

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

ROBERT ADAMS (British, 1917-1984)

“I am concerned with energy, a physical property inherent in metal, [and] in contrasts between linear forces and masses, between solid and open areas ... the aim is stability and movement in one form.”

(R. Adams, 1966, quoted in A. Grieve, 1992, pp. 109-111)

Robert Adams was born in Northampton, England, in October 1917. He has been called “the neglected genius of post-war British sculpture” by critics.

In 1937, Adams began attending evening classes in life drawing and painting at the Northampton School of Art. Some of Adam’s first-ever sculptures were also exhibited in London between 1942 and 1944 as part of a series of art shows for artists working in the Civil Defence, which Adams joined during the Second World War.

He followed this with his first one-man exhibition at Gimpel Fils Gallery, London, in 1947, before starting a 10-year teaching career in 1949 at the Central School of Art and Design in London. It was during this time that Adams connected with a group of abstract painters – importantly Victor Pasmore, Adrian Heath and Kenneth and Mary Martin – finding a mutual interest in Constructivist aesthetics and in capturing movement.

In 1948, Adams’ stylistic move towards abstraction was further developed when he visited Paris and seeing the sculpture of Pablo Picasso, Julio Gonzales, Constantine Brancusi and Henry Laurens. As such, Adams’ affiliation with his fellow English carvers, such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, extended only as far as an initial desire to carve in stone and wood. Unlike his contemporaries, Adams did not appear to show much interest in the exploration of the human form or its relationship to the landscape. Instead, he completely embraced undiluted abstraction, becoming one of the first to do so in the British Isles, before the emergence of Anthony Caro.

“I do not abstract from nature as such, although I may be excited by certain relationships observed in nature and this may be the germ of a new work. Nevertheless, this experience must be understood for what it is, and be completely assimilated before being used, and my problem remains to make the work completely objective, with its own life and laws.”

(R. Adams, 1957, quoted in A. Boström et al., 2008, p. 52)

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Adams experienced his most prolific and acclaimed years of sculpting between 1950 and 1980, when he became one of the foremost sculptors of the British avant-garde in the post-war period. His reputation was propelled by successful exhibitions at the International Arts Program in New York (where he met artists Alexander Calder and Robert Motherwell); a second solo show at Gimpels in London; and a major commission for the Festival of Britain in 1951.

He was renowned for being a meticulous craftsman who would produce a number of detailed sketches to guide the fabrication process. His expert understanding of the complicated fabrication process enabled him to provide precise directions as to how each piece's effect should be achieved. Adams was also adamant that every subtle variation in form be intentional and significant. As such, the exact treatment and configuration of the materials were synonymous with his ideologies surrounding any given work – a trait he saw as peculiar to the abstract expression.

Arguably the most significant moments in Adams' career were his two exhibitions at the Venice Biennale in 1952 and 1962. The first Biennale cemented Adams' name in the so-called 'Geometry of Fear' movement alongside Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull. Together they exhibited in the 'New Aspects of British Sculpture' in the British pavilion. In fitting with the materials and language that the Geometry of Fear group worked in, Adams' approach to sculpture subsequently changed from carving to working in bronze, welded iron and cast concrete – essentially modern materials.

Ten years later, at his second Biennale, Adams co-hosted an exhibition with Hubert Dalwood at the British Pavilion, this time presenting a series of welded screens. These flat-panelled sculptures now form a significant part of the artist's lasting legacy.