

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Henry Moore Goes Indoors

By Roslyn Sulcas



Moore's "Large Two Forms" from 1966 at the Gagosian Gallery in London.

LONDON — A Henry Moore sculpture is an oddly familiar sight. Its size and scale, weight and heft; the undulating curves and geometric angles that recall both the specificity of the human figure and the abstractness of large-scale landscape — these elements are present in Moore's work on public plazas and piazzas, in front of city halls and banks, public squares and parks, all over the world. "More than any other artist of our own time," John Russell wrote in *The New York Times* in 1983, "he has been brought out of the museum and into the open and offered the gift of ubiquity."



Henry Moore working on "Two Piece Reclining Figure," finished in 1960.

Along with that ubiquity has come a certain critical indifference, a feeling that so much popularity surely meant artistic complacency. But a new show that opened at the Gagosian Gallery in London on May 31, "Late Large Forms," tries to revise that jaded view of Moore with an exhibition of some of the huge bronze pieces he created from 1960 to 1980 for sculpture parks and outdoor spaces.

The surprise of the show is too see these monumental works — most of which have never been shown indoors — in the neutral white space of the Gagosian, which occupies a warehouse-like space near King's Cross Station.

“A lot of collectors and dealers have said, they are meant to go outside, what would Moore have thought?” said Anita Feldman, the curator of “Large Late Forms” and the head of collections and exhibitions for the Henry Moore Foundation at the sculptor’s house in Perry Green, Hertfordshire.

In an interview at the gallery before the show’s opening, she continued: “But one of the great challenges as a curator of Henry Moore’s work is getting beyond general perceptions. People think they know Moore because his work is all over the world. I wanted to do something that would change how you approach the work, how you read the forms. Here, you don’t have the distractions of nature. The pieces evoke the feeling of the sublime in sculpture, nature as overwhelming and slightly threatening, and I think that aspect is even more pronounced in an interior space.”

Moore did not achieve international fame until 1948, at 50, when he won the grand prize for sculpture at that year’s Venice Biennale. Until then, he had been known in his native England (he grew up in Yorkshire) for his drawings of World War II Londoners’ waiting and sleeping in Tube stations while bombs rained upon the city during the Blitz.

In the decade after Venice, however, and until his death in 1986, he was to become the unquestioned voice of British sculpture, a byword for public art, and immensely popular in the United States. (“Sometimes it seems as if there are Americans who cannot get out of bed in the morning until they have bought a Henry Moore,” Mr. Russell wrote.)

“We are used to seeing his pieces in the context of nature,” said Stefan Ratibor, director of the London branch of Gagosian. “I thought it would be interesting to show them in a clean well-lit space. There is a sense of their hugeness, which you get less of outside, and a tension, because you get the feeling they can almost break down the building.”

That hugeness is indeed the overwhelming impression as you enter the Gagosian gallery and are faced with “Two Large Forms,” a 1966 piece in which two enormous curving, swelling shapes are positioned close together, one arcing over the other without touching, like almost-interlocking pieces of a puzzle. Close-up, the sea-green patina and changing surface of the weathered bronze is remarkably beautiful, showing layered colors that gleam against the whiteness of the gallery walls.

“Bringing these pieces inside completely changes the sense of the scale,” said Will Gompertz, arts editor at the BBC. “They seem much bigger, and it forces you to engage with them from much more of a material point of view. I think it changes them as works of art.”

Getting works like “Two Large Forms” and the dramatic “Two Piece Reclining Figure: Cut” into the Gagosian was not a simple process. Several walls had to be removed and a number of pieces had to be lowered into the gallery by a crane. The logistics, however, were never an issue, Mr. Ratibor said.

“What I really admire about this organization is that the first response is never no,” he said. “We have had great experiences with Richard Serra and David Smith and pushed the technology to get the pieces in. It doesn’t frighten us. Part of ongoing scholarship is to try to analyze artworks in new ways — they can go back outside, but meanwhile we’ve been able to do something that has never been done before by putting these outdoor works indoors.”

Not everyone is convinced that Gagosian’s motives are all about the art.

“It’s a totally commercial idea,” said Rachel Campbell-Johnston, chief art critic for The Times of London. “It’s an immensely expensive thing to achieve because these things weigh tons, but it allows Gagosian to yoke itself to a big name. Everyone has heard of Henry Moore. They have put on some fantastic shows like this before, but it’s all part of creating an image of themselves as linked to great artists.”

But though there is still some feeling in the art world that museums shouldn't collaborate with commercial galleries, Gagosian's willingness to do — and pay — whatever it took to stage the exhibition was a compelling incentive for the Henry Moore Foundation to agree to the idea when it was approached 18 months ago.

“The distinctions or boundaries between commercial galleries and museums have become much more blurred in the last few years,” said Richard Calvocoressi, director of the Henry Moore Foundation. “Galleries like Gagosian put on museum-quality shows which outweigh any doubts. And Moore did show in commercial galleries. But in the end, it was mostly the space that convinced us to do it — what it could offer in terms of space and light.”

The nine works at Gagosian exude an almost erotically tactile quality in their enclosed space. From the giant knucklebones of “Three Piece Sculpture: Vertebrae” (1968) to the more industrialized forms of “Large Spindle Piece” (1974) and the brutal cleavage that sharply divides “Two Piece Reclining Figure: Cut” (1981), the sensory qualities of surface (hard and shiny, rough and rock-like, often showing the marks of the maker's tools), the rearing verticalities and soft, organic swellings seem heightened and exposed.

A small shelf of maquettes offers another vision of Moore's work as it becomes apparent that these gigantic pieces first took form as tiny models that could fit into the sculptor's hand. Many are constructed from natural elements — pieces of driftwood, sea shells, animal bones and skulls — that Moore collected and stored at Perry Green.

“They are quite personal objects,” Ms. Feldman said. “He was really working on a small scale, with small objects in a small studio. He wanted to be able to hold them, turn them, and see them from many angles. There is something a bit disconcerting about seeing fragments of body parts, bones, mixed with these found objects, but he is also saying that we are part of organic matter. The genesis of the forms all comes back to nature. And he thought that there was a right size for every idea. That's something we can feel even more acutely in this context.”