

Henry Moore Bibliography - Detailed Report

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The World's Greatest Living Artist by Perry T. Rathbone

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Perry T. Rathbone

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Description
Magazine published by Harvard University '1933 reunion committee to mark the 50th anniversary of the class of 1933. The article is written by Perry T. Rathbone, former Director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Rathbone recalls



Rathbone and Moore in Cambridge, 1958.

"The World's Greatest Living Artist"

by Perry T. Rathbone

The spring of 1939 found me at the age of 28 at the New York World's Fair in an unenviable and unexciting position at the Detroit Institute of Arts and responsible for the operation of a \$27,000,000 show of old masters. There were the last remnants of the depression into which much of the Class of '33 had been set adrift, and the last weeks of peace before the outbreak of World War II. Living was cheap but money was scarce and no one knew it better than the entrepreneurs of the Great Exhibition of 1939. The Masterpieces Exhibition, held financially as badly as ever. But for me personally there was compensation: time off from routine duties, except for interminable letters and almost fortnightly financial crises demanding urgent attention, my administrative chores allowed me more time to myself than I have enjoyed ever since.

What better way to fill my leisure hours than with the rights of the Fair? Across the way was the spectacular General Motors Pavilion, and around me were the pavilions of half the nations of the world. Of them all the British Pavilion alone left a deep impression on me, and for a reason I have come to cherish more and more over the years — my first encounter with a work by the great English sculptor, Henry Moore. I had never heard of the artist nor had I ever seen anything remotely like the sculpture that stood at the center of the British Artwork Exhibition, a feature that stood with the Magna Carta as the principal attraction.

Here was a sensuously smooth, mediating female form carved from stone, but appearing to have grown into its shape by some organic process, or to have been fashioned by the force of waves flowing through and around it in a manner had never seen of mine. This wonderful and strangely beautiful creation held me spellbound. While 'hardly human' the form somehow went beyond humanity — a timeless symbol of emotional elegance yet authoritative, inspiring, — evocative.

During a year in New York in preparation for the Fair I had become a close friend of Curt Valentin, a discerning young art dealer who was a recent refugee from Nazi Berlin. A year earlier he had opened a gallery for modern art which was already achieving distinction. Incidentally I told Valentin of my discovery. Being passionate about sculpture and readily enterprising about his gallery, he rushed off to the Fair to see the Moore. Valentin was enthralled. This first encounter as it turned out was to have far-reaching consequences. For Curt Valentin's dedicated involvement with the sculptor was to contribute importantly to Henry Moore's rise to international fame.

In England Moore had been deeply admired for some years, hence his inclusion in the exhibition in the British Pavilion. And it may be had been known to certain distinguished American museum directors: Alfred Barr, James Sweeney and Daniel Rich, the Museum of Modern Art had included an example in an exhibition in 1937 and the sub-

terran Buffalo Museum under Gordon Washburn had just acquired a sculpture — the first to enter a public collection. Nevertheless, Henry Moore in 1939 was generally unknown outside art circles in England. Curt's eye discerned well, for it is his name that never comes up at the Fogg in our days and he had been unknown to the German Berlin dealer in modern art.

The sculptor Rudolph Fischer in Harmsworth Street created alive in Curt Valentin's mind and he had learned that Moore made beautiful drawings. In 1942, by the simple device of writing a letter to the artist, Valentin became Moore's exclusive dealer in this country. The following year he organized the first Henry Moore exhibition in America: a show of forty drawings that were sent to New York rolled up in two mailing tubes and delivered by diplomatic courier flight arranged by the British Air Council. Six men in those perilous days, with Allied ships sinking left and right, was one of the questions. From that exhibition I bought my first work by Moore, a beautiful watercolor, a paper of marble called *Study for Sculpture*. After the war, in 1946, the Museum of Modern Art's great retrospective show, inspired by the Valentin exhibition of 1943, solidified the sculptor's reputation. Valentin thereafter organized three more exhibitions in his gallery: *Study in MO* Moore in Rome and *Study in MO* Moore in London. Moore and I met throughout the work: three quarters of his work is now in this country. For the St. Louis Museum, of which I had become director

in 1943, I was proud to have brought an important early sculpture directly carved in concrete, the third work to enter a public collection in America. Moore is represented today in virtually every important museum in the country, most importantly at the entrance to the new East Building of the National Gallery, Washington, where an abstract composition in bronze stands as the very symbol of the art of our time. Last year a monumental Moore was presented to Harvard and erected in the Yard.

In the years after the war Henry Moore and I became close friends. I visited him repeatedly at his studio and home in Hertsfordshire, first with Curt Valentin and afterwards with members of my family, and of course we met when he came to this country. But of all these meetings there was one which was a pure surprise to us both.

In 1958 the class of '33 gathered for our 25th reunion. I was pleased to be asked to make a Commencement as a marshall's aid. My acceptance was somewhat provisional because of an unexpected emergency: I had to drop out of our reunion for 24 hours to fly to St. Louis to accept an honorary doctorate from Washington University. Upon my prompt return I found that my commencement duties required little of me but morning dress, a top hat and a white frock to hand me to be on time and so as I was told. On Commencement morning, after meeting on Windsor steps with the other class functionaries for the official photographs, I was given an envelope containing the name of one

Moore's post-war reception in America, and their close friendship with Curt Valentin. In 1940 Rathbone organised the purchase of 'an early concrete carving' for the St Louis Museum. Rathbone also writes about a surprise meeting with Moore in 1958 during the 25th reunion of the 'Class of 33'. Moore was an honoree, and Rathbone was pleased to be able to accompany Moore and they became 'two tipsy celebrants'.