In Search of Form: The Sculpture of Henry Moore

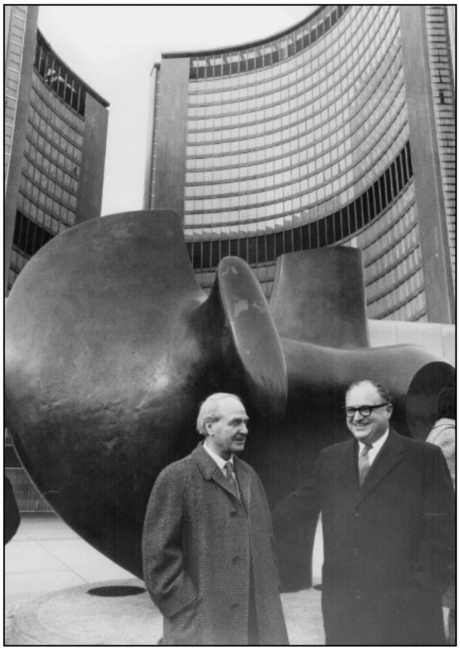
Henry Moore (1898-1986), one of the greatest sculptors of the 20th Century, created striking three-dimensional forms using many different techniques – carving, casting, modelling – and many different materials – stone, bronze, iron, wood, concrete, polystyrene. In the words of Herbert Read (1965, p 259)

> He is a maker of images – or, as I prefer to call them because they have material existence – of icons, and he is impelled to make these icons by his sense of the forms that are vital to the life of mankind.

Each of Moore's works was derived from nature, but Moore simplified and abstracted the experience to provide an emotional understanding rather than a sensory representation This essay comments on the nature of form and considers some of Moore's works.

Personal History

In 1966 a sculpture by Moore entitled *Three Way Piece Number 2*, but generally known as *The Archer* was erected in the square in front of Toronto's new City Hall, designed by the modernist Finnish architect Viljo Revell (1910-1964). Revell had asked Moore to design a sculpture to complement the new building. Unfortunately, the city council refused to finance the sculpture. Undaunted, the mayor Philip Givens arranged to pay for it through private donations. Despite the misgivings of some, the sculpture and the city hall have become immensely popular. Below are two photographs from 1966, the one of the right showing Henry Moore and Philip Givens.



I was intrigued by Toronto's controversial sculpture, and in 1968 on a trip to London, I was able to see a large exhibit of Moore's work at the Tate (Sylvester, 1968). His work affected me deeply: the forms he presented resonated in my mind.

In the early 1970s, Moore donated a large collection of his work to the Art Gallery of Toronto, and in 1974 the gallery opened its Henry Moore Sculpture Centre (Wilkinson, 1987). The focus of the centre is a large room containing many plaster maquettes used by Moore for casting in bronze.

In 2014, to celebrate its 40th anniversary, the centre arranged for Geoffrey Farmer to illuminate these maquettes with changing lights and to provide a sonic accompaniment for the forms (Whyte, 2014). He called the experience *Every day needs an urgent whistle blown into it*. It demanded your attention and I was completely fascinated by the play of light and sound on the forms. Several of the illustrations that follow are photographs taken during my visits to this particular exhibition.

Some Comments on Form

Form is a word of many meanings. The first four meanings given by Wiktionary for the noun “form” in the sense of physical objects are:

1. the shape or visible structure of a thing or person
2. a thing that gives shape to other things as in a mold.
3. regularity, beauty or elegance.
4. the inherent nature of an object; that which the mind itself contributes as the condition of knowing; that in which the essence of a thing consists.

Ancient Greek philosophy had much to say about form (see recent commentaries by Ainsworth, 2024; Fine, 2023; Koslicki, 2018; Koslicki & Raven, 2024; and Silverman, 2014). A “Theory of Forms” is attributed to Plato and Socrates, although this theory is not clearly delineated in the dialogues of Plato. The basic concept holds that an object that we perceive through our senses is but a poor and transitory example of a perfect and eternal form (*eidos*) that exists in some domain separate from everyday reality. However, the true form of something can be grasped through the exercise of reason. For example (from Book X of *The Republic,* circe 375 BCE), though we may experience many different versions of a table, we can discern an idea of a table to which all these versions conform.

Socrates’ *Allegory of the Cave* (from Book VII of *The Republic*) is often understood as explaining the nature of forms. Socrates asks us to imagine that we are imprisoned deep in a cave. All we can see are shadows on the wall of the cave. These shadows are cast by various objects held in front a great fire by a group of puppeteers. The puppeteers themselves do not cast shadows since they are behind a wall, above which they hold their objects. Now, suppose one of the prisoners were to escape and to climb back past the puppeteers and the fire to the entrance of the cave. She would at first be dazzled and confused by the light of the sun. But after a while she would be able to see the real world. And if she were

then to return to the cave and try to convince the other prisoners of what she had discovered, they would consider her crazy.

Socrates (or Plato) is proposing that what we normally perceive is an illusion. Reality can only be attained by leaving behind our preconceptions and grasping the true nature of the world. This is similar to the Apostle Paul's comment (Tyson, 2024)

> For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (*I Corinthians* 13:12)

Indeed, Plato actually used the same metaphor in the *Phaedrus* (circe 370 BCE)

> For there is no light of justice or temperance or any of the higher ideas which are precious to souls in the earthly copies of them: they are seen through a glass dimly; and there are few who, going to the images, behold in them the realities, and these only with difficulty. (Jowett translation)

Socrates' allegory has been interpreted in different ways. An epistemological interpretation is that we cannot know the true reality through what we perceive, but can only discover it if we reason beyond appearances. An ethical interpretation is that we cannot know how to be good by observing the world but only by understanding the ultimate nature of goodness. Whatever the interpretation, the allegory gets lost in its details (e.g. Wilberding, 2004). Who or what are the puppeteers? What are the objects they use to cast the shadows? What is the fire in the cave that causes the shadows? It might have been simpler for the sun to cast shadows of objects in the outside world onto the wall of the cave.

We are left with the simple idea that what we perceive as good or true may not be so. The good or the true may need some

deeper understanding. The religious will claim that this understanding comes by faith; the scientific will claim that it comes by reason.

Aristotle had completely different ideas about form from Plato (Fine, 2003; Ainsworth, 2024). For him, form was what gave objects their individuality. Any thing was a combination of substance (*hule*) and form (*morphe*): a theory that goes by the name of "hylomorphism." In this approach form is not the universal and general idea of which a particular object was a poor copy, but rather that which made that particular object itself. Form was one of the four types of cause: material, formal, efficient, and final.

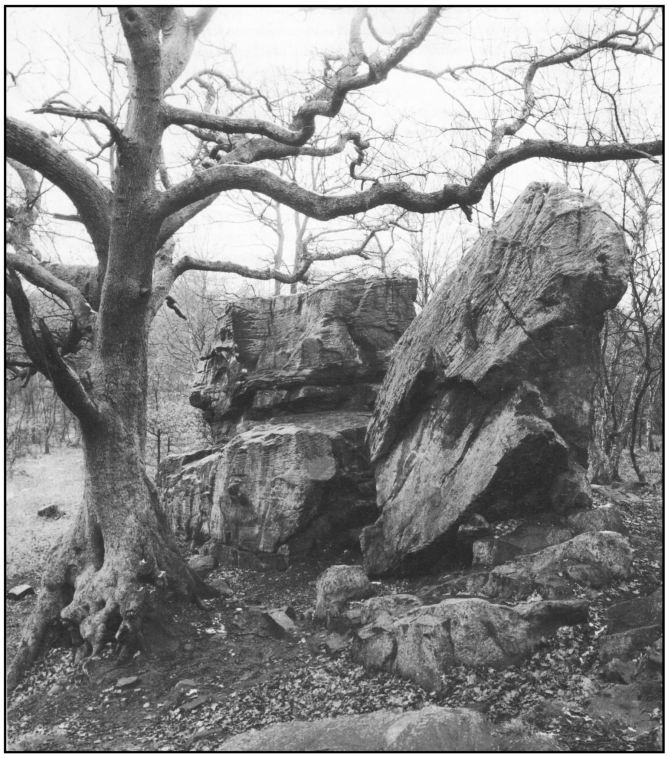
The Young Moore

Henry Moore was born in 1898 in Castleford, near Leeds, Yorkshire, where his father worked as a supervisor in one of the coal mines. Having heard about Michelangelo in school, he decided at the age of 11 years that he would be a sculptor (Barassi et al, 2017, p 11).

The rolling hills of Yorkshire are a result of glacial erosion. As the glaciers retreated, they left behind "erratic" rocks that remain scattered across the landscape. The young Moore was impressed by one such erratic, Adel Rock:

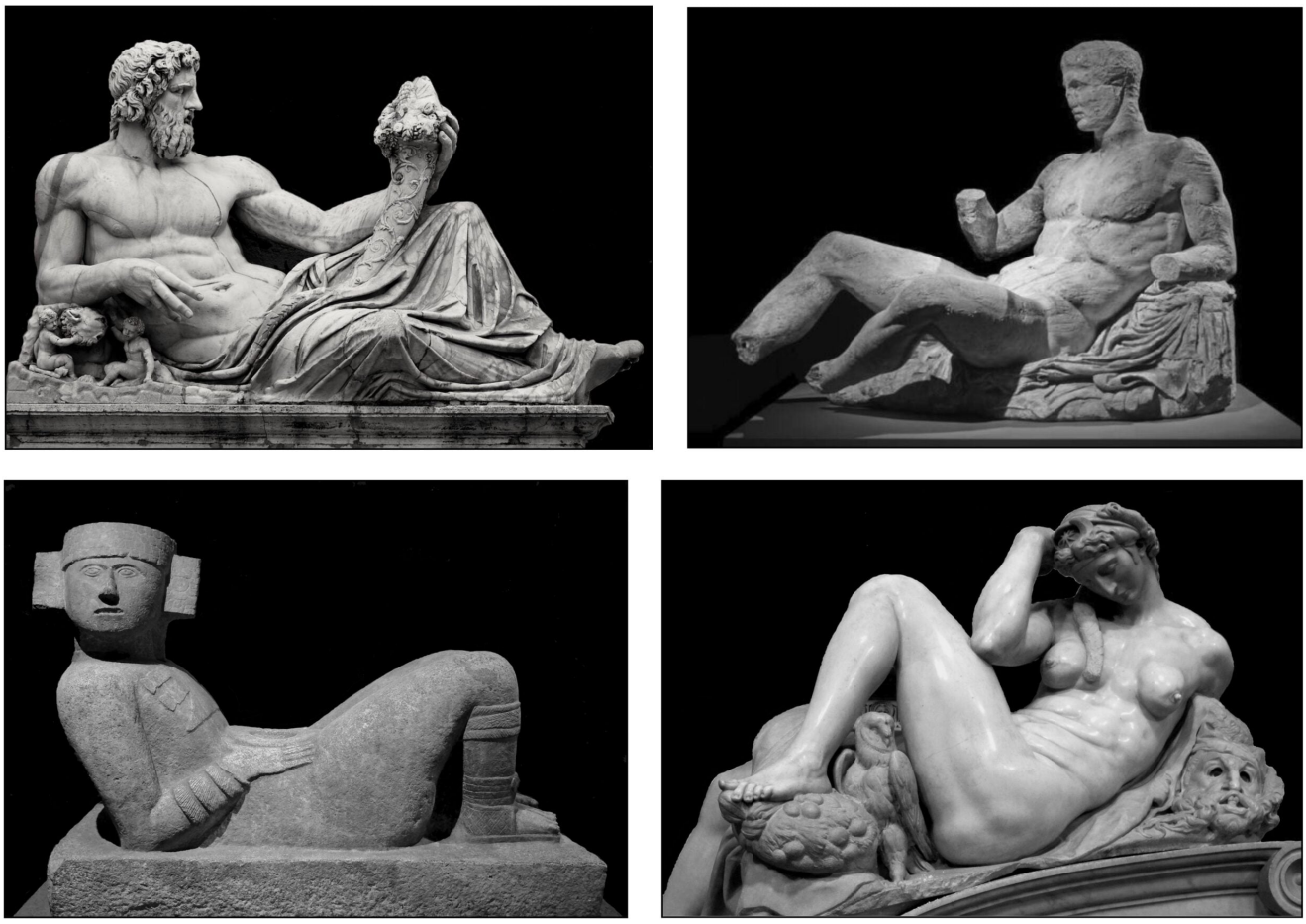
> For me it was the first big, bleak lump of stone set in the landscape and surrounded by marvelous gnarled prehistoric trees. It had no feature of recognition, no element of copying of naturalism, just a bleak powerful form, very impressive. (quoted in Moore &Hedgecoe, 1986, p 35)

The following photograph is by John Hedgecoe (copied from Moore & Wilkinson, 2002, p 30)



Moore served in France with the Prince of Wales Own Civil Service Rifles and was injured by gas in 1917. After the war he obtained a veteran's educational grant and attended Leeds School of Art from 1919-21. He then won a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London from 1921-24. Upon graduating, he became an instructor at the college.

In London, Moore became familiar with the sculptures and the plaster casts held by the many museums in the city. A travelling fellowship also gave him an opportunity to study works in France and Italy. Moore became especially intrigued by the long history of reclining figures in sculpture. The illustration on the following page shows some historical reclining figures: the *Tiberinus*, a Roman sculpture from the 2nd Century CE representing the God of the River Tiber with his horn of plenty, the *Dionysios* from the Parthenon (5th Century BCE), the Chichen Itza *Chacmool* from the 9th Century CE, and *Night* by Michelangelo (1531).



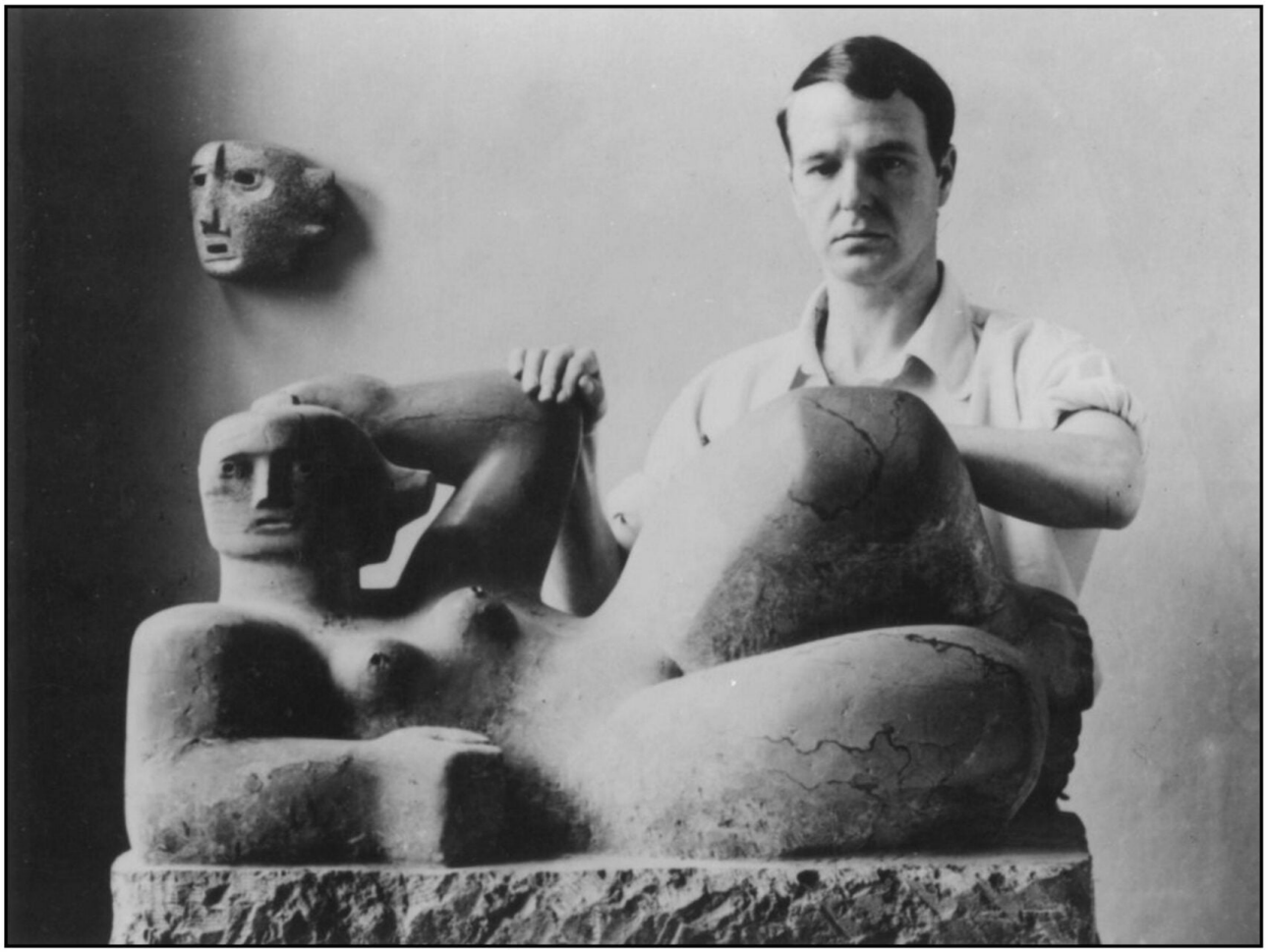
Moore was particularly fascinated by the power of the pre-Columbian Mexican *Chacmool* figures, some of which he saw in the British Museum and others he read about. No one knows what these sculptures represented, nor what they were actually called. The name *Chacmool,* meaning “jaguar” in the Mayan language, was invented by an archeologist. The bowl on the stomach may have held offerings to the gods. In some places and at some times such offerings may have been related to human sacrifice.

Moore’s first major work *Reclining Figure* (1929) carved out of Hornton stone paid homage to the *Chacmool* sculptures of Mexico.

> It has a definite influence from Mexican sculpture, from that particular figure, the *Chacmool* figure! Now except for the turn in the head of the *Chacmool*, which I think is a wonderful sculpture, you get a side view of the body, and

> the legs are both doing the same thing, both sides are both doing the same thing, that is it’s a symmetrical pose, and although I wasn’t consciously trying to compete with this figure in the brown Hornton one, perhaps my desire to get more three dimensions into sculpture made me use a pose in which the top leg comes over and the body is twisted, the arm is up and the other arm is down, that is, I was using a much less symmetrical pose. (quoted in Moore & Wilkinon, 2002, pp 253-4)

The following illustration shows the 1929 sculpture as well as an anonymous photograph of Moore with the sculpture in his studio in 1930:



One of Moore’s colleagues in Leeds and in London was Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975). Hepworth was likely the first modern sculptor to use the hole as an essential part of her creations (Vertu, 2021). The illustration on the right shows *Pierced Form* (1931), a carving in pink alabaster, that was destroyed by bombing during World War II, and only exists in this photograph. Hepworth’s creations hearken back to the *gongshi* or “Scholar’s Rocks,” naturally weathered stones, strangely shaped and often containing holes, that have been used as objects of contemplation in the East.

Moore began to use holes in his sculpture soon after. In a BBC program in 1937 he remarked

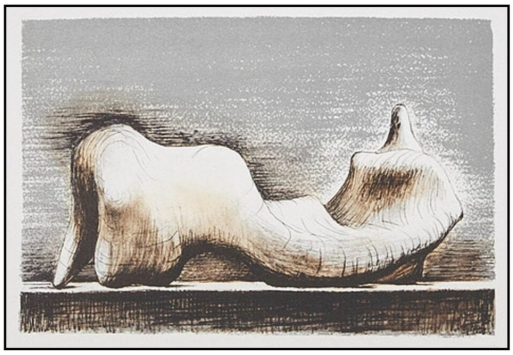
> A piece of stone can have a hole through it and not be weakened – if the hole is of a studied size, shape and direction. On the principle of the arch, it can remain just as strong. The first hole made through a piece of stone is a revelation. The hole connects one side to the other, making it immediately more three-dimensional. A hole can itself

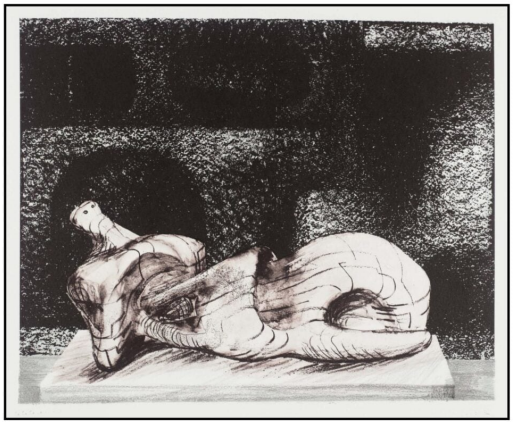
> have as much shape-meaning as a solid mass. Sculpture in air is possible, where the stone contains only the hole, which is the intended and considered form. (quoted in Moore & Wilkinson, 2002, pp 95-96)

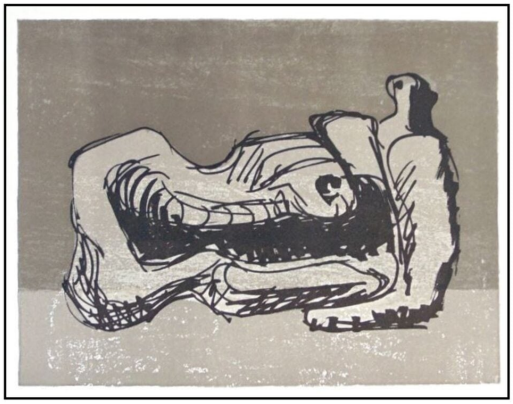
The following is a reclining figure carved in elmwood from 1939:

Reclining Figures

The reclining figure became Moore's most common theme. Almost all of his reclining figures are women. The following illustration shows on the left a page of sketches from 1934. Moore reworked the page into a presentation copy in 1954 using watercolor and crayon to unify and highlight the drawings. On the right are some of his many lithographs showing reclining figures from the 1970s.







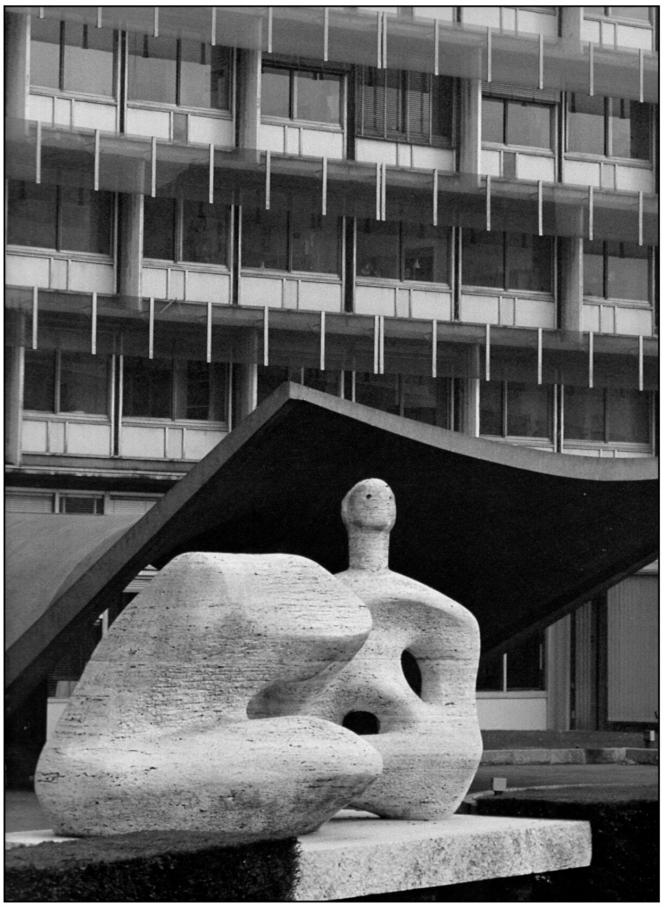
The reclining figure can convey many meanings. In its relation with the ground, it combines aspects of both the human figure and the natural landscape. Sylvester (1968, p 5) remarks

> But the primary intention is ‘energy and power’: Moore’s reclining figures are not supine; they prop themselves up, are potentially active. Hence the affinity with river-gods: the idea is not simply that of a body subjected to the flow of nature’s forces but of one in which these forces are harnessed.

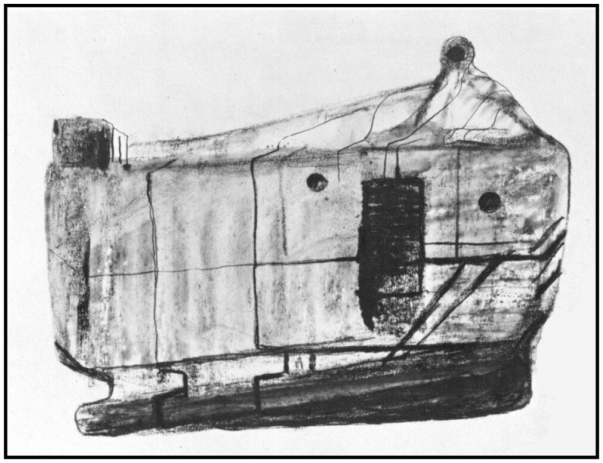
To my thinking Moore’s reclining figures appear to be waking up. They may thus embody the idea of matter becoming

conscious. In this respect, it is appropriate that one of Moore’s most impressive reclining figures was commissioned in 1955 for the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in Paris. The sculpture could serve to illustrate the awakening of collaboration between nations.

Moore initially made a plaster maquette which was 2.35 meters long. From this, seven bronze versions were cast. Since he thought that the bronze version was too dark and too small to be placed in front of the UNESCO building, Moore carved a larger (5.08 meters long) version in travertine stone, the same as used for the building. Moore often scaled his creations to fit the location. The following illustration shows the stone sculpture, the sculpture in place in Paris in a photograph by John Hedgecoe (1998, p 136), and the plaster maquette under the lights of Geoffrey Farmer in Toronto.



Moore’s reclining figures came in many forms. An interesting version shows a relining figure on a pedestal (1960). This may relate to the 3rd-Century BCE Etruscan sarcophagi in Tuscania. The following illustration shows one such sarcophagus, a drawing from 1936 (from Clark, 1974, Figure 85), and the plaster maquette in Toronto under the lights and shadows of Geoffrey Farmer.



Relations between the Pieces

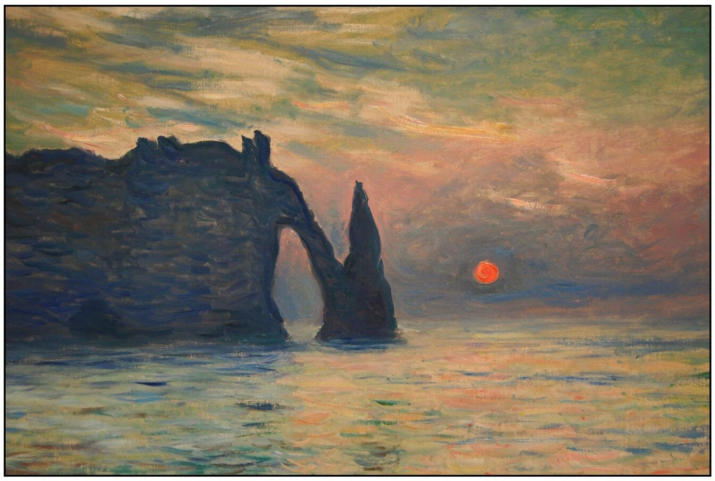
In the late 1950s Moore began to consider the idea of creating reclining figures composed of two parts. In conversation with John Hedgecoe (Moore & Hedgecoe, 1986, p 112) he remarked

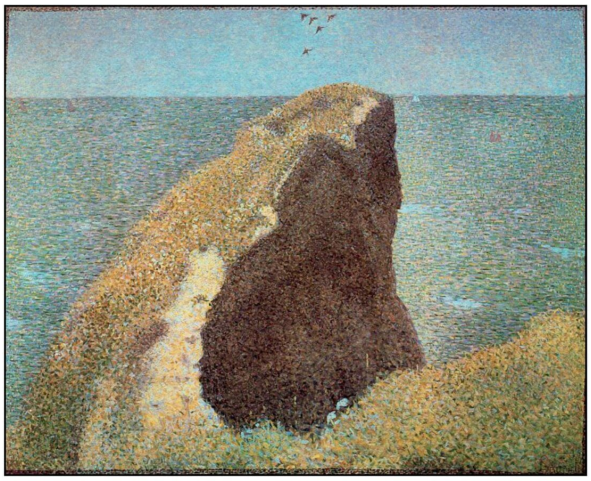
> Making a sculpture in two pieces means that, as you walk around it, one form gets in front of the other in ways that you cannot foresee, and you get a more surprising number of different views than when looking at a monolithic piece. … If you are doing a reclining figure, you just do the head and the legs. You leave space for the body, imagining that other part even though it isn't there. The space then becomes very expressive.

He also related the new sculpture to childhood memories of Adel Rock:

> While I was making it my *Two Piece Reclining Fig*ure recalled for me Adel Rock and the *Rock at Etratat* by Seurat. This particular sculpture is a mixture of the human form and the landscape, a metaphor of the relationship of humanity with the earth.

Moore is likely conflating Seurat's *Le Bec du Hoc at Grandcamp* (1985), illustrated below on the right, which was at one time owned by his friend Kenneth Clark, with one of Monet's many paintings of the *Cliff at Etratat* (left).





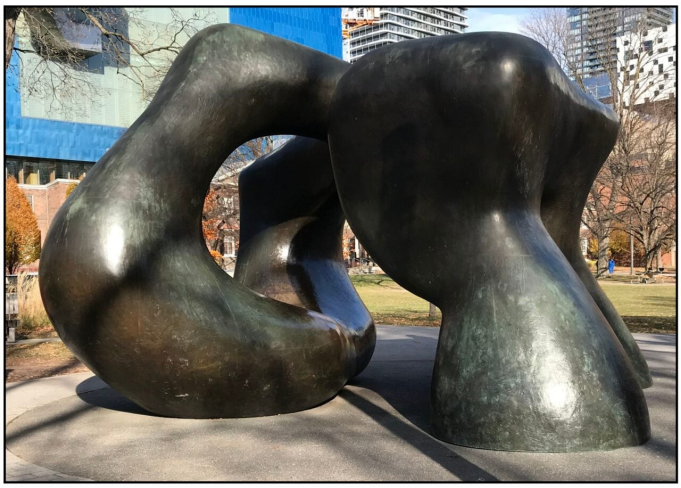
The following illustration shows a recent photograph of Adel Rock:

And finally, the *Two Piece Reclining Figure 2* (1960) as a plaster maquette in Toronto and as a bronze casting in the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (viewed from the other side):

Moore soon began to experiment with more abstract forms placed in relation to each other. His *Large Two Forms* (1969) brings

two shapes that might derive from pelvic bones into a close and possibly sexual relationship. The sculpture began as a small plaster maquette (16 cm) and then was carved in red Soraya marble (length 2 meters): The following illustration shows some black and white photographs by Moore (Sylvester, 1968) and a more recent color photograph:

Moore scaled the forms up using polystyrene (length 6 meters) and cast them in bronze. One of the castings was initially installed outside the Art Gallery or Ontario in 1973. In 2017 it was moved to the nearby Grange Park, where it can be more easily viewed from all directions:



Pointing

In 1940 Moore made a small (length 19 cm) sculpture in steel entitled *Three Points*.

He remarked that

> this pointing has an emotional or physical action in it where things are just about to touch but don’t. There is some anticipation of this action. Michelangelo used the same theme in his fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, of God creating Adam, in which the forefinger of God’s hand is just about to touch and give life to Adam. It is also like the points in the sparking plug of a car, where the spark has to jump across the gap between the points.

There is a very beautiful early French painting (*Gabrielle d’Estrées with her Sister in the Bath*), where one sister is just about to touch the nipple of the other. I used this sense of anticipation first in the *Three Points* of 1940, but there

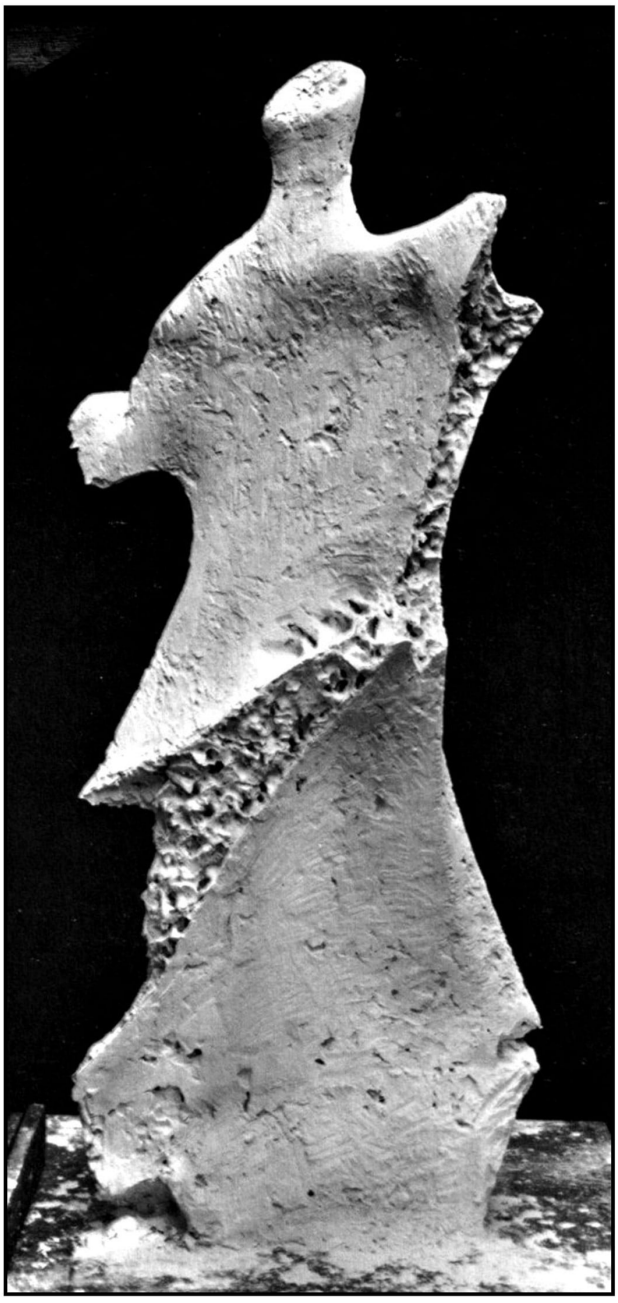
are other, later works where one form is nearly making contact with the other. It is very important that the points do not actually touch. There has to be a gap. (quoted in Moore & Wilkinson, 2002, p 260-1)

Probably the most famous of Moore's pointed sculptures is the *Oval with Points* (1960). This began as a small plaster model (height 16 cm). Based on this Moore made a plaster maquette (height 110 cm) from which bronze versions were cast. Finally, he made a larger version in bronze with a height of 332 cm. the following illustration shows the original plaster model in the Art Gallery of Ontario, the large bronze version in the sculpture park run by the Henry Moore Foundation in Perry Green, Hertfordshire, and the medium-size plaster maquette under the lights of Geoffrey Farmer at the Art Gallery of Ontario:

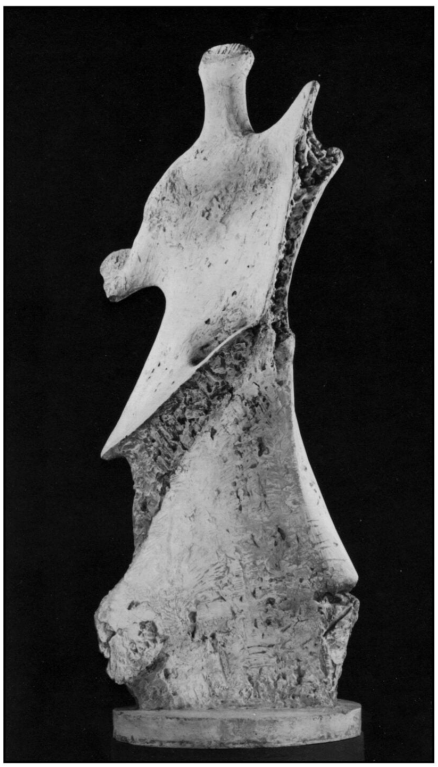
The sculptures have a clear focus where the two points come close together. The points divide the hole in the center into two parts, which make their own form out of the emptiness. The eye wanders from the structure of the oval to the focus, then through to holes to what is beyond.

Standing Figure: Knife Edge

In 1961 Moore created a small figure (about 25 cm tall) by adding modelling clay to a fragment of a bird's breastbone. The figure no longer exists except in a photograph by John Hedgecoe (1968, p 360). Using this as a model, Moore then made a plaster maquette that was 163 cm tall. The following illustration shows two views of the plaster maquette:



Using this maquette, Moore cast several versions of the figure in bronze and one in fibreglass. An even taller version (2.8 meters) was then cast in bronze. The following illustration shows the original model, the fibreglass casting (now in the Art Gallery of Ontario) and a bronze casting of the taller version placed as a memorial to W. B. Yeats in St Stephen's Green in Dublin


In 1976, Moore arranged for a further enlargement – *Large Standing Figure: Knife Edge*. The following figure shows multiple views of one o the castings of this sculpture, now in Greenwich:

From the “front” the statue resembles a human figure with arms indicating the way to go, or an angel with wings opening to begin flight. At one time Moore called it *Winged Figure*, a name appropriate to its origin in the breast bone of a bird. From the “side” it does appear as a cutting edge. The form brings many ideas to mind.

The following illustration shows the fibreglass version at the Art Gallery of Ontario as experienced under the lights of Geoffrey Farmer. To me it was a little like watching the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave.

A Maker of Forms

This essay has only mentioned a few of the themes in Moore's sculptures. Over his long and productive life, he considered many others: among them the mother and child, the family, seated figures, warriors, energy, and heads of various kinds. His forms were occasionally naturalistic but more often abstract. He commented on the process of abstraction:

> People say 'Are you trying to be abstract?' thinking then that they know what you are doing though, of course, they don't understand what the devil it is all about. They think that abstraction means getting away from reality and it often means precisely the opposite – that you are getting closer to it, away from a visual interpretation but nearer to an emotional understanding. When I say that I am being abstract, I mean that I am trying to consider but not simply

> copy nature, and that I am taking account of the material I am using and the idea that I wish to release from that material. (quoted in Moore & Hedgecoe, 1986, p 87).

Moore always insisted that his work must come from nature.

> One doesn't quite know how ideas have been generated or where thy come from. Sometimes one is influenced by a particular pebble or other natural form, but it's equally possible to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and a pencil and a scribble will turn into something which is worth developing. It depends on how much background you have to draw on. The older you are, the more observant you are of the world, of nature, and forms, and the more easily you can invent. But it has to come from somewhere in the beginning, from reality, nature. (quoted in Moore & Hedgecoe, 1986, p 122)

How do Moore's forms relate to the ancient philosophical ideas of form? At times he seemed to be seeking the essence or perfect form of something. Some have considered his work in relation to the archetypes that underlie human thought (Neumann, 1959), but this does not help me understand the sculptures.

More often than not, Moore was creating forms rather than portraying them. He was more Aristotelian than Platonic. He followed Aristotle's four causes: material, formal, efficient, and final. He worked with many different materials, he conceived of forms, he arranged for the material to be made into these forms to be made from the materials, and he did this to help us to understand the world and ourselves.

Final Statement

We can let Moore have the final word on his work. The following is from a 1930 article (quoted in Moore and

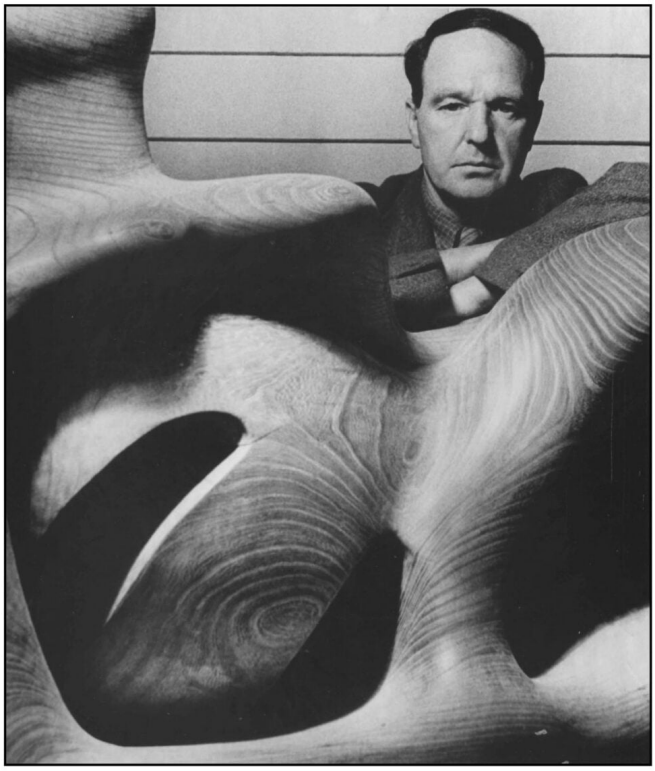
Wilkinson, 2002, p 188)

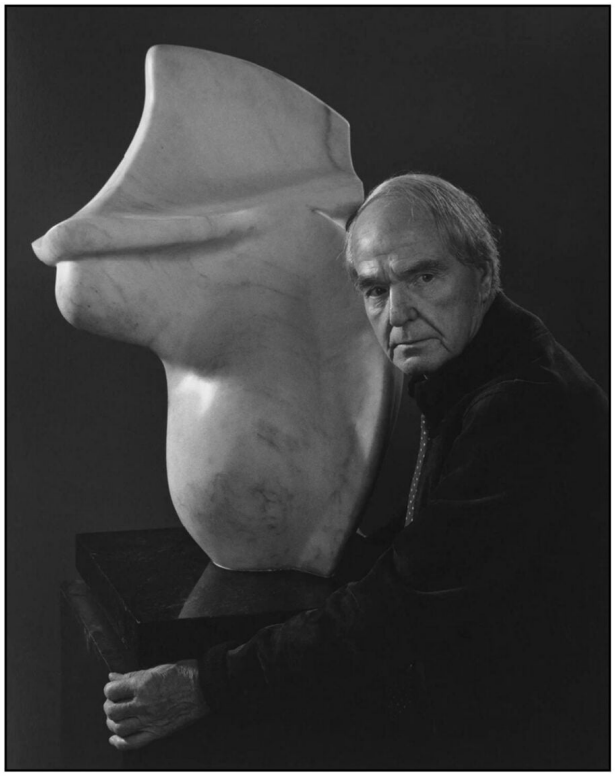
> Each sculptor differs in his aims and ideals according to his different character, personality and his point of development. The sculpture which moves me most is full blooded and self-supporting, fully in the round, that is, its component forms are completely realised and work as masses in opposition, not being merely indicated by surface cutting in relief; it is not perfectly symmetrical, it is static and it is strong and vital, giving out something of the energy and power of great mountains. It has a life of its own, independent of the object it represents.

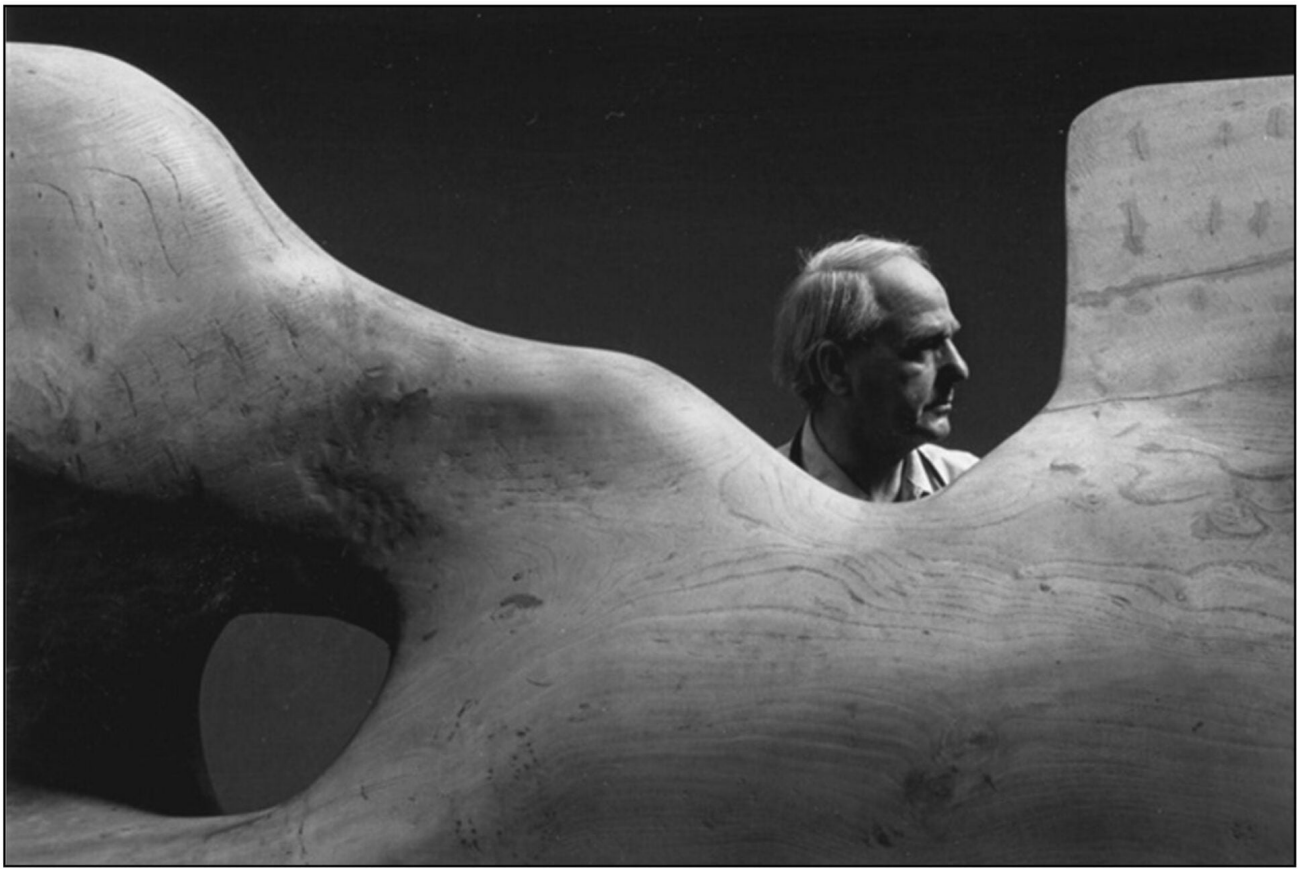
Moore likely derived the idea of the energy and power of great mountains from reading Ezra Pound's 1916 memoir of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915), a young French sculptor who died in the trenches of World War I. His wrote in the journal *Vortex* (quoted in Pound, 1916, p 9)

> Sculptural energy is the mountain.
> Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses in relation.
> Sculptural ability is the defining of these masses by planes.

Below are some photographs of Moore with his sculptures: by Bill Brandt (1946), by Yousuf Karsh (1972) and by Arnold Newman (1966).







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