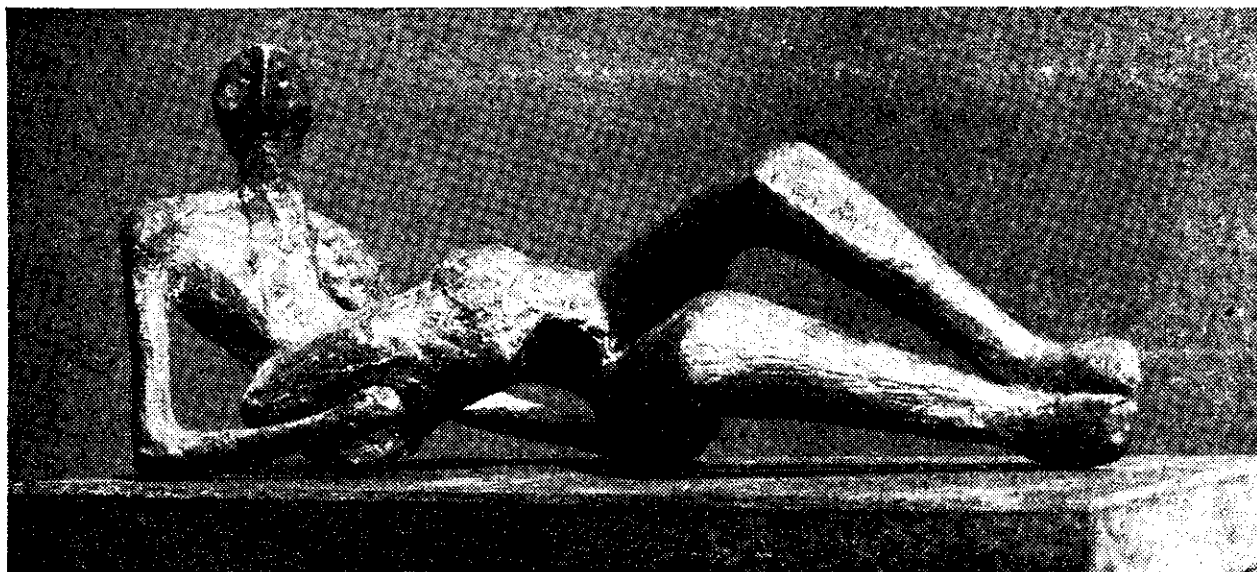




LEFT: Reclining Figure No. 2 (1953)

The Sculpture of Henry Moore

by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

WHATEVER else it does, the British Council exhibition of sculptures by Henry Moore, which began its New Zealand tour at the Auckland Art Gallery on September 17, will arouse a large number of people from their normal state of indifference towards the arts. As early as July a thin trickle of rustic wit at the expense of Moore had begun to appear in the correspondence columns of the press. Before long, no doubt, there will be a torrent of jocosity. On the other hand, voices will be raised in passionate defence and adulation.

Whether public controversy at this level assists towards an understanding of art is extremely questionable. In truth, the present show is likely to do more harm than good if those who see it do not keep reasonably cool, and try to make a calm assessment of Henry Moore's positive qualities and his limitations. Those people who in the past have taken little or no interest in sculpture may perhaps be warned against the folly of reacting in the way a New Guinea native might react when taken to the ballet.

It is difficult to discuss Moore critically without appearing to give hope and encouragement to those simple souls who imagine Mr. Munnings and the late C. F. Goldie to be "masters"; and who, if one is to make a logical inference from what they say about "realism," would no doubt be best pleased if sculptors simply took plaster casts of their models. Nothing contained in this review must be taken to imply in any way an endorsement of bar-parlour art.

The situation has been made the more difficult by the fact that Moore's reputation has got itself involved with certain secular processes that have little or nothing to do with art. For one thing, it is tied up with the post-war British Export Drive (Department of National Prestige). The official culture-organisations of Britain are well aware that, as Sir Bernard Heinze put it the other day, in the times in which we are living "a country is measured as much by its cultural achievement as by its foreign policy," and have set about blowing up certain reputations close to

bursting point. Christopher Fry provides an example. It is possible that the exigencies of public policy may have caused some slight distortion of judgment to creep in regarding Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, and various other practitioners of the arts.

Again, as a sculptor who has not hesitated to experiment widely, Moore has inevitably been placed in an invidious position *vis-à-vis* the Modern Art racket. Beyond doubt there is such a thing. Even Mr. Wyndham Lewis, once a militant member of the *avant garde*, has been inveighing against it in a little book, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*—although he specifically excludes Moore, Sutherland and a number of others from his immediate frame of reference. Like the racket in women's fashions, its centre of operations is in Paris; and its organisers have similar aims in view—rapid turnover, a rate of change that induces a sort of vertigo, and the exploitation of novelty as a fetish—the encouragement of every possible mode of the exotic and the unusual. An artistic "smart set" has been created among the public, which regards art as being, metaphorically speaking, a sort of non-stop cocktail party. These people are always excited by new cocktail mixtures. The habit of living on savouries, nuts, and fragments of exotic cheese has rendered them incapable of appreciating a square meal. At best, they never get past the *hors d'oeuvres*, and demand that everything shall have the quality of "originality" their jaded palates cry out for. Since this group constitutes a large proportion of the art public (the other large group comprising the Munnings devotees and those who think of landscape as "scenic attractions"), the lot of the critic who chooses to wander in the no-man's-land of tradition is not a happy one.

Fundamental styles in art, as in dress, change slowly. On top of this normal process of development there has grown up a surface activity, instigated by dealers, critics, impresarios, journalists, and artist-adventurers, which produces a froth of fake "modernism." No artist today can hope to remain completely unaffected by this situation, and to go on painting or sculpting as the spirit moves him, following his own

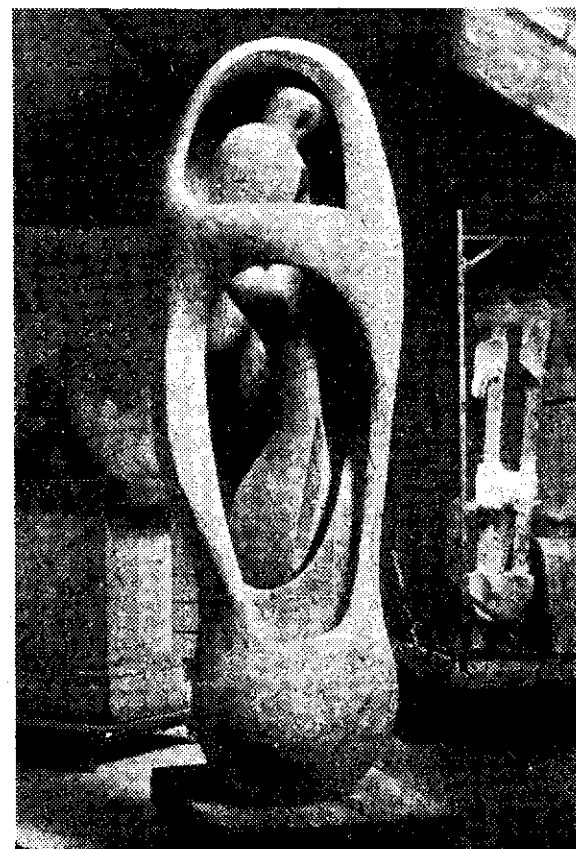
development. However strong his natural integrity, he will find himself under pressure to become self-consciously either a member of the *avant garde* (commanded by critics), or a "reactionary." If he is not very careful indeed, he will be pushed off balance. Has this happened, in any degree, to Henry Moore? Let us leave this question for the moment.

THE very least that can be said in favour of Moore—and it is a great deal—is that he is a sculptor. His work is *sculptural* in character. It is not sculpture trying to produce effects more proper to some other art. Even when he is at his most "literary," sculpture is still, for him, the formal arrangements of masses in space, and not an art of illusionistic effects. And even when he is creating interior as well as exterior form, by perforation or hollowing, he shows at all times a high regard for the definiteness, the three-dimensional actuality, that is characteristic of pure sculpture. Beyond doubt, he has a superb plastic imagination, expressing itself sometimes in sheer richness and complexity of form, at other times in subtly expressive gradations, as in the early head the Auckland Gallery has recently acquired.

His relationship to the tradition of sculpture is a complex one. In the main development of European art during the last five centuries we see a classical strain (appearing first in Greece, and re-emerging at the Renaissance), which has been broken into, cross-fertilised by, sometimes smothered

by other, non-classical elements—chiefly the Gothic strain deriving from Northern Europe. Like a great deal of the notable art of our period, the work of Moore is hybrid, or eclectic. Sometimes he is concerned with creating powerful rhythms that move in wave-like motion through his forms, with strong expressionistic effects gained through a measure of distortion, or with other characteristically Gothic aims. In much of his more satisfying work we see the influence of African and Mexican art. On the whole, he is unhappy when responding too directly to the influence of classical sculpture. In the Battersea Park "Three Standing Figures," for instance, he has tried to create simple formal harmony, poise and balance, and a feeling of calm and relaxation. This is a disappointing work—monumental at the expense of dullness, and a little vulgar in some of its detail. (An English critic has compared these figures to petrol pumps.) In his series of reclining figures—which owes something to the Greek (to the "Theseus" of the Parthenon, for instance)—he has developed the theme very fully, with noble results in some cases, although he ends in somewhat overstrained abstraction. Apart from these traditional influences, some critics have found in certain of his work (especially some of the "inner and outer forms") an instinctual and "embryonic" awareness that echoes contemporary psychology.

In one important respect he belongs most definitely to the Gothic tradition, and that is in his constant attempts to fuse art forms and natural forms in the language of a sort of natural mystique. I would say, in fact, that the most important generalisation to be made about Moore is that he is deeply rooted in that particular aspect of the Gothic ethos which produced English nature-romanticism. When he creates



RIGHT: Internal and External Forms, 1950