

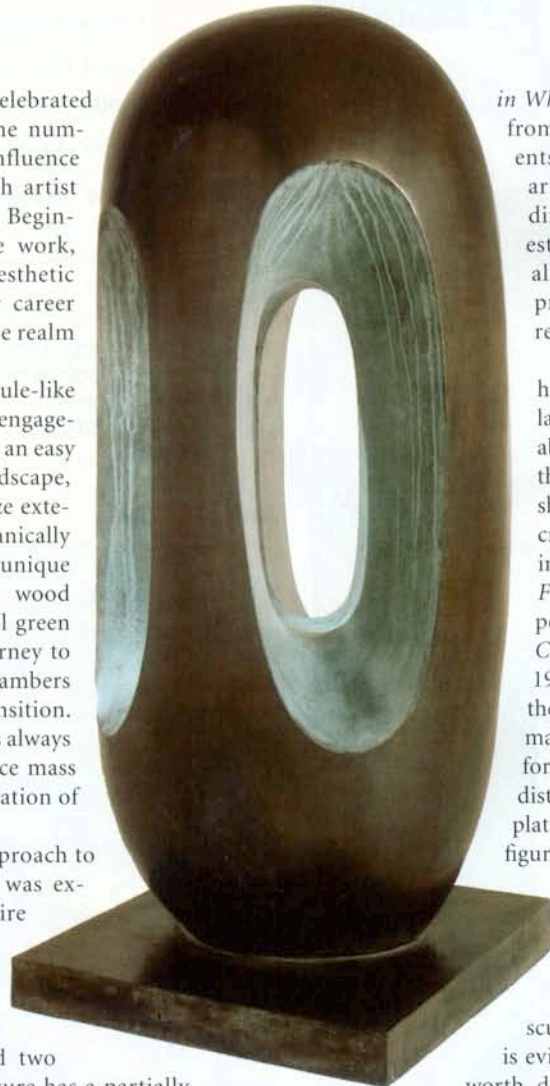
Hepworth at 100

The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, MI

The number of women artists celebrated in their lifetime is limited. The number of women sculptors whose influence is as pronounced as that of British artist Barbara Hepworth is even smaller. Beginning in the 1920s with figurative work, Hepworth's basic humanistic aesthetic remained evident throughout her career even as her sculpture moved into the realm of modernist abstraction.

Less than five feet tall, the capsule-like *Elegy III* (1966) reflects Hepworth's engagement with organic forms. Reflecting an easy relationship between man and landscape, *Elegy III* has a lightly painted bronze exterior that opens into a tri-podal, organically divided interior of three similar yet unique shapes. The transition from the wood grain type exterior mass to the cool green patinaed interior is an alluring journey to the internally mysterious ovoid chambers that are evocative of age and transition. Hepworth's metaphorical power has always been her ability to delve into surface mass and to expose the interior transmutation of her objects.

Working with the subtractive approach to sculpture, Hepworth's early work was executed in wood or stone. That desire to fully own and manipulate the surface is evident in work such as *Two Forms with White (Greek)* (1963-69). Influenced by a trip to the Aegean, Hepworth has paired two figures of unequal height. Each figure has a partially convex surface treated with a white patina and is dominated by a single hole. Hepworth's use of color on her simple and elegant bronze forms enhances the negative space created by the hollowed interior. Constantine Brancusi, a major influence on Hepworth, focused on the purity of form and material; Hepworth's willingness to introduce additive color to her sculpture at this time is refreshing. Of course, the pairing of figures is a powerfully evocative metaphor alluding to our human nature and inherent dependency on one another. The oppositional geometry of *Two Forms with White (Greek)* is more striking here than in her other sculptures, as is the frontal positioning of the work. Of all Hepworth's sculpture on display, *Two Forms*



in White (Greek) probably suffers the least from the awkward installation that presents the sculpture against the wall. The artist's life long commitment to three-dimensionality, in addition to her interest in transparency and positioning, are all subordinated by a gallery layout that precludes the viewers' movement in relation to the artwork.

Hepworth's artistic significance rests heavily on her combination of figure and landscape in her organic and geometric abstractions. This willingness to explore the positive and negative shape relationship is evident in the public sculpture created for the United Nations building in New York. The U.N. sculpture *Single Form* is indicative of the real power and potential of her sculpture. *Maquette for Conversation with Magic Stones*, bronze, 1973-74, provides a small sample of the power of her large public work. The maquette is a vision of towering totemic forms with short and squat magic stones distributed organically throughout the platform. These contrasting geometric figures dominate the landscape, forcing the viewer to meander, physically or philosophically, through the redefined social space.

Hepworth's career was a bright one, and the influence of early abstract sculptors such as Hans Arp and Brancusi is evident in her early work. However, Hepworth defined her aesthetic interests early in her career, developing a perspective that embraced organic abstraction combined with the novel idea of piercing through her sculpture, an aesthetic leap that continues to reverberate today. Hepworth provided an alternative view as a sculptor, an opportunity to see through the form as well as around the form. Even as the modernist belief in the purity of form and the singular icon of communication fades into history, the profundity of her work remains. ●

Julia Morrisroe is a freelance writer and director of the University Art Gallery at Central Michigan University.

Elegy III (1966) bronze with color