

Barbara Hepworth Student Notes: Galleries 4 & 5

Barbara Hepworth was one of the most important artists of the 20th Century. She was one of the first artists in the UK to make abstract sculpture. Today her artworks can be found in museums and public places around the world.

"Abstract art doesn't try to 'look like' something. Instead, the colour, shape and materials are the subject, becoming a visual language." Barbara Hepworth

BIOGRAPHY

1903: Born in Wakefield. Went to Wakefield Girls High School.

1920-24: Studied art at Leeds College of Art and then the Royal College of Art in London.

1924: While learning to carve marble in Italy, met artist John Skeaping. They married and had a child in 1929. They separated two years later.

1931: Started to make abstract sculpture and made her first sculpture with a hole, *Pierced Form*.

1931: Met painter Ben Nicholson, whom she married and in 1934 had triplets with.

1939: Moved to Cornwall to keep the family safe during World War II and stayed there for the rest of her life.

1975: Died in an accidental fire in her studio. During her life she made over 600 sculptures.

2011: The Hepworth Wakefield was opened, showing many of her sculptures in the place where she was born.



INSPIRATION

Although Barbara Hepworth's sculptures are mainly abstract, she took inspiration from the landscape. The organic shapes she saw in the hills, rock formations and coastlines around her are reflected in her sculptures. Sometimes she used more geometric shapes in her sculptures, which contrast with her natural, organic forms.

"All my early memories are of forms and shapes and textures. Moving through and over the West Riding [of Yorkshire] landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the form." Barbara Hepworth

LOOK: What connections can you make between Hepworth's sculptures and the natural world? Think about form, texture, colour and materials.



WORK IN FOCUS: *Rock Form (Porthcurno)*, 1964

This sculpture is inspired by the sea and rock formations at a place called Porthcurno in Cornwall. *"These are all sea forms and rock forms, related to Porthcurno on the Land's End coast with its queer caves pierced by the sea."* Barbara Hepworth

Hepworth used the colour, form and textures in the sculpture to express her experience of the place.

THINK: What feelings do you think Hepworth was trying to express. How has she used colour, form and texture to show this?

DRAW: Draw the sculpture without taking your pencil off the paper. Show the shapes and textures using one long continuous line.

WORK IN FOCUS: *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red*

Hepworth created *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* during World War II. It is one of her first wooden sculptures with strings. She had to get special permission to use the wood for the sculpture because wood was needed for the war effort.

Her inspiration for the sculpture came from the coast and sea. *"The strings were the tension I felt between myself and the sea."* Barbara Hepworth



LOOK: Look closely. How do you think Hepworth added the strings to this sculpture?

Over 2800 people helped raise £3.8 million to save *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* and keep this unique sculpture in the UK for everyone to enjoy.

MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Hepworth's early sculptures were carved in wood and stone. She chiselled and smoothed them using hand tools. *You can see some of her tools in Gallery 4.*

"I have always preferred direct carving to modelling because I like the resistance of the hard material and feel happier working that way". Barbara Hepworth

A lot of her later work was first made in plaster. Hepworth built up layers of wet plaster onto a wire mesh frame. When it had hardened, she carved the surface to create texture.

These sculptures were usually then cast in bronze to become permanent and survive being outdoors in all weather. Hepworth also experimented with new materials like aluminium.



WORK IN FOCUS: *Spring*, 1966

Spring was originally a carved wooden sculpture called *Oval Form with Strings and Colour*. This version of *Spring* is a copy, cast in plaster from the wooden version.

It is a rounded egg-like shape with tight strings crossing through the central hole.

The contrast between soft curves and hard lines, and solid forms and negative spaces, are important features of Hepworth's work.

DRAW: Experiment drawing using your pencil in different ways. Add the darker and lighter areas in the sculpture to help show it is 3D. Add the strings, observing how they cross through the hole.

PUBLIC SCULPTURES

In later life, Hepworth was asked to make sculptures for public places, where anyone could see them. These public sculptures were often large scale for outside buildings and in public squares, including *Single Form* for the United Nations headquarters in New York.

WORK IN FOCUS: *Winged Figure*, 1961-62

Winged Figure was made for the John Lewis department store on Oxford Street, London. It is nearly six metres tall and is still high above the entrance today.

Hepworth constructed this full size prototype from aluminium sheet and rod.

To get the rough texture she wanted, Hepworth smeared the surface of the aluminium with car filler.

You can see her working drawings, as well as photographs of the sculpture being made in Gallery 4.



THINK: What does the sculpture make you think about or feel? What do you think John Lewis wanted the sculpture to communicate about their brand?

"I think one of our universal dreams is to move in air and water [...] I wanted to evoke this sensation of freedom. If the Winged Figure in Oxford Street gives people a sense of being air-borne in rain and sunlight and nightlight I will be very happy."
Barbara Hepworth

DRAW: Look at the sculpture from different viewpoints. Draw it from different angles, how do your drawings change what you notice about the sculpture?