



## **Mother and Child**

Henry Moore

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Mother and Child

**Artist/Maker:** Henry Moore

**Born:** 1932

**Object Type:** Sculpture

**Materials:** Hornton stone

**Measurements:** h. 995 x w. 535 x d. 380 mm

**Accession Number:** 82

**Historic Period:** 20th century

**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe

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**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Leading up to the 1932 *Mother and Child*, Moore had carved twelve sculptures on the subject in just three years. He suggested that his preoccupation with the theme came from a 'mother complex'. He reinforced this mythology with the repeated anecdote about rubbing oil into his mother's back as a child, which he described as his first sculptural experience. [1] However, the subject is more likely to have come from examples of mother-and-child sculptures from art history which, as he described, 'has been a universal theme from the beginning of time and some of the earliest sculptures we've found from the Neolithic Age are of a Mother and Child'. [2]

Some of Moore's earliest examples of the mother and child directly echo sculptures that he would have seen in the British Museum. In these works the mother and child are a unified form, still resembling a single block of stone. The 1932 sculpture was Moore's first full-length mother and child, and his most ambitious carving to date. Archive images show that Moore initially carved drapery on the lower half of the figure, before transforming it into two legs and a stool. In conversation with Robert Sainsbury, he described how the slowness of carving allows ideas to develop, which may account for this change. Moreover he explained that the drapery had been 'avoiding a solution . . . it was getting out of the situation too easily.' [3]

Carving the two legs and the stool offered an opening so that the viewer can see through the sculpture, connecting its opposite sides. A small hole pierces the stone behind the neck to suggest hair falling from the head. These aspects, which open the stone in both orientations, demonstrate

Moore's growing confidence in carving. Furthermore, the figures have a more naturalistic relationship than Moore's earlier sculptures. The mother holds the child protectively in her arms. Although the two bodies merge, there is tension between the figures. The child pushes against, and looks away from, the mother. The mother peers away from her baby, over her large shoulder and into the distance, seemingly protective and alert. Her eyes are indicated by black beads set into the stone. Other marks offer relief from the immense stoniness of the figures, as the limbs are given detail by incised lines that are seemingly drawn into the surface to delineate fingers and toes.

The figure's vast back evokes Moore's childhood interaction with his mother. The large, flat, smooth surface celebrates the colours and textures in the stone. This relative blankness, compared to the front of the sculpture, may be the result of Moore's working process. At this time, Moore worked through his compositions on paper. Therefore his early works are predominantly focused on one viewpoint, whereas in the 1950s he started conceiving sculptures three-dimensionally in plaster or clay maquettes.

Tania Moore, September 2020

[1] Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore*, 2nd edn (London: Giles de la Mare Publishers, 2003), p.11.

[2] John Hedgecoe and Henry Moore, *Henry Spencer Moore* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1968), p.61.

[3] Henry Moore in conversation with Robert Sainsbury, 18 January 1983, Sainsbury Research Unit Archives.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

In 1933 Robert Sainsbury was a young accountant, twenty-seven years old and working his way up in the family firm, when he met Henry Moore for the first time and bought this *Mother and Child* to put in his hall. By his own account, almost nobody liked it. Even Sainsbury's most sophisticated friends found something freakish and threatening in the mother figure's tiny alert tubular head, massive limbs and rearing rounded left shoulder.

Moore, who had recently married, always said he picked his wife "just for her shoulders". He had looked hard at Aztec figures, as well as at the work of radical contemporaries in Paris, and his *Mother and Child* of 1932 spoke a sculptural language still largely incomprehensible at the time in this country. The scale and poise of the head, the body's compact energy, the soft brown stain flowing diagonally across the flat, freckled, greeny-grey plane of the back, the scoop and twist of hip, belly and forearms, even the limpet-like infant clamped to the sloping boulder of its mother's breast: all added up initially to a public affront. It took courage to buy as well as to make this monolithic

image of maternal power and serenity. If you had to pick a single piece to stand for the whole - to sum up the lucid, resolute, confident sensibility expressed from the start in the Sainsbury Collection - Moore's *Mother and Child* could be it.

—

Hilary Spurling, writer and journalist

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## Exhibitions

'Henry Moore, Sculpture and Drawing', Manchester City Art Gallery, 1949

'Henry Moore at Dulwich Picture Gallery', Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, 12/5/2004 - 12/9/2004

'Henry Moore', Tate, London, 24/2/2010 - 8/8/2010

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## Further Reading

John Russell, *Henry Moore* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1968)

Steven Hooper (ed.), *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, volume 1* (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1997)

Ann Garrould, Terry Friedman and David Mitchinson, *Henry Moore, Early Carvings 1920-1940* (Leeds: Leeds City Art Gallery, 1982)

Ann Garrould, Anita Feldman Bennett and Ian Dejardin, *Henry Moore at Dulwich Picture Gallery* (London: Scala Publishers, 2004)

Chris Stephens (ed.), *Henry Moore* (London: Tate, 2010)

Tania Moore, *Henry Moore: Friendships and Legacies* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2020)

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## Provenance

Purchased by Robert Sainsbury from the Leicester Galleries in 1933.

Donated to the University of East Anglia in 1973 (Sainsbury Centre).

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