

Honorable Mention, *The Navigator's* Best Writing Award

Henry Moore's *Seated Woman*: Modern Surrealist Abstraction

Cheri Regis

Seated Woman: An Introduction

If there is ever any 20th century post-war modern European sculptor in the world who has created, shared, and imparted to the world an oeuvre so richly and evidently informed by modernism, the natural world, and his home country, this position, without a shadow of a doubt, would be filled by the English presence known as Henry Moore. His modern artistic contributions have proven time and again to be monumentally commanding and symbiotically engaging. Such is the case for Moore's *Seated Woman*, a utilitarian but feminine figure seated not in a static manner, but rather in a form-fitting, nature-conforming manner. Presenting herself to us as an organic maternal life form in a sleek, subtly textured bronze sitting at 4 feet and 9 inches high, the *Seated Woman* gracefully makes herself not only at home in a mere institutional setting, but also at home and one with nature, past and present. Just as the sculptor, as with his collective body of work, had originally intended.

A Closer Look

The *Seated Woman*, made and cast in bronze by Moore in 1957 as an edition of 6, consists of the tried and true subject matter of a female nude rendered not in a realistic Classical, traditional manner, but rather in a semi-abstract figurative manner reminiscent of previous modernist sculptors of the 1920s and 30s. Accompanying the model is a support and base that seems to be the only sole object in the composition that has been rendered realistically and with precision that is stylistically in stark contrast with the primary subject, front and center in the foreground. As for the medium, the bronze deceptively fools the viewer's judgment of color and tone by alternating between colors of what seems to be a cool toned green-gray and black-gray when viewed at multiple angles and under artificial lighting. The features of the sculpture are simplistically carved and serve as indicators that the model is facing both directly above the viewer while simultaneously gazing into the horizon, as if there is a sense of longing. The position of the model's pose, one of asymmetry, suggests that while she is sitting contentedly, she is also endeavoring to fend off any signs of discomfort and pain. An element of distinction that gives the artwork its elemental, painterly, and industrial feel is the collective texture of scratches varying in thickness and depth, as if showcasing both the intimate working partnership

between artist and muse in the exclusively unique realm that is the artist's studio.

With all these elements and details in play, Moore's artwork is one of graceful, parental, taxing resiliency, and he chose to magnify this by way of scale, variety of surface texture, and form. As for the context, the viewer is provided and equipped with the insight and knowledge that the figure is an expectant mother. This is exhibited by the dense and expansive mass of the figure's torso and the tilted weight on the figure's right side. As Moore's early and later works will show, themes of motherhood, childhood, and organic environment with a surrealist abstractive lean will be dominant in much of his artistic output, with the human figure, whether as individual or as a unit of a group, as his primary subject.

Moore's Early Inspirations and Influences

A lifelong native of Great Britain, Moore was born and raised into a working-class family who lived in Castleford, a small, industrious mining town located in Yorkshire. According to Moore, writers, observers, and critics of his work have an inclination for linking his early upbringing, one of adversity and grit, to his present, "almost as if one hasn't changed" (Moore, 1986). It is widely known throughout the artist's life and career that he constantly recalls and looks back to his childhood and early formative years as sources of inspiration and influence for his body of work, which covers a limited but diverse range of media from sculpture to drawing.

Some of Moore's observers tried to emphasize and refer to Moore's current innovative style and approach to sculpture when regarding his earlier encounters. Regarding this, Moore makes a statement wherein he suggests that they failed to recognize other aspects of his modern life as well as his encounters with other modern artists and how their lives and modernist contributions to visual art and visual art history had served to shape and define the sculptor artistically, developmentally, aesthetically, and personally. In other words, Moore and his oeuvre had become multifaceted and stylistically diverse, and both cannot be simply tied to a moment of time in art history. According to modern art scholars and authors of the book *History of Modern Art, Seventh Edition*, by the early 1930s, Moore was well aware, influenced, and informed of modern art movements such as abstraction and Surrealism. He was instituted by the likes of essential sculptors such as Auguste Rodin, Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Pablo Picasso, as well as advances, discoveries, and developments in sculpture and his absorption of Classical, pre-Classical, African, and pre-Columbian art he viewed and studied in English and European museums during and after his academic years (Arnason and Mansfield, 2013).

Also, by this time, Moore was well developed, prolific, and mature as an artist who rose to international acclaim by 1945. These earlier formal sources of inspiration are apparent in Moore's earlier reclining figure sculptures, which hearken back to sculptures and monuments of earlier

cultures and periods. These would prove to be a defining asset to both the artist's process, design, and overall production and presentation in much of his work and professional career. One work of art that is a perfect example of cross-cultural aesthetic and artistic originality is Moore's 1929 reclining female nude *Reclining Figure*, which, given the shape, mass, the rusty earth red of the stone that is carved in, and the model's pose, Moore masterfully integrates central Mexican sculpture design and background with his own original voice. Additionally, he lends credence to his forward-thinking approach to modern sculpture. One figure in particular that is evident in this pivotal sculpture is the chacmool, an athletic warrior figure in Mexican Toltec culture that symbolizes sportsmanship and human sacrifice and also represents the losing participants who took part in the ancient ball games, which were deadly and challenging in nature. Given Moore's travels to Mexico and his exposure to central Mexican sculpture, he transferred and translated his inspiration and reference of the chacmool into his *Reclining Figure* and several of his public sculptures, which would leave an indelible impact on his artistic career and legacy. In *Seated Woman*, while there is little to no indication of ancient cultural references, there is strong indication of Moore's preference and gravitation towards massive, shapely forms and natural conforming space. Furthermore, this art piece also serves to perpetuate Moore's fascinating foray into surrealist modern abstraction that was prevalent in the early to late 1920s and 30s.

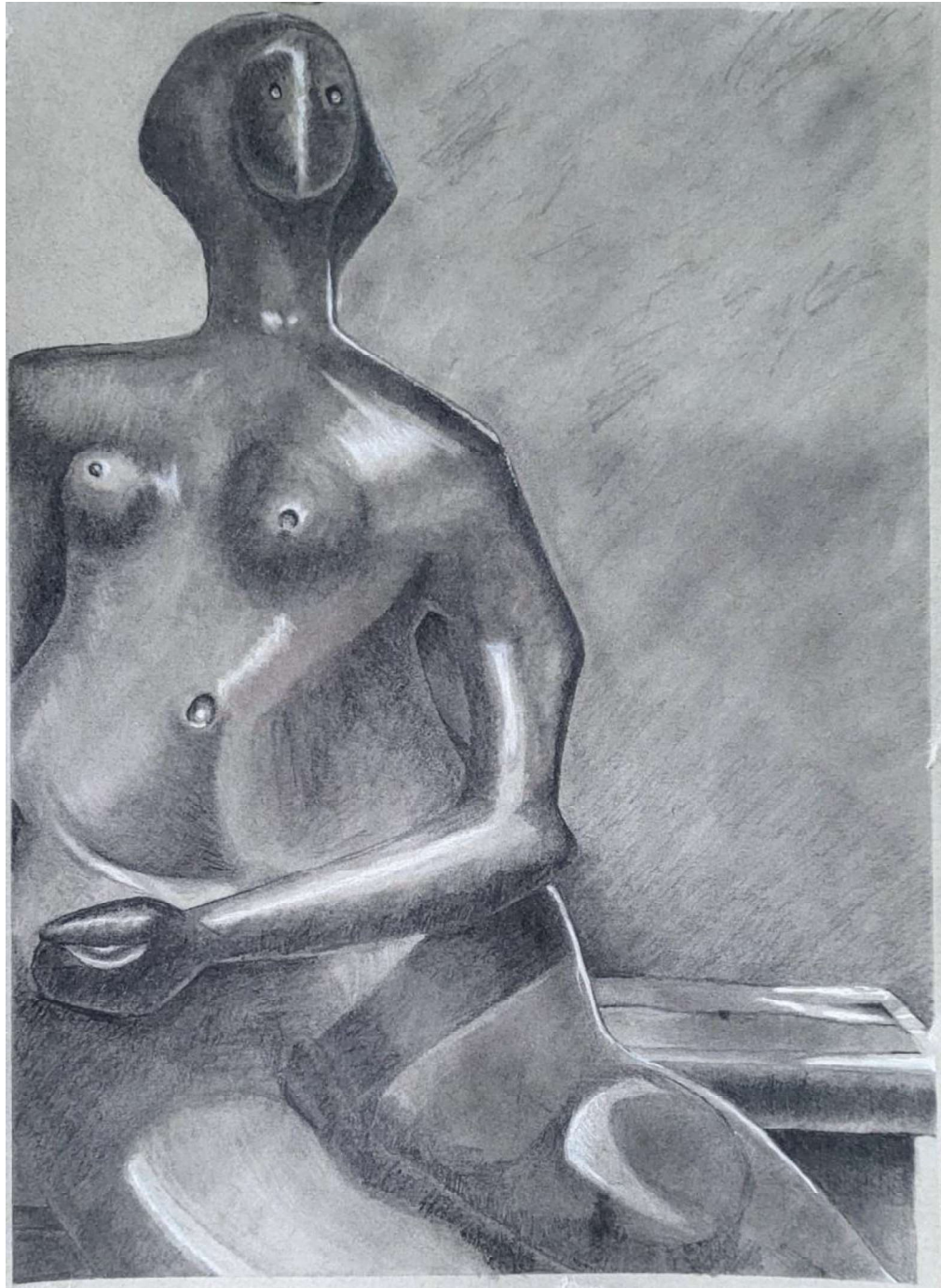
Abstract Surrealists Moore and Picasso

As stated previously, during the late 1920s and well into the 1930s, Moore readily embraced and absorbed Surrealism and Surrealist informed abstraction, and that can be attributed to the aforementioned modern artists, especially Picasso. Moore, like Picasso, explored and made evident Surrealistic tendencies and aesthetics in the production of his sculptures from a stylistic standpoint. He accomplished this by way of experimenting with other materials commonly utilized in the sculptural tradition such as bronze, specialized stones, and even wood. In his later sculptures, Moore would go on to create and present them in a variety of materials, such as 1951's *Reclining Figure*, another semi-abstract reclining nude figure made of yellowed white plaster and string. This particular work is an acknowledgement and tribute to Picasso and Surrealism, as the figure is made up of vast gaping holes and is formatted in a pose that the viewer can easily identify the subject as both figure and landscape. What makes this sculpture distinct from Moore's earlier reclining figures is the graphic linework throughout the areas of the figure that serves as a texture that gives the figure an aged, skeletal appearance. This gives the impression that this figure, while full and curvaceous, is also a skeleton propped up as a traditional still life. As a whole, the artwork's inspiration and influence can be directly linked to Picasso and one of his Surrealist paintings, *Seated Bather* of 1930. This particular artwork features a seated nude female rendered in

organic semi-abstraction with the head and features completely incomprehensible and abstract, just as the head and features of Moore's innovative and stylistically similar sculpture are incomprehensible and abstract. Taken the two works together, they both share an acknowledgement to Surrealism, abstraction, its artists, and its groundbreaking qualities. Meanwhile, when taking both works in contrast, they differ and translate in size, medium, approach, method, and timeframe.

Summary

While Moore's *Seated Woman* is a testament to the artist's crucial modern voice and devotion to his fascination of nature and the female form as subject, it is a vast departure from Moore's earlier experimentations of Surrealist aesthetic and total abstraction seen in earlier post-WWI works. However, the sculpture retains a few aspects and parts of the artist's forays into these two attributes as well as his flirtation with art of ancient cultures. Some of these references are conveyed through the voluminous use of negative space, the abstract simplification of the head and its features, and the block-like shape and form of the earlier reclining figures of the late 1920s and 30s. In the modern art historical canon, *Seated Woman*, the hand behind this formidable work of modern art, and his richly diverse and widely acclaimed oeuvre have proven not only invaluable and timeless in the history of modern sculpture, but also in the history of modernism. The world continues to look to this celebrated and beloved 20th century European modernist for groundbreaking, dynamic, sculptural inspiration.



Cheri Regis, *Seated Woman (after Henry Moore)*, 2022. Graphite on recycled toned paper, 9" x 12". Collection of the artist.

References

- Moore, H & Hedgecoe, J (1986). *Henry Moore: My Ideas, Inspiration and Life as an Artist*. London, England: Ebury Press.
- Mansfield, E. C. & Arnason, H. H (2013). *History of Modern Art, Seventh Edition*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Harris, B. & Zucker, S (April 6, 2019). *Describing what you see: Sculpture, Henry Moore's Reclining Figure*. Smarthistory. A <https://smarthistory.org/describing-moore/>.

Art References

- Henry Moore, CBE, British, 1898-1986
Seated Woman, 1957
Bronze, ed. of 6
61 x 57 ½ x 41 ¾ in. (154.7 x 146 x 106 cm)
The Hall Family Foundation at The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Kansas City, Missouri
- Henry Moore, CBE, British, 1898-1986
Reclining Figure, 1951
Plaster and string
105.4 x 227.3 x 89.2 cm.
Tate Britain
London, England
- Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881-1973
Seated Bather, 1930
Oil on canvas
64 ¼" x 51" (163.2 x 129.5 cm.)
The Museum of Modern Art
New York, New York