



**Henry Moore : Nature and Inspiration at Houghton Hall
1 May to 29 September 2019**

'The observation of nature is part of an artist's life, it enlarges his form,-knowledge, keeps him fresh and from working only by formula, and feeds inspiration. The human figure is what interests me most deeply, but I have found principles of form and rhythm from the study of natural objects such as pebbles, rocks, bones, trees, plants etc. There is, in Nature a limitless variety of shapes and rhythms (and the telescope and microscope have enlarged the field) from which the sculptor can enlarge his form-knowledge experience' Henry Moore 1934

A real privilege to be sitting in Sky Space – James Turrell's site-specific, permanent installation at Houghton Hall – writing this review. I am at Houghton Hall to preview the new exhibition of Henry Moore sculptures, curated at Houghton by Sebastiano Barassi and the Henry Moore Foundation at Perry Green, Hertfordshire.

The exhibition is perfectly sited in the grounds and house here at Houghton, with its extraordinary outdoor spaces, vistas and eyelines which allow breathing spaces for large pieces combined with dramatic views and classical interiors which complement smaller sculptures, detail drawings and compositions of artefacts and references inside the house.

The first room, the South Wing Gallery, houses the enormous elephant skull accompanied by a set of etchings showing how Moore observed, drew and reconstructed this eroded bleached object, a gift from friends, into its component parts, abstracting the skull into shapes and details as he progressively studied and sketched the skull, getting to know every curve of the form.

Sebastiano explained Moore's fascination with nature and human form, geography and sculpture, materials and textures/patterns into landscapes and figures, drawing references from generations of classical artists before him but making the most of his status as a contemporary artist exploring new materials and new relationships.

Working with form and scale Moore became one of the foremost sculptors of his era, choosing to work in a studio in rural Hertfordshire rather than the urban setting of London where he found endless inspiration in flints, bones, birds, hills, sheep and human beings, and the space to explore different backdrops and settings.

Along the ground floor, another small gallery room shows a smallish knobbly flint in a cabinet which was the starting point for *Spindle Piece*. A series of photographs show the process and progression of the abstraction and scaling up of the flints, approx 200mm high to a monumental bronze via a maquette or working model in fibreglass - a new light-weight material at the time - demonstrating the stages of inspiration through abstraction, enlargement and production.

In the Stone Room on the first floor of the house, are two smaller sculptures. One, *Reclining Figure : Bone* in Travertine marble clearly shows a relationship between bone and the human body translated into a landscape with open-pored, striated stone chosen to accentuate the layered pattern. *Bird Form* a dark sculpture made from black serpentine, is juxtaposed with an ancient bronze classical sculpture, linking diagonals - a vehicle for the curator to place and link works in their site specific location.

Out of the window, one of two large pieces located either side of the house occupies a view almost destined to be a frame for this work - a huge long vista leading the eye beyond the huge bronze *Vertebrae* into the far distance. Again, this work, a huge bronze this time is inspired by three vertebrae stacked together, glistening in the sun and showing the marks inscribed into the surface, allegedly made with a cheese grater - a popular tool in Moore's studio. It hard to imagine how this piece could exist elsewhere, it looks so at home.

Around the west side of the house, equally dramatic is a white, bone-like fibreglass sculpture, a figure indeterminate from behind but clearly a reclining woman from the front, her arms as arches to the ground, her smooth body-form crawling along the grass, bonelike but still fulsome. From the house is a view of the back of the sculpture and walking around shows *Large Reclining Figure* outlined against the house and set in the grass lawn.

Walking away and into a wooded garden, I find myself in a central spot occupied by *The Arch*, again fibreglass and bone-white, a large structure to walk through and under but captured by its green and wooded surroundings. Emerging from the garden yet another vista opens up. I am quickly learning that the design of the outdoor spaces at Houghton is almost entirely intended to explore vistas and sightlines.

It is almost impossible to capture the visual and emotional impact of seeing these huge works out in a landscape of such symmetry and perspective that I am compelled to try a number of ways. I am standing at a point with an avenue of planted and sculpted trees directly ahead, creating a most amazing view: the house - a backdrop for the white reclining figure; *The Arch* visible along a diagonal path framed by hedges and to my left *Two Piece Reclining Figure : Cut* - another large double sculpture with a magnetic tension between the two bronze sections with a pavilion/folly framed between them in the distance. With a large Richard Long slate sculpture behind me there is a dramatic long-shot view in all directions. I tried to draw it but scale and perspective made this very hard. I tried to describe it in words - pretty useless too. In the end a diagram had to suffice, the only way that I could hold this image, albeit inadequate anyway. It was literally breath-taking especially when the sun came out and brilliantly illuminated *The Arch*.

Approaching the last piece I could see down another long pathway, lined by hedges, a Classical Greek piece, or so it seemed, appeared at the end. Until closer, a truncated figure, a mother and child caught in a tensile gaze with each other, a moment lasting forever. The marks on the bronze resemble the marks on drawings and etchings which no doubt initiated the piece - tender, smooth and strong.

Rounding the corners at Houghton is occasionally literally breath-taking, made remarkable by the fact that the setting cannot just be conjured up at a moment's notice as is possible in many galleries - a day or two allocated to mount and dismount and paint to completely change the context. No, this is the result of centuries of care and cultivation, full of wildlife (a hare scampers by as I write) and the work has to fit in - it is a two-way relationship where the art cannot dominate, it has to live alongside the context. The skill of the curator has been to find the perfect spots and match them to works in the Foundation's collection, a challenge that he has met extraordinarily well.

The exhibition is open **1 May to 29 September** 2019 so there is time to see it over the coming weeks. It will change as the summer progresses and the garden changes and of course there is a permanent sculpture collection in the grounds which includes work by Richard Long, Rachael Whiteread, James Turrell, Stephen Cox and others. There is space for the energetic to stretch their legs so visit prepared to take your time and enjoys the gardens and permanent collection as well as the Moore. In the stables is *Norfolk By Design : Festival*, a curated collection of high quality art and crafts for sale by eminent locally-based artists, running alongside the Moore exhibition.

I am told that if you are inspired by this exhibition, the next visit should be to the Henry Moore Foundation at Perry Green, where Moore lived and worked for many years and now a dedicated centre for his life and work - I will be making the trip soon!

For more information about the Moore exhibition and Norfolk by Design : Festival

<https://norfolk-by-design.co.uk>

<https://www.houghtonhall.com/visitor-information/times-and-prices>

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