

English Modernists - Seminar 2

Hepworth, Moore, Nash, Nicholson and Read

Beth Taylor - 21 October 2010

WAHG

Modernist painters and sculptors

Barbara Hepworth 1903 - 1975

English sculptor. Studied Leeds School of Art (Henry Moore was a fellow student) and the Royal College, London. Studied in Italy 1924-26 with her husband, the sculptor John Skeating. Married Ben Nicholson in 1932 after her divorce from Skeating. During the 1930's Hepworth, Nicholson and Moore worked in close harmony and were recognised as the nucleus of the abstract movement in England. With the outbreak of war in 1939 Hepworth moved to St Ives. Internationally famous by the 1950's she received many honours and prestigious public commissions. She died in a fire at her studio in St Ives which is now a museum dedicated to her work.



Henry Moore 1898 - 1986

English sculptor and graphic artist. Son of a Yorkshire miner, he served in the 1914-18 war before training at Leeds School of Art and the Royal College of Art. Taught at the RCA 1924 - 1931. Married one of his students, Irina Radetsky 1929. From 1932-39 was Head of Sculpture, a new department at Chelsea School of Art. During 1930's lived in the same area of Hampstead as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and the critic Herbert Read. He was considered leading avant-garde sculptor in England by the 1930's. Appointed Official war artist 1940-42, awarded many public commissions in the postwar period. Moved to Much Hadham, Hertfordshire in 1940 after his studio was bombed, living there for the rest of his life. Much Hadham is now a site dedicated to his work.



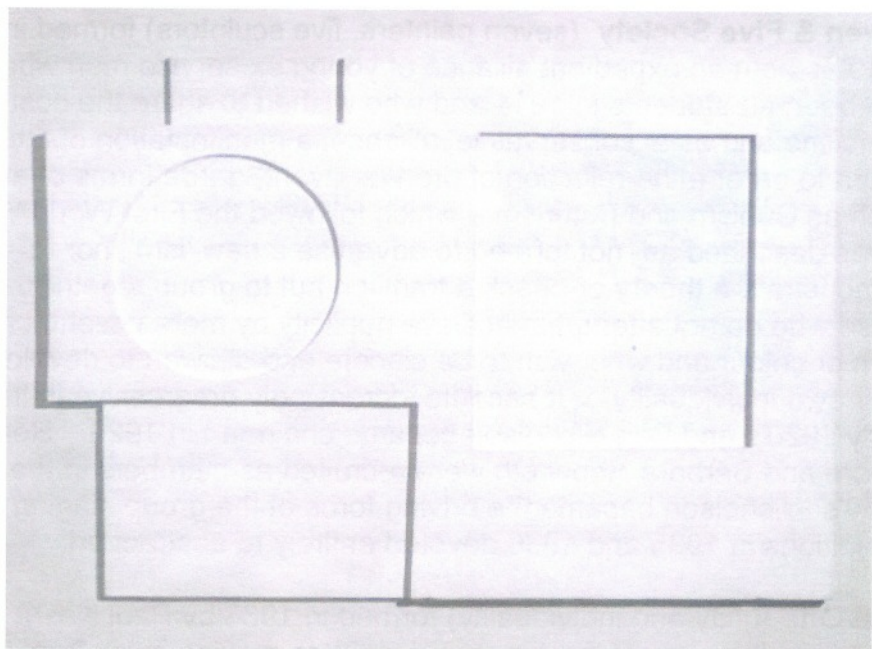
Paul Nash 1889 - 1946

English painter, book illustrator, writer, photographer and designer. Trained at the Slade, served in 1914 -18 war. After being wounded, he became an official war artist. In the 1920's and 30's he lived in Kent, Sussex and Dorset. He was the prime mover in setting up Unit One and helped to organise the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Appointed official war artist in second World War. Regarded as one of the finest book illustrators of his time.



Ben Nicholson 1894 - 1982

Painter and maker of painted reliefs, a pioneer of abstract art in Britain. Son of Sir William Nicholson, painter and graphic artist. Attended Slade School of Art 1910-11. Married the painter Winifred Nicholson in 1920, divorced 1931. Married Barbara Hepworth 1932, divorced 1951. Moved to St Ives in 1939 with Hepworth. Internationally famous, received a series of awards in the 1950's. Married Felicitas Vogler in 1957 and moved to Switzerland in 1958. awarded Order of Merit in 1968. Returned to England in 1971, having left his wife, and continued working and exhibiting until his death.



Sir Herbert Read 1893 - 1968

British critic and poet, regarded as the foremost advocate of modern art. Studied Economics at Leeds University, served with distinction in 1914-18 war, then worked at the Treasury and in the ceramics department at the V & A before becoming Professor of Fine Arts at Edinburgh University, 1931-33. Editor of the Burlington Magazine 1933-39. Edited the Unit One manifesto. Helped to organise the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts and head of the Institute 1947-1968. Published poetry and numerous influential studies of art and artists.

Artistic groupings

Seven & Five Society (seven painters, five sculptors) formed in 1919 as both an expedient alliance of young ex service men who had been art students in 1914 and who wished to share the cost of exhibiting and as a 'conservative' alliance, a manifestation of the return to order – the rejection of pre-war avant-garde forms of art such as Cubism and Futurism - which followed the First World War. It was described as "not formed to advertise a new 'ism', nor to demonstrate a theory or attack a tradition but to group together those who do not attempt to achieve publicity by mere eccentricity of form or colour and who wish to be sincere and allowed to develop their own individuality". It became increasingly progressive in the early 1920's and Ben Nicholson became chairman in 1926. Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth were recruited as members in the 1930's. Nicholson became the driving force of the group staging exhibitions in 1935 and 1936 devoted entirely to abstract art.

Unit One (unity and individuality) formed in 1933 by Paul Nash. He explained the aims of the new movement as moving away from "The ingenious and agreeable exercises in formalised naturalism [of] 'Post-Cezannism' and 'Derainism' to the pursuit of form; the expression of the structural purpose in search of beauty in formal

interaction and relations apart from representation...typified by abstract art. Second, the pursuit of the soula psychological research on the part of the artist parallel to the experiments of the great analysts...the movement known as surrealisme.” Unit One thus brought together a rather heterogeneous group of artists – some concerned with abstraction, some with surrealism. By 1934 when Unit One collapsed – key members like Nicholson and Hepworth (who had spent time in France visiting Picasso, Hans Arp, Brancusi and Mondrian) became increasingly committed to abstraction and members of the group Abstraction-Creation.

Abstraction-Creation: Art non-figuratif formed in Paris in 1931 and active until 1936. Aimed to organise and promote the continuing practice of non-figurative art, that is, art which excluded any explanatory, anecdotal, literary or naturalistic element. Non figurative art was identified with freedom from political constraint. Membership which numbered over 400 internationally included major abstract painters such as Naum Gabo, Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian.

“A Nest of Gentle artists” the term used by Herbert Read to describe the community of modern artists, designers, architects and sympathizers who lived in Hampstead between 1932 and 1939. Moore, Hepworth and Nicholson were all using studios in or near Parkhill Road when Read joined them in 1933. In 1934 Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and Eric Mendelsohn came as refugees from Nazi Germany. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Naum Gabo joined them in 1935 and 1936. Paul Nash moved within walking distance in 1936. Mondrian had a studio in Parkhill Road in 1938. Nearby lived H.S. Ede, Roland Penrose and John Summerson. The small circulation magazine *Axis* which ran for 8 editions from 1935 provided an outlet for the discussion of the modernist ideas and work of this informal group.

Further key concepts*

Constructivism; term first used by artists in Russia in 1921 to refer to a group of artists who sought to create a new visual environment embodying the social needs and values of the new Communist order. Since the 1920's the term has been used more loosely to evoke a continuing tradition of geometric abstract art that is 'constructed' from autonomous visual elements such as lines and planes, characterised by precision, impersonality, simplicity, economy of organisation and use of contemporary materials like plastic and metal. **Concrete art** – a type of abstract art that was entirely free of any basis in observed reality and without symbolic implications – was closely allied to Constructionism.

Surrealism: defined by Andre Breton in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) as "Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern". A form of art, that is, which was based on the unconscious mind, identified by Freud as the deep layer of the human mind where memories and instincts are stored. Using techniques like automatism, free association, the chance encounter and the juxtaposition of unrelated objects, surrealist art in France was allied to an attempt to transform society and moral values by overthrowing institutions such as organised religion and the state.

Neo-plasticism: term adopted by Piet Mondrian for his own type of abstract painting. Ideally, an art in which the basic elements of painting – colour, line, form – were used only in their purest, most fundamental state: only primary colours and non-colours, only squares and rectangles, only straight, horizontal or vertical lines.

* see Background note on lecture 1 for definition of **Abstraction** and **Collage**.