

## British Sculpture Exhibited at the Venice Biennale after the Second World War, and its Impact on the Work of Italian Sculptors

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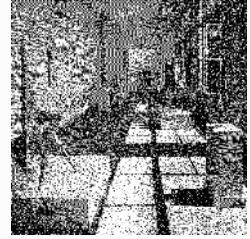
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# British Sculpture Exhibited at the Venice Biennale after the Second World War, and its Impact on the Work of Italian Sculptors

Article by **Emanuela Pezzetta**

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## **Abstract**

British sculpture gained an international reputation thanks to the exposure it was given at the Venice Biennale from 1948 to 1958, and proved capable of influencing sculptural developments throughout the 1950s. This essay will examine various aspects of the crucial impact it made on Italian sculpture, at a time when this had fallen badly behind the international field.

## Moore and the Validity of Figurative Sculpture

In 1946, the critic Giulio Carlo Argan asserted that Henry Moore was the most important sculptor in Europe, above all for his exquisitely English capacity for not shutting himself away within the confines of his own artistic tradition, but remaining open to innovations from the Continent, as a means of nurturing his own autonomous development.<sup>1</sup> The question of his relation to tradition was of particular importance to Argan. Italians' cultural isolation during the fascist dictatorship had contributed significantly to their relative backwardness, in relation to developments in other parts of Europe. For Argan, the crisis in contemporary Italian sculpture derived from the fact that instead of remaining open to all the latest innovations, it had fallen back on the traditional elements which had once propelled it to a level of excellence.<sup>2</sup>

A quick tour of the Central Pavilion at the 1948 Venice Biennale would have sufficed to bear out the accuracy of Argan's claim. To be sure, Marino Marini would have stood out, for his allusive use of his sources, his assimilation of sculptural archetypes and his rigorous approach to combining form, mass, and line. So too would Giacomo Manzù, for his championing of sculptural *chiaroscuro*, for pursuing a dialogue between sculpture and painting, and for creating an intimate, lyrical atmosphere in his work. In the room devoted to the *Fronte Nuovo delle Arti*, visitors would have been struck by the novelty of Leoncillo Leonardi's neo-Cubist syntheses, Nino Franchina's fresh readings of archaic forms, and Alberto Viani's pure volumes. However, all things considered, the Italian sculpture presented in these international exhibitions, which were the most important postwar events of their kind, was shown still to be anchored in a stylistic repertoire and choice of themes, such as nudes, portraits, and mythological subjects that were heavily indebted to the sculpture of the previous decade and had not moved with the times. When Argan learned of Moore's selection for the British Pavilion at the XXIV Biennale, he quickly got down to writing what became the first foreign monograph devoted to the artist, which appeared after the Biennale had opened.<sup>3</sup> In this, Argan adroitly presented Moore as a sculptor of abstract forms, who had managed to stay aloof from the crisis in modern figurative art. The two apparently irreconcilable aspects of Moore's work conveniently embodied the value that Argan attributed to his sculptural experiments, in that, as he saw it, Moore had developed an intense form of abstraction that was capable, at a formal level, of bringing out the objective features of the sculpture, without sacrificing the references to nature or the human figure, or having to renounce his ambition of constantly experimenting with a figurative idiom.

One of the reasons, indeed, for the Italians treating Moore's work as a valuable visual resource was connected with this very issue of figurative sculpture, at a moment when the debate between figuration and abstraction in Italy had become more heated than ever, especially after 1947, when Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist Party, which stressed the links between communist artists and different kinds of figurative or realist art, decided to join the fray. On top of this came the republication in 1948 of the celebrated tract, "Sculpture Dead Language" by Arturo Martini, the most innovative Italian sculptor of the first half of the twentieth century, one year after his death in 1947, which considerably complicated the situation for figurative sculpture.<sup>4</sup> The harsh tone of some of Martini's remarks gave the impression that he had quite simply gone over onto the offensive against all use of images of people and animals in sculpture. Italian sculptors learned two valuable lessons from the works that Moore exhibited in Venice: first, that figurative sculpture was still viable at the end of the fifth decade of the century, and that they could work in a figurative way without subscribing to a realist aesthetic; second, that it was

possible to treat figural subjects in a contemporary manner, if they could find a way of overcoming what Martini had defined as “the prison of sculpture”—in other words, its overdependence on visual appearances. Moore’s sculpture, in fact, addressed figural subjects in an organic language bordering on abstraction and offered an exemplary amalgam of these different elements, for Italian sculptors who still believed in the validity of a figurative style but neither wanted to subscribe to some form of realism nor to join in condemning different modes of abstraction. In Venice, Moore exhibited a representative selection of work going back to 1925, which showed how he had consistently experimented with new elements of forms of figurative sculptural language without allowing the figural elements (what Martini called “the image”) to dominate the sculptural form. At the Biennale, Henry Moore also exhibited some abstract sculptures, which recalled his participation in Unit One and his experimentation with combinations of interpenetrating structures and pure volumes and organic forms. However, the numerical preponderance of works such as the *Standing Figures*, *Reclining Figures* and *Family Groups*—especially, those of the previous six years—confirmed the continuing relevance of figurative sculpture at the end of the 1940s.



Figure 1

Installation view, *Lynn Chadwick display in the British Pavilion, XXVIII Venice Biennale, 1956*, showing Chadwick, *The Seasons*, 1955-56. Digital image courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia – Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee / Photo: A.F.I. (Venezia).

The Italian sculptor who most determinedly set about adapting his own work to Moore’s formal objectives and espoused his theoretical principles was Aldo Calò. After travelling to London in 1950 to study Moore’s work at first hand, and after visiting the sculptor whom he so greatly admired at his home in Perry Green, Calò began to formulate the preconditions for what he would go on to define, in the mid-1950s, as “living sculpture”—a kind of sculpture distinguished by its formal purity, in which the primacy of the material qualities might be supposed to contribute to a harmonious relationship between the different parts, and not to experimenting with geometric or constructive planes, in the manner of the abstractions of the historic avant-

garde, or to the definition of a kind of archetypal sculpture, characterized by inorganic forms. Calò had assimilated two fundamental principles, which lay at the heart of Moore's work—namely, the principles of *direct carving* and *truth to materials*. He did not abandon figuration, but he achieved a radical departure from the Italian sculptural tradition.

Carmelo Cappello made a careful study of the original sculptural elements in Moore's work, as a means of refreshing his own figurative sculpture without, however, feeling obliged to break with his favourite visual references, which were still inextricably linked to Arturo Martini's formal vocabulary. He grasped the fact that the voids inserted into the interior of the material imparted a greater dynamism to the work and triggered a new relationship to the surrounding space. The space itself, which flowed freely within the work, did not get caught up or absorbed by it, but set the interior and exterior of the sculpture in a relation of continual movement and flux. At the very least, Cappello learned from Moore the principles of direct carving and truth to materials and began to handle his materials with due respect for their physical properties, such as their elasticity, strength, veining, cracks, and irregularities—at the same time, opting for a broad range of different materials, such as a variety of alabasters, stones, marbles, and woods.

After 1950, Moore consolidated his reputation as one of the leading figures in the revival of monumental sculpture, both in theory and in practice, and in giving myth a new lease of life via the innumerable articles devoted to him in Italian magazines. Myth, archaism, and primitivism were endowed with new attributes in 1950s sculpture.

The sculptors of the 1950s gave further accretions of meaning to the existing repertoire of myths and archaic and primitive forms, which could serve as metaphors for the condition of mankind, afflicted by the ravages of the Second World War. This led to the representations of the proud, but lacerated human form, sustained only by an atavistic inner force, protecting its integrity of spirit from the brutal assaults to which its body has been subjected. Moore played an essential role in defining this myth: his *Helmet Heads* (1950) and *Warrior with Shield* (1953–54) make a play on the idealized theme of the Mycenaean warrior, whose praises Homer had sung, for his proud stoicism and obstinate refusal to submit, even after the mutilations he had suffered in battle. These works were at the root of his representation of the human figure, vulnerable but undefeated for all that, and opened up new perspectives for the sculptural treatment of heads and the nude male body. In fact, Moore's *Helmet Heads* explored the potential of the sculpted head, emptied of its internal volume. In *Warrior with Shield*, the implicit visual allusions to antiquity, from the Belvedere Torso to the linear patterns on the sculpture from the Apollo Sanctuary in Bassai (c. 410 BC), now in the British Museum, introduced a new dialectic between Ancient and Modern, an issue dear to the Italians. The antique fragment was thus used as an allusive device, or a metaphor through which to address, indirectly, the horrors of the Second World War and the tensions generated by the Cold War.



Figure 2

Marcello Mascherini, *Guerriero (Warrior)*, 1961, bronze, 150 × 130 × 120 cm. Trieste. Digital image courtesy of Pozzar.

The theme of the warrior enjoyed particular success with Italian sculptors. Mario Negri, who was especially interested in exploring aspects of the fragmented and suffering human body, took Moore's warrior as a visual model for testing a mythical subject, to lachrymose effect. In fact, his sculpture *Leonida* (1956), which dealt with the theme of the Spartan king at the Battle of Thermopylae, at the head of a select band of combatants, who sacrificed his life in an effort to block the advance of Xerxes' troops, was treated by Negri as the mortally wounded hero, proud even in his final agony, as a modern symbol of humanity, affronted by the war that was reshaping his own identity and submitting to the judgment of history, but managing to hold his head up high. For Marcello Mascherini, in 1961, Moore's warrior provided the occasion for telling a tale of human tragedy. Around this time, Mascherini had begun to make sculptures with the aid of plastine moulds taken from the limestone surfaces of rocks in the Karst region of Trieste, which produced the characteristically lacerated, contorted effects of the *informel*. His *Warrior* (1961) took from Moore, not only the theme of the wounded and suffering male nude, proudly brandishing a huge shield, but his monumentality. For Luciano Minguzzi, Moore's *Warrior with Shield* and *Helmet Heads* provided a pretext for rethinking the motif of the sculptural head, in keeping with the 1950s style of presenting materials with all the marks of wear and tear. Minguzzi worked pictorial effects into the surfaces of his bronze heads, by drawing attention to all the bumps, perforations, and contrasting volumes, as a way of imbuing elements taken from antiquity with the tortured qualities of the *informel*.

### **The “Geometry of Fear” and Stylistic Characteristics of the 1950s**

The year 1952 was crucial for Italian sculptors, who were once again confronted with the leading protagonists of the medium in the British Pavilion and at the Venice Biennale, in general. The selection of work by the new British avant-garde—the so-called sculptors of “the geometry of fear”—which had been totally unknown outside Britain itself, presented to the world a new way of thinking about, conceiving, and presenting sculpture, which was without precedent. These young artists changed the subjects and materials of sculpture, as well as of the figure of the sculptor himself, and his way of making sculpture. From that moment until 1958, the sculptors Lynn Chadwick, Reg Butler, and Kenneth Armitage were closely followed at every stage by their

Italian peers, who considered that they held the new keys that would once again enable them to gain access to a climate of modernity.

The “geometry of fear” produced a diverse range of effects on Italian sculpture after 1952. In the first place, a certain number of Italian sculptors were spurred on to try and redefine the human figure, in line with the example set by the British sculptors, by resorting to corroded and distorted representations of the male and female nude. Secondly, the works of the British sculptors acted as a filter for a variety of vaguely expressionist stylistic traits, such as the eroded, pitted, and textured surfaces that were part of a more generalized sculptural lexicon that had already gained common currency in the rest of Europe, but had been slow to become established in Italy.

Alberto Giacometti and Germaine Richier, for example, who had provided the models for the sculpture of the “geometry of fear”, along with Pablo Picasso, Julio González, and Alexander Calder, had scarcely been followed by Italian critics in the early 1950s. For an Italian sculptor, it would have been risky to become attached to this new vocabulary of forms, because he or she would not have been understood, would not have been able to exhibit, and would have been prevented from entering into the commercial circuit.

For the Italian sculptors, the undeniable international success of the new British avant-garde created an illustrious precedent for them to abandon their outworn linguistic conventions, in favour of a sculptural idiom that was neither traditional nor thought through in terms of volume and mass. Finally, they found that, by using the techniques of welding and assemblage, they could imbue their surfaces with a tactile quality and arrive at a new concept of sculpture, as something that was predominantly frontal, linear, and open on all sides.

Two sculptors, in particular, provided a focus for the Italians’ attention: Reg Butler and Lynn Chadwick. For a number of Italian figurative sculptors, the works that Butler exhibited at the 1954 Biennale (his reconstruction of the prize-winning model for the Unknown Political Prisoner Competition and *Study for Two Watchers*, of 1952), with their depersonalized, heroic, even hieratic representations of the human figure, exercised a strong appeal. Butler presented the nude figure as degraded, mutilated, and inert and, like Francis Bacon in his paintings, presented a tormented image of humanity, as being self-obsessed and ridden with *Angst*. Alfio Castelli, for example, used Butler’s works as a model for his representations of the mutilated male nude, rendered fragile in its nakedness. He reduced the dimensions of the head, depriving it of its physiognomic connotations; deformed the massive torso, supported by stick-like legs; and presented a surface appearance that looked thoroughly brutalized and abraded.

In Italy, Butler’s *Girl* (1953–54), which was exhibited at the Third Antwerp Sculpture Biennale, in 1955, became one of his best-known sculptures. This work depicted an adolescent girl, standing up with her hands crossed over her head, one of them covering her face, in the act of removing her vest. *Girl* was literally plagiarized by Marcello Mascherini, in his *Gazzella nera* (Black Gazelle, 1960), where Butler’s androgynous figure, traversed by sparse swellings of matter, was converted into a sensual woman, cast in a smooth, compact bronze.



Figure 3

Luciano Minguzzi, *Ombre nel bosco n.2 (Shadows on the wood n.2)*, 1957, bronze, 220 × 96 × 59 cm.

Collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro, Venice. Digital image courtesy of Buccio Fotografia Artigiana."

The British sculptor who made the greatest impact on progressive Italian sculptors was Chadwick. At times, his work switched over to an exploration of non-figurative elements via a conjunction of human and vegetal forms and pushed Minguzzi into experimenting with tenuous rhythms, combinations of trapezoid volumes, filigree structures, and compositional extensions into the surrounding space. From 1956 to 1960 Roberto Crippa, for example, shamelessly referenced Chadwick's animal sculptures, at a time when his career as a painter still boasted solid roots. Thus, between 1950 and 1960, he took to producing objects in iron and steel that were obvious transcriptions of a group of machine-like "beasts" that Chadwick had made, flaunting his characteristic forked and barbed tails, broad wing expansions, and exposed areas of armour plating.

The revival of Italian sculpture after the Second World War, which was due, in part, to the presentation at the Venice Biennale of Moore's sculpture (1948), the "geometry of fear" (1952), and of Butler (1953), Chadwick (1956), and Armitage (1958), had run its course by the time that Italian sculptors found ways of overcoming tradition and adopting contemporary solutions that enabled them finally to be able to compete again at an international level.

Translated by Henry Meyric Hughes

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## About the author

Emanuela Pezzetta (PhD) is an independent historian and researcher of contemporary art, and a curator of contemporary art exhibitions. After studying Modern Literature at the University of Udine (Italy), she followed a post-degree Diploma in history of art at the same university. Her PhD research, under the supervision of Flavio Fergonzi, professor of the Università Normale di Pisa (Italy), focused on post-Second World War Italian sculpture, with specific attention given to the impact of British sculpture on Italian sculpture of this period.

Emanuela was a lecturer at the research workshop *Exhibiting Contemporary Art, 1945–1961* at the Paul Mellon Centre in collaboration with Tate Britain in London in June 2014; at the conference *Sculpture and its Exhibition Histories* at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, in December 2012; and at the research workshop on the Venice Biennale at the University Institute of Architecture of Venice (IUAV) in April 2011. She has also lectured on Italian Pop Art; Dino, Afro, and Mirko Basaldella; Emilio Vedova; Odd Nerdrum; and the artistic object in contemporary aesthetic theories and debates.

Her recent publications are about the sculptor Alberto Viani and his teaching at the Venice Academia di Belle Arti, Dino Basaldella, Marcello Mascherini and his reliefs, and essays on sculpture of the 1960s and 1970s, art, and philosophy.

## Footnotes

1. G. C. Argan, “Arte Moderna in Inghilterra: Henry Moore” (Modern Art in England: Henry Moore), *Letteratura* 8, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1946).
2. G. C. Argan, “Difficoltà della scultura” (The Difficulties of Sculpture), *Letteratura* 2 (March–April 1950).
3. G. C. Argan, *Henry Moore* (Turin: Francisco De Silva Editore, 1948).
4. See Arturo Martini, “Sculpture Dead Language” (1945), in *Modern Sculpture Reader*, ed. Jon Wood, David Hulks, and Alex Potts (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2007), 165–79.

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- Argan, G. C. “Arte Moderna in Inghilterra: Henry Moore” (Modern Art in England: Henry Moore). *Letteratura* 8, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1946).
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