

MICHAEL AYRTON (British, 1921-1975)

Michael Ayrton (1921-1975) was a true 20th century renaissance man. He was a sculptor, painter, printmaker of figures and landscapes, illustrator, draughtsman, theatrical designer, filmmaker, writer and art critic. Well-known for his sculptures and drawings, Ayrton saw himself simply as an “image-maker”.

Although he spent time at Heatherly's and St. John's Wood School of Art, both in London, Ayrton's education in art mainly came from his travels in Europe. He lived in Vienna in 1936, and in 1937-1939, he shared a studio with John Minton in Paris, studying under Eugène Bérman and working in George de Chirico's studio. He returned to the UK and taught at Camberwell School of Art in 1943-1944.

Ayrton continued to travel widely throughout his life, particularly in France, Italy and Greece. He first exhibited with Minton in 1942 at the Leicester Galleries in St. James's, London and thereafter with a selection of other galleries in London and abroad. In addition, he illustrated many books, and his interest in theatre design was stimulated by collaborations with Minton and Constant Lambert.

The Whitechapel Art Gallery held a solo show of Ayrton's work in 1955 of his drawings and paintings; after this date his exploration of equilibrium lead him towards sculpture. He began to sculpt in bronze, receiving technical advice from Henry Moore who he greatly admired. When visiting Greece in 1958, Greek mythology was his principal source of inspiration, in particular Icarus the minotaur and Daedalus, the inventor of the labyrinth. His powerful style sought to reinterpret mythological ideas in terms of the figure.

Ayrton's work is represented in public collections including the Tate Gallery, London; The National Portrait Gallery, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; The British Museum, London; National Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York.