

THE HEPWORTH WAKEFIELD

Barbara Hepworth: Art & Life Short course – 6 weeks

Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975) is one of the most important artists of the 20th century. She was at the forefront of multiple avant-garde art movements, with wide-ranging interests that infused her work. Deeply spiritual and passionately engaged with political and technological change, Hepworth focused on the dynamic physical encounter with sculpture and how this could allow the viewer to both reflect on and alter their perceptions and experiences of the world.

To coincide with a major exhibition of Hepworth's work at The Hepworth Wakefield, the author of the new biography will lead a short course offering a comprehensive overview of Hepworth's remarkable life and work. Over 6 sessions you will learn about the impact of her upbringing in Yorkshire, the modernist carving that launched her career in the 1920s and 1930s through to the iconic strung sculptures of the 1940s and 1950s, and her later large-scale commissions. Within these sessions you will also learn how she integrated interests in music, dance, science, space exploration, politics and religion, as well as events in her personal life, into her work, creating a singular vision of art and life. Each session will include close looking and shared interpretations of an individual artwork by Hepworth to draw out these themes and influences.

Session 1: A Life of Forms

In 1951 Hepworth elaborated on how the forms she had been continually drawn to – the themes and variations – related to the world she experienced:

'The forms which have had special meaning for me since childhood have been the standing form (which is the translation of my feeling towards the human being standing in landscape); the two forms (which is the tender relationship of one living thing beside another); and the closed form, such as the oval, spherical or pierced form (sometimes incorporating colour) which translates for me the association of meaning of gesture in landscape; in the repose of say a mother & child, or the feeling of the embrace of living things, either in nature or in the human spirit.'

This introductory session will begin with a discussion of the central philosophies and forms present in Hepworth's practice, before taking you back to the beginning of her life. We will follow, through artworks, her early life in Yorkshire and her pathway through education, from Leeds to London, Paris and Italy. We will look at her early career successes, following her return to London in 1926, and her pioneering approach to creating sculpture, concluding with her first critical and commercially successful exhibition in 1930 at Arthur Tooth & Sons, with her first husband John Skeaping.

Looking in focus at *Kneeling Figure*, 1932, subjects covered in discussion may include; Direct Carving, Abstracting the figure, and the influence of West African carving seen in the British Museum.

Session 2: A New Order

'The Head carved in 1930 expressed that feeling of freedom, and a new period began in which my idea formed independently of the block. I wanted to break down the accepted order and rebuild and make my own order.'

- Hepworth writing in 1952

The early 1930s were a period of considerable change for Hepworth. Her marriage broke down, and in 1931 she began a relationship with another artist, Ben Nicholson. Their shared interests and influences, from spirituality to the Parisian avant-garde, encouraged a disintegration of the boundaries between sculpture and painting, fine art and other disciplines, and ultimately between art and life. Midway through the decade she wrote, *'I think the thing to work at is that work & living is the same thing... All is one movement.'* This session will look at the multitude of contemporary cultural influences and confluences, from the Bauhaus and Unit One to Surrealism and Christian Science. Correspondence between Hepworth and Nicholson in the early 1930s will shed light on these and more as both artists became part of the avant-garde.

They had triplets in 1934, an event that prompted a dramatic shift in Hepworth's sculpture, as she later noted, *'my work seemed to have changed direction although the only fresh influence had been the arrival of the children. The work was more formal and all traces of naturalism had disappeared.'* We will explore this shift alongside Hepworth's assertion that these purely abstract works nonetheless capture *'the quality of human relationships.'*

Looking in focus at *Mother and Child*, 1934, subjects covered in discussion may include; Biomorphism, Motherhood and art, spirituality and abstraction.

Session 3: No Ivory Tower

'These formal relationships have become our thought, our faith, waking or sleeping – they can be the solution to life and to living. This is no escapism, no ivory tower, no isolated pleasure in proportion and space – it is an unconscious manner of expressing our belief in a possible life. The language of colour and form is universal and not one for a special class.'

- Hepworth writing in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, 1937

In the 1930s Hampstead, London, where Hepworth lived became a centre for the avant-garde. Hepworth became close to the writer and activist Margaret Gardiner and her partner, scientist J. D. Bernal, and the architect Leslie Martin and his wife, designer Sadie Speight, among many others. Émigré abstract artists such as Naum Gabo and Piet Mondrian who had fled Europe due to the rise of Fascism also settled there, creating a vibrant, interdisciplinary community who believed abstract art could be a catalyst for social change. This session will outline Hepworth's interdisciplinary circle in the 1930s, her increasing commitment to abstract art and her involvement with Anti-fascist activities in the late 1930s.

In 1939, just before war was declared, Hepworth moved with her young family to Cornwall, taking with her only a few small sculptures and carving tools. Drawn from archival research into Hepworth's personal correspondences, this session will reveal how this upheaval influenced her practice, her working conditions through the war, and the impact of this experience on her political and artistic philosophies.

Looking in focus at *Pierced Hemisphere*, 1937, subjects covered in discussion may include; the significance of 'piercing' the form, the connection between sculpture to science, and sculpture as a political act.

Session 4: Joy in a Line

Working realistically replenishes one's love for life, humanity & the earth. Working abstractly seems to release one's personality & sharpen the perceptions... I don't feel any difference of intention or of mood when I paint (or carve) realistically or when I make abstract carvings. The two ways of working flow into each without effort. It all feels the same – the same happiness & pain, the same joy in a line, a form, a colour – the same feeling of being lost in pursuit of something.

- Letter to Herbert Read, 1948

During the war, Hepworth began relating her sculptures to the surrounding landscape in St. Ives, in both their form and, on occasion, their titles. These more open and fluid forms, often incorporating interlacing strings, expressed Hepworth's emotional response to both her surrounding landscape and personal struggles during the war. This session will reveal multiple influences on this development of form discussed in Hepworth's private correspondences and public statements.

One factor was the illness of one of her daughters which required a series of operations and periods in hospital from early 1944. This led to an invitation to observe operations and resulted in a series of paintings made at the end of the 1940s known collectively as the 'Hospital Drawings.' We will discuss these works in relation to her broader practice, alongside Hepworth's own notes on the series. Hepworth exhibited abstract and figurative work together when representing Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1950, and in two large-scale public sculptures made for the Festival of Britain in 1951. These significant moments in her career will be looked at in depth.

Looking in focus at *Landscape Sculpture*, 1944 (cast 1961), subjects covered in discussion may include; the embodied response to landscape, increasing use of colour and focus on surface, and the connections between strung abstract sculpture and figurative Hospital drawings.

Session 5: Music, Movement and Metal

'Everything that goes to make up my usual working day. These things are immensely important to me... My home and my children; listening to music, and thinking about its relation to the life of forms, the need for dancing as recreation, and where dancing links with the actual physical rhythm of carving; the intense pleasure derived from tools and craftsmanship – all these things are daily expressions of the whole.'

- Hepworth writing in 1952

Hepworth was a lifelong lover of music, having played the piano as child and won prizes for her playing in school. In 1933 she had written about the closeness of abstract art to music. These thoughts became more tangibly present in her practice following her meeting with composer Priaulx Rainier in 1950. Rainier composed music for an experimental film made of Hepworth's work in 1953, the same year that Hepworth, Rainier and composer Michael Tippett organised the St. Ives Festival of Music and the Arts. These connections and other collaborations across theatre and music will be explored in this session.

Works relating to musical form were also some of the first sculptures Hepworth made in metal since her student days, addressing, as she wrote to critic Herbert Read, 'how to extend the forms beyond the capacity of stone & wood? How to swing up & outwards when feeling cannot be contained by the block?' We will look at two sculptures, *Curved Form (Pavan)*, 1956 in metallised plaster, and *Forms in*

Movement (Galliard) 1956, to show two different approaches Hepworth took to developing her own way of working in metal, and the conceptual content of both processes.

Looking in focus at *Orpheus* 1956, subjects covered in discussion may include; process of working in brass, including the patination and an overview of editions, the influence of poetry, particularly Rilke on her work, the connection of this work to the death of her son Paul in 1953, and her subsequent trip to Greece in 1954.

Session 6: Politics and Participation

Culture means the affirmation of life. There can be no true culture while we make stock-piles of nuclear weapons – they are the negation of life.
Hepworth co-authored statement for CND, 1961

Hepworth's political engagement in the 1930s and 40s continued in the post-war period. Her belief that artists had a moral responsibility in society was given new urgency by the increasing opportunities to create public sculpture, through which these ideals could be communicated. This session will look in depth at the development of one public sculpture in particular, *Single Form* 1961-64, made for the United Nations Headquarters in New York, and inspired by Hepworth's friendship with Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the UN with whom she shared conviction in the importance of global nuclear disarmament.

Her shift to working on a monumental scale infused her practice beyond public sculpture, and she began to consider viewer participation in her works. As she wrote in 1969, 'so much depends, in sculpture, on what one wants to see through a hole! Maybe, in a big work I want to see the sun or moon. In a smaller work I may want to lean in the hole.' Her mention of the sun and moon reflects a fascination with celestial bodies that we will trace through her work at this time, inspired by the 'space race' of the 1960s, of which she noted, 'I regard the present era of flight and projection into space as a tremendous expansion of our sensibilities.'

Looking in focus at *Four-Square (Four Circles)*, 1966, subjects discussed may include; colour and scale, return to geometric abstraction and connection to Op Art, the impact of advances in science and technology on Hepworth's practice, and the combination of this with continuing faith in Christian Science.