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Barbara Hepworth

Art and Life

Eleanor Clayton

The first biography to look at the entirety of Barbara Hepworth's multi-faceted artistic practice

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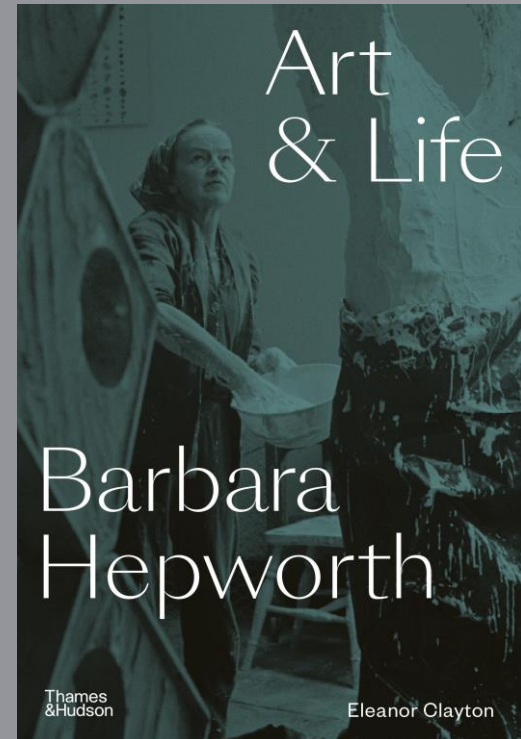
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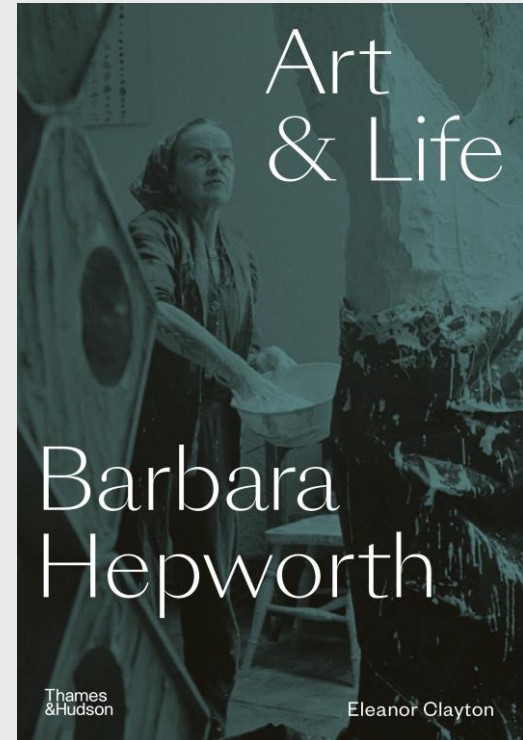
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Book

Key Sales Points

- A fully illustrated biography that reflects for the first time Hepworth's multi-faceted, interdisciplinary and networked approach.
- Fills a gap in the market: Hepworth has been the subject of relatively few monographs in comparison to her male counterparts.
- Published in association with The Hepworth Wakefield, on the occasion of a major touring retrospective opening in May 2021.

Provisional





The visual impact of these trips resonated throughout Hepworth's life, and she expressed the impression in her 1970 *Pictorial Autobiography* in sculptural terms: 'moving through and over the West Riding landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the forms.'⁷ Yorkshire remained an important touchstone for Hepworth: she defined her no-nonsense temperament as that of a Yorkshirewoman (writing, for example, to friends of her 'constitutional Yorkshireman's belief in calling a spade a spade'⁸), and in her sixties she commissioned photographs of key landscapes within the county that continued to inspire her, like the large rock formation known as 'The Cow and Calf' in Ilkley (see previous page).⁹

As her father's career progressed, her family also grew and Hepworth became the eldest of four children: Joan, born in 1906, Anthony in 1909, and Elizabeth in 1911. That Hepworth accompanied her father on his trips rather than her younger brother showed the progressive attitude of her father, who valued education for his daughters as much as for his son – a relatively unusual approach at a time when middle-class women were expected to be housewives and mothers. Hepworth attended the Wakefield Girls' High School, where she credited the headmistress, Miss McCroben, with introducing her to Egyptian sculpture in a particularly memorable slide-show: 'at the age of 7 I sat in the lecture hall of a school of 600 girls with tightened nerves & muscles gazing on slides

ABOVE Barbara, Joan, Elizabeth and Anthony (Tony) Hepworth, c. 1915

of the Pyramids, Greek temples & ancient sculptures. That first vision of "form" between heaven & earth never leaves me.'¹⁰ She recalled, 'My headmistress knew I detested sports and games. I loved dancing, music, drawing and painting. And wonderfully, when all had departed to the playing fields, I found myself miraculously alone with easel, paints and paper in the school.'¹¹

There are few surviving sculptures from this period, although Hepworth remembers modelling heads of her siblings in clay in the cellar, the mucky material not being permitted in the upstairs rooms.¹² An early modelled sculpture in glazed porcelain, *The Pond (Two Figures)* (c. 1922), shows a female figure lifting her skirt as she stands within the water, her feet already submerged beneath the surface and a companion leaning over her shoulder (below left). The subject chimes with Hepworth's reminiscences of her early life, the figures immersing themselves in nature, and conveying a close human bond. Surviving teenage drawings, such as *The Shadow Dance* (1919) (below right), reflect Hepworth's interest



ABOVE LEFT Barbara Hepworth, *The Pond (Two Figures)*, c. 1922, glazed porcelain, 18 × 6.5 × 8.5 cm (7 × 2½ × 3⅜ in.)



ABOVE RIGHT Barbara Hepworth, *The Shadow Dance*, 1919, watercolour and ink on paper, 13 × 8 cm (5½ × 3⅛ in.)



common room the *Cahiers d'art* were eagerly studied and Cubism was the great revelation [...] Paris was the centre of interest.¹³ Hepworth and her fellow students visited Paris several times, and a photograph from her student years shows her on the banks of the Seine alongside Moore and Edna Ginesi, another student who had moved from Leeds School of Art to the Royal College (opposite). The photo was most likely taken by Raymond Coxon, the fourth member of the 'Leeds table', as the quartet was known. Coxon remembers that Parisian outings would follow visits to public and commercial galleries, with free life-drawing classes at the Colarossi and Grande Chaumière academies. A series of figures that Hepworth modelled from life in clay around 1922–23 were subsequently cast in bronze in 1925 (see above).

Hepworth left the Royal College of Art in October 1924, having spent the previous year preparing for the Prix de Rome, an annual competition that afforded the winner two or three years of study in Italy, with lodgings at the British School in Rome and a stipend of £250 (some £15,000 today). Following the Open Examination in October 1923, Hepworth was shortlisted for the Final Competition the following year.

ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *Venus* (Figure 18), c. 1922–23 (cast 1925), bronze, height 52.7 cm (20 3/4 in.)

OPPOSITE Edna Ginesi, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth in Paris, 1922 or 1923





ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *Mother and Child*, 1934, pink Ancaster stone, 30.5 × 26 × 22 cm (12 × 10¼ × 8⅝ in.)



In late 1933, Hepworth and Nicholson exhibited together at the Lefevre Gallery in London. A review of the show by Adrian Stokes in *The Spectator* paid particular attention to Hepworth's 'Mother and Child' stone carvings:

It is not a matter of a mother and child group represented in stone. Miss Hepworth's stone is a mother, her huge pebble its child. A man would have made the group more pointed: no man could have treated this composition with such a pure complacency. The idea itself is a spectacular one, but it gains from Miss Hepworth's hands a surer poignancy.¹

Hepworth made several more 'Mother and Child' sculptures in 1934. As with the earlier *Seated Figure* (see p. 56), she combined biomorphic forms akin to landscapes with figurative allusions. *Mother and Child* (1934) comprises two separate stones, the larger 'mother' stone with two carved eyes cradling the smaller 'child', which, while safely rooted in its mother's lap, leans slightly forward with little outstretched arms (opposite). *Large and Small Form* (1934) continues the theme (above), with pin-prick eyes given to both the large amorphous horizontal form – which recalls the *Reclining Figure* of 1933 (see p. 59) – and the separate small pebble perched on its knee. For both works, Stokes's description is apt: there are concavities or absences in the large forms where the small forms once were – the stone is, indeed, a mother. Positioned on the hinge between

ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *Large and Small Form*, 1934, alabaster, 23 × 37 × 18 cm (9 × 14½ × 7 in.)



depiction of the surgeon's face and hands, the other elements receding into the background. *Two Figures* (above) is close in technique to the initial ink sketches Hepworth made in a small notebook while in the operating theatre. She said, 'I had to train myself to note only the most important things and to memorise the entire structure of the group, which was always changing as the operation proceeded. It was from notes such as these that I made my painting when I returned to the studio.'²⁶ Hepworth used a unique process for creating these works, building up layers of gesso and chalk on which coloured oil glaze was then painted, before rubbing and scraping at the surface with razors to reveal the white ground and brushstrokes below, giving suitable 'hardness and depth.'²⁷ She then drew her compositions in pencil on top, executing the faces and hands with delicate shading and detailed finish, before completing the work with colours in oil paint. In a lecture to a group of surgeons at Exeter, she described the process, noting, 'I used the colour, not in a realistic way, but in order to stress the meaning of form and light as I had seen it.'²⁸ Works such as *The Hands* (1948) (opposite, below) emit an ethereal glow, the surgical actors floating in a timeless space to capture, as Hepworth said of this painting, 'a very moving moment (*forme*) when

ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *Two Figures*, 1947, green crayon and pencil, pen and black ink, 38 x 27 cm (15 x 10 5/8 in.)



TOP Barbara Hepworth at work on an operating theatre drawing, *Quartet! (Arthroplasty)*, Chy-an-Keris, Oarbis Bay, January 1948

ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *The Hands*, 1948, oil and pencil on gesso ground board, 38 x 51.4 cm (15 x 20 1/4 in.)

aiming to focus on Britain's achievements in technology, industrial design, architecture and the arts to boost public morale following the devastation of war. Twenty-three arts festivals were to be held across the UK between May and September 1951. Hepworth strongly appreciated the festival's aims, not just in its interdisciplinary approach, but also in integrating art more thoroughly into society. She wrote, 'A Festival of Art allows the impact [of creative arts] to be made upon the social structure, breaking the crust of resistance and allowing a new free growth, of interplay between the practicing artist and the rest of society, an absolute necessity if we are to maintain a proper articulation between members both of communities and of nations.'²⁰ *The Times* announced as early as January 1950 that Hepworth had been commissioned by the Arts Council, along with Moore and Epstein, to make new site-specific sculpture for the Festival on the South Bank in London, and 'the sites where their works will be on view have already been chosen by the sculptors'.²¹

Hepworth's observations in Venice informed her ambitions for sculpture in the public realm, as she noted, 'sculpture should act not only as a foil to architectural properties but the sculpture itself should provide a link between human scale and sensibility and the greater volumes of space and mass in architecture'.²² She began work on *Contrapuntal Forms* in the spring of 1950, again two figures but this time separate entities with corresponding forms and piercings (see above). Film footage shows Hepworth using black paint to sketch the outline of figures, similar to those in her contemporaneous paintings, onto the uncut stones, identifying where the forms would take shape.²³ The title is a musical term, 'contrapuntal' meaning that each element is the counterpoint to the other, designed to be related but distinct. Hepworth described to Margaret Gardiner, 'Yesterday we moved the 2 big stones close up together, very, very slowly. It thrilled me absolutely because as they drew together I saw all the shapes take on significance & what had been, up till now, a mental image took on reality.'²⁴ The physical challenge of carving such monumental work was immense, and Hepworth had taken on two assistants



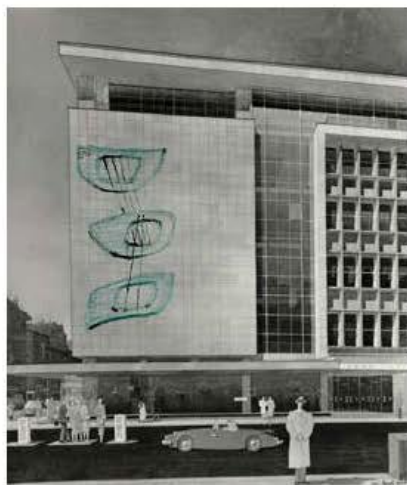
ABOVE Barbara Hepworth at work on *Contrapuntal Forms*, 1950. Photograph by Peter Keen, Pictorial Press Ltd

at the end of 1949 to work on the commission.²⁵ In July, she wrote that the work was complicated by 'weather so wet that I've had to design & order a most elaborate & expensive shelter for the 2 large figures. 2 more weeks of rain would set the work back so far I should never finish in time.'²⁶ The situation had not improved by the autumn, as Hepworth wrote to Ramsden:

It is exciting to have the sort of work one has longed for but a pity that the Festival has brought it all at once & the zero hour is oppressive, especially as I am (& I suppose everybody else)



ABOVE Barbara Hepworth at work on *Contrapuntal Forms* by floodlight, 25 October 1950. Official Festival photograph



forms to show the shadows that would be cast when the sculpture was lit at night (above, left). She wrote to Miller, 'the "Three forms in echelon" with radiating strings rising upwards [connecting the three forms] is my interpretation of the John Lewis partnership, its Members and the Public',² suggesting that the three equal forms working in harmony reflected the interaction of these groups of people. Further, Hepworth considered that people would perceive the work as they entered 'looking upwards at the building – when naturally the forms begin to blend one with the other',³ suggesting unity of purpose.

Despite these explanations, the design (see above, right) was rejected, Miller feeling that it neither suited the building, nor seemed characteristically 'Hepworth'. He suggested the option of an alternative derived from an existing work, and despite being disappointed that her considered proposal was rejected, Hepworth proposed enlarging and adapting an earlier work, *Winged Figure 1* (1957), to suit the space. She noted, 'I wanted to capture the greatest variety of light and shadow, from morning sun, afternoon reflected light and night floodlighting, so that visually the sculpture never remained static. The use of the apertures and stainless steel rods enabled me to get a constant "variation" of the "Winged Figure" by ever changing light and shade.'⁴ The monumental final version (see p. 219) was cast in aluminium for lightness, and the

ABOVE LEFT Barbara Hepworth, prototype for *Maquette, Three Forms in Echelon*, 1961, plaster painted green, on white painted hard board with shelf base of chipboard; strings now missing, 67.5 x 51 x 26 cm (26½ x 20 x 10¼ in.)

ABOVE RIGHT Barbara Hepworth's first scheme for the John Lewis commission, 1961. Sketch superimposed on a photograph of a line drawing by Jon Wood, an artist's impression of the new John Lewis building on Oxford Street, in green and blue ball point pen and pencil

surface was textured with 'Isopon', a polyester resin filler used in cars and boats. It was unveiled on 23 April 1963, and Hepworth wrote in *The Gazette of the John Lewis Partnership*, 'I think one of our universal dreams is to move in air and water without the resistance of our human legs. I wanted to evoke this sensation of freedom. If the *Winged Figure* in Oxford Street gives people a sense of being air-borne in rain and sunlight and nightlight I will be very happy.'⁵



ABOVE Barbara Hepworth in Trewyn Studio, Cornwall, February 1959. Photograph by Cornel Lucas

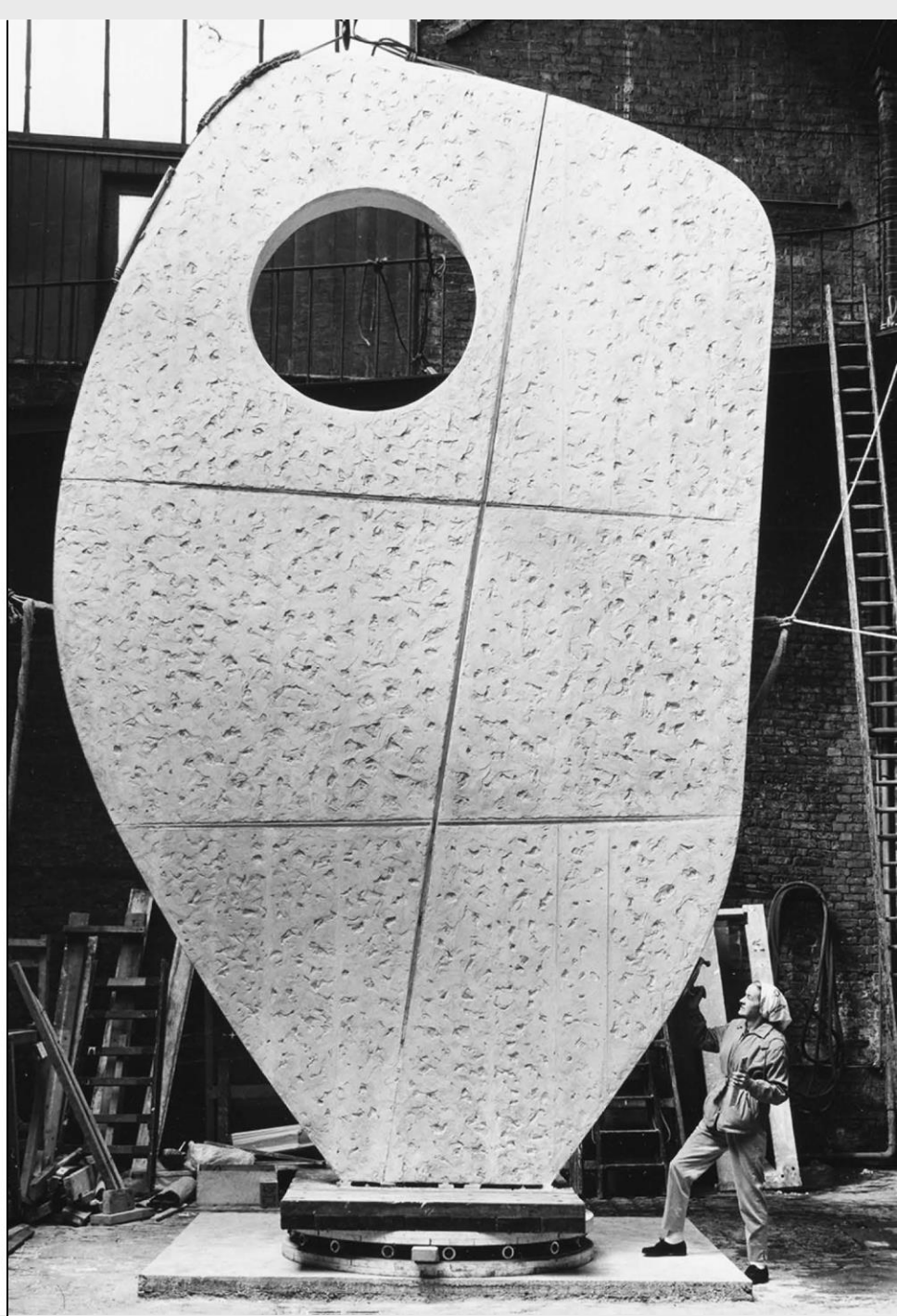


have rejected all that might veer towards the grandiose and pompous. He would have wished people to perceive, and feel, and be moved, by the intention in terms of sculpture.⁴⁴

Hepworth had made *Single Form (Memorial)* in plaster for bronze casting, and described the development of the sculpture to Bunche in early 1962 as ‘the best work I have ever done’.⁴⁵ The plaster prototype was exhibited as simply *Single Form* in Hepworth’s Whitechapel exhibition in May 1962, as the bronze had not yet been cast, and the completed bronze was shown with the subtitle ‘*Memorial*’ and a dedication to Hammarskjöld at the 1963 open-air sculpture exhibition in Battersea Park.⁴⁶ Hepworth reinterpreted this work for her UN proposal (above), the larger scale requiring significant alterations, as she wrote to Bunche: ‘the swellings in depth would increase – the curvatures attenuate and the circle through

ABOVE Barbara Hepworth speaking at the unveiling of the United Nations *Single Form*, New York, June 1964

OPPOSITE Barbara Hepworth with the plaster *Single Form* at the Morris Singer Foundry, May 1963. Photograph by Morgan-Wells



to be cast in bronze, an abstract crucifixion which contains three circles – a blue circle viewed from one side and yellow from the other, with a gold-painted steel circle outline hung slightly lower.¹³ Hepworth saw this as furthering her experimentation with colour, as well as comprising an overtly religious work that she related to her period of illness.¹⁴ In *Science and Health*, the Christian Science text that Hepworth owned and consulted, Mary Baker Eddy writes that ‘the circle represents the infinite without beginning or end’.¹⁵ The synthesising of scientific advances with spirituality is typical of Hepworth’s inclusive philosophy, and she noted in an interview of May 1966, ‘I regard the present era of flight and projection into space as a tremendous expansion of our sensibilities, and space sculpture and kinetic forms are an expression of it; but in order



ABOVE Barbara Hepworth, *Family of Man* (1970), bronze. Photograph taken by Foresees outside the Morris Singer Foundry, January 1972

to appreciate this fully I think that we must affirm some ancient stability.’¹⁶ At this time Hepworth wrote to Nicholson, relaying her heightened awareness of astronomical forms through her worldly surroundings:

It is midnight & May & full moon! I have just been in the garden & in this light everything is strange & new. The flowering cherries & bushes are like stars. The sculptures strangely huge & ethereal. The moon is at right angles to my new ‘thinking room’ (no stone dust allowed!) & the fierce & gorgeous moonlight gives a new dimension to all things. It is warm with a clear & wonderful sky. A night never to forget.¹⁷

