



Coventry Cathedral

Exhibition of British Sculpture

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Foreword by Stephen Verney
Canon Residentiary of Coventry
Cathedral. Director of Studies
"People and Cities" Conference.

Climate of freedom

This Exhibition is planned to coincide with an international conference on "People and Cities".

What is happening to people as all over the world they crowd into bigger and bigger cities? This is probably the central question now facing the human race. The city should provide an opportunity for us to enjoy a richer culture than ever before. We can build theatres and concert halls, schools and universities, centres for sport and recreation. Above all, we can meet each other in a variety of human relations. But too often our modern cities are ugly, noisy, congested, and the people living in them are dwarfed, segregated and lonely. The assassination of Martin Luther King, or student riots in Paris, Calcutta and Tokyo, only highlight the general problem.

How shall we use our technical skill to build cities that are beautiful, where people can belong and can participate? The key to the answer is that we must do it together—politicians and planners, economists and engineers, industry, the Church, the artist. So this Exhibition is planned to emphasize the role of the sculptor. With the planner and the architect he forms an immediate team, within which he has the responsibility for summing up and expressing the meaning of the city, in buildings and networks, and the human life within it.

We are proud to show at Coventry Cathedral the work of contemporary British sculptors, and to acknowledge their important contribution to the creation of the modern city.

There has been so much talk of a "renaissance" of British sculpture in the last few years that one hesitates to use the phrase yet again. But what other description can one give to the phenomenal post-war emergence of a whole new generation of sculptors whose works have excited international attention? And when this is followed by yet another wave of talent from an even younger group springing up independently from their elders, one begins to believe that we have in this country a world-wide monopoly on this art form.

The term renaissance means rebirth, but a quarter of a century is still too soon to say whether our sculptors—working in an international style—may be as important in the long run as their anonymous medieval forbears, whose alabasters travelled far and wide.

What one can say with confidence is that the position of Henry Moore, despite the vagaries of changing fashions, remains a constant source of inspiration to those who have come after him. Reg Butler, and Kenneth Armitage, and then Anthony Caro (unfortunately not represented in this Exhibition) have all benefited from a belief in a sculptural heritage, despite stylistic differences and diversities of approach. While it is clear that our sculpture presents not a "school" but an intellectual and aesthetic climate of freedom to experiment and explore new spatial concepts, new forms, new materials and new content, all of our artists have one thing in common: an insistence on producing something unique and

personal and of the highest quality both in terms of idea and execution.

Phillip King (who confirms his important international standing at this year's Venice Biennale), Roland Piché, Michael Bolus, Derrick Woodham, Kneale, Wragg, Morland, Turnbull, David Annesley, Brian Wall, Derek Boshier; the list seems endless. Suffice it to say that there is no country in the world today that could produce such an impressive list of artists working in three dimensions. And it is a tribute to all of them that this important national sculpture exhibition—the first in England in seventeen years—has been given pride of place in an historic setting that links a rich artistic inheritance which fortunately no longer goes ignored.

Mario Amaya

It is amazing to see that in the last ten years the very concept and character of British sculpture has developed beyond all recognition. A revolution has gradually taken place, the details of which are only known to a specialized informed minority.

There is no real tradition in this country for sculpture and it was not until the thirties that Moore, Hepworth and McWilliam started to lay the foundations for original sculpture. Their work was of extreme importance in creating prestige abroad for British Art. In the face of active opposition they forged an international reputation which allowed a later generation—Butler, Chadwick, Armitage and Meadows—to follow in their wake.

The younger sculptors were faced with the problem of working within this rather limited framework or starting fresh and finding a new tradition. The reconciliation between painting and sculpture with the coloured sculptures of Calder and Smith in America pointed the way. Anthony Caro, through his influential teaching at St. Martins was one of the first to draw attention to the possibilities in the articulation of space and the use of industrial materials. These new materials came as a strong reaction against the character of bronze and stone which imposed enormous limitations. The materials—fibreglass, plastics, polyurethane—are not important in themselves, it is what they will allow the sculptor to do. Freed from the conventions of early modernism, the younger sculptors have been able to concern themselves with the problem of sculpture as a thing in itself.

Many stylistic comparisons can be drawn in the new sculpture, but these are primarily superficial. There is a new weightlessness in many of the works. Colour is used lavishly, either as a uniting skin, or as a reinforcement of the form, or to create ambiguity by denying it. Essentially all the sculptors are individuals linked only by a direct approach to the questions of modern sculpture. Some of the work is concerned with creating an environmental change in the mind of the spectator by using anonymous materials and surfaces—exploiting physical-spatial improbabilities. Others are completely detached from human existence.

It is difficult to show this type of sculpture in an outdoor setting—much of it is intimate and indoor. But no sculpture is made specifically for an interior or for an architectural setting—it is made to stand up on its own and to be seen simply as sculpture. It will bring out a different feeling in every individual who sees it—whether it is attractive, repulsive or laughable, it has a distinct function, related to the totality of experience.

Anthony Fawcett, Organizing
Committee, London

Coventry Cathedral as a setting for sculpture

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The stimulus our minds receive, through our eyes, originates in objects. The visual imagination may soar into fantastic ideas but it is launched by the sight of *things*. Artists have featured objects, living or still-life, in their art. But the main advance in sculpture in the last half-century has been towards the understanding of *space*. Open space is a difficult thing to contact, understand and get excitement from. It is a relationship, it brings to mind not one object but two—or more—and in this way it is possible to isolate it as a separate thing.

Sculpture in isolation cannot fully express the artist's notions of space, notions that are totally in keeping with the relationships as between people, in the relationship of architectural styles in cities, the relationship between our planet and other planets.

Sculpture can express these relationships better when the meaning of the single works acts on its surroundings.

This is why modern sculpture, sculpture concerned with its enveloping space, and enveloping its own space, becomes so interesting in the midst of a Gothic Cathedral—one so clearly expressing space, as all around sky and trees and a busy city are immediately in evidence. This is quite a unique event, where there is both containment and open air, the interior and the exterior of architecture, as a setting for sculpture.

In other ways this Exhibition is also a prototype. The works assembled represent the main phases of sculptural advance in the last decades, indeed, since

Coventry was blitzed. Such an extensive review of post-war British sculpture has never been seen outside London. There are gaps, naturally, and I regret that space did not allow greater representation of the youngest contemporaries. One or two better-known names are notably absent, due to the calls of major one-man shows in London, and of Festivals, such as Venice.

Sir Herbert Read will be missed from the opening of this Exhibition. We wish him well with his convalescence; he will be present in spirit, for no one has done more to spur on the enterprise of sculptors than he.

The catalogue was compiled by Fabio Barraclough and designed by Raymond Love

Fabio Barraclough, Chairman,
Organizing Committee

