



Standing figure

Robert Adams

Not on display**Title/Description:** Standing figure**Artist/Maker:** Robert Adams**Born:** 1949**Object Type:** Sculpture**Materials:** Brass**Accession Number:** 31559**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

Resembling a deconstructed human figure, *Standing Figure* is stripped down to its constituent parts in fine wire, almost like the outline of a drawing. Two curving upward thrusting wires suggest arms, a downward triangle at the top suggests shoulders, and the generously curving outer forms suggest a body. Each of these lines dynamically plays off each other reaching in different directions. Adams was one of the first British artists to work in the technique of welding, which achieved this form. He was inspired by the work of González and Picasso before him and followed artists such as Reg Butler in using the technique in Britain. Sculptures in this style are often described as 'drawing in space'.

Alastair Grieve, who compiled Adams' catalogue raisonné, related his constructed figures to the armature of earlier works in plaster and cement modelled in the same year. He writes that in the constructions, 'Adams abandoned the outer coating of flesh and let the constructed, skeletal, frame stand alone'. [1] Just before making this work in brass, he had made a version with wooden rods at twice the height titled *Tall Figure* (1949). Adams created a further five works in this style in brass and of these, *Standing Figure* is the latest and the largest. Grieve describes it as 'The most ambitious and most successful'. [2] *Standing Figure* represents a turning point in Adams' oeuvre for being one of the final figurative works he made. Following this, his works became more and more abstract to the point of being completely non-representational from 1950 onwards.

Robert Adams was one of eight young sculptors to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale in 1952 in the exhibition *New Aspects of British Sculpture*. *Standing Figure* was one of the artworks exhibited in this important exhibition. Although it had been made three years earlier, Adams was predominantly represented by his earlier figurative work, rather than the abstract work he was making by 1952. This would have been more in keeping with the figurative work of the artists who he showed alongside: Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi, and William Turnbull. In the exhibition catalogue Herbert Read identified Adams as distinct from the other artists, writing he was 'isolated in his architectonic pursuits', acknowledging his abstract tendencies. [3]

Adams' later abstract work was more closely aligned with the British Constructivist artists, who created purely abstract forms. Adams exhibited alongside this group of artists who included Adrian Heath, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin and Victor Pasmore, although, like the artists who he exhibited with at the Venice Biennale, often his work did not entirely follow their foundational ethos.

The Sainsbury Centre has the most important body of work by Robert Adams in a public collection in the UK with 27 sculptures and 8 works on paper. They were acquired by collectors Joyce and Michael Morris and bequeathed to the Sainsbury Centre in 2016.

Tania Moore, February 2021

[1] Alastair Grieve, *The Sculpture of Robert Adams* (London: Lund Humphries, 1992), p.26.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.31.

[3] Herbert Read, 'New Aspects of British Sculpture', in *Exhibition of works by Sutherland, Wadsworth, Adams, Armitage, Butler, Chadwick, Clarke, Meadows, Moore, Paolozzi, Turnbull, organised by the British Council for the XXVI Biennale, Venice* (London: British Council, 1952), unpag.

Exhibitions

'London-Paris, New trends in painting and sculpture', ICA, London, 7/3/1950 - 4/4/1950

'New Aspects of British Sculpture', British Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 14/7/1952 - 19/10/1952

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

Further Reading

Alastair Grieve, *The Sculpture of Robert Adams* (London: Lund Humphries, 1992)

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005)

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.24.

Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.
