

*Many Friends will have been impressed, when visiting York Art Gallery, by the bust of Alfred Wolmark displayed in the Burton Gallery. Here Dorothy Nott investigates the background to this exceptionally striking work, exploring the life of both the sculptor and his subject.*

## **ALFRED WOLMARK BY HENRI GAUDIER-BRZESKA**



Henri Gaudier Brzeska, *Bust of Alfred Wolmark*  
©York Museums Trust

My first impulse on approaching the bust of Alfred Wolmark is to bury my fingers in his deeply furrowed curls, to trace the line of his forehead past the indentation around his eyes, before homing in on his wonderfully expressive nose. The audacious angle of the head, focussing just above the viewer, tells me that this was a man of confidence, self-awareness, even panache, a man it would not be easy to ignore. Who then was Wolmark, and why was he sculpted by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska?

Born in Poland in 1877, Wolmark was part of that body of Eastern European immigrants to Britain that included Jacob Epstein, David Bomberg, Mark Gertler, and Jacob Kramer. Although older than Gaudier-Brzeska, the two artists became friends, and in 1914 Wolmark exhibited his own portrait of Gaudier-Brzeska entitled [\*A Street-fighting Man\*](#).

Larger than life, this shows his fellow artist in a vivid red shirt and black cloak against an equally vivid red background, the face alternately blue,

green, and red, as if bruised in a brawl, the left hand held out palm upwards drawing his opponent in. The art critic P. G. Konody referred to this as 'a piece of pictorial impertinence that goes beyond a joke', though, by a nice reciprocity, it is interesting to note that Gaudier-Brzeska in his self-portrait used large quantities of bright green, red, and yellow to accentuate the chiselled structure of his face.

Wolmark's use of colour was known to be so bright that, in an exhibition of the International Society of Artists, no English painter dared hang work next to his, and it was finally placed alongside a work by Van Gogh, a matter of considerable pride to the artist in later years. As well as the intense colours, Wolmark's paintings are characterized by a bold application of paint, dominated by heavy impasto, leading Walter Sickert to complain that 'you cannot see pictures for the paint'. As a post-impressionist Wolmark exhibited at Roger Fry's 1910 *Manet and the Post Impressionists* at the Grafton Gallery, though in some ways he is closer in style to the Scottish Colourists and the Fauves.

Gaudier-Brzeska was equally flamboyant. Everything about him was exaggerated. He was precociously talented and referred to by Jim Ede of Kettle's Yard as *The Savage Messiah*, the title of Ken Russell's film about him in 1972. He was certainly striking to look at physically as well as in mannerisms and behaviour, and, when the poet Ezra Pound first met him in 1913, he referred to him as a 'well-made wolf or some soft-moving bright-eyed wild thing'. *Wild Thing* was also the name given to an exhibition of his work along with that of fellow sculptors, Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill – both of whom attracted their own controversy – at the Royal Academy nearly a century later in 2010.

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was born Henri Gaudier in 1891, but after he met a Polish woman Sophie Brzeska, some twenty years older than he, he formed a platonic relationship with her, and he added her name to his. In many ways she was like a mother to him, and at times, to avoid censure, they held out that they were brother and sister. They moved from Paris to London, which latter city at the time appeared more accepting of their relationship. Gaudier-Brzeska remained there until the First World War, and was only twenty-three when he died in the trenches in 1915. For such a short life he has left an astonishing legacy behind him.

At the age of sixteen he had won a scholarship to the Bristol School of Art, where he was constantly sketching landscapes, buildings, and people, before returning to France. Initially he identified as a painter, but by 1910 he had decided to devote himself to sculpture and had started by modelling busts of his friends, much like the one under discussion;

but, after his return to Britain in 1911, his artistic breakthrough came when he met Epstein in 1912. At this meeting, Epstein asked him if he carved directly from the material. Too ashamed to admit that he did not, he went home and immediately started on a work, carving direct from stone in preparation for a visit by Epstein three days later. From then on most of his work was created in this way, carving rather than modelling. Although initially he had much in common with the Italian Futurist movement, he soon became attracted by the Rebel Art Centre, which, under the aegis of Wyndham Lewis, morphed into the Vorticist movement, a movement which set itself against much of the art on show in the national galleries, praising 'primitive' art at the expense of derivative forms of Greek sculpture and the cult of Hellenism. For the Vorticists, the machine was at the centre of their art, as in Epstein's famous *Rock Drill*. Gaudier-Brzeska was excited by this new movement which championed an art directly expressive of machine-age dynamism. In 1915 he exhibited with the Vorticists at the Dore gallery, and he contributed to the first of two editions of the iconoclastic magazine *Blast* with an article entitled 'Vortex'; he even scribbled a few notes for the second edition, but by the time this edition was published he was dead.

Between 1912 and his death Gaudier-Brzeska created 80 sculptures and 2000 drawings. He visited the British Museum for inspiration, and, after an initial obsession with Ruskin, he started copying Michelangelo and Rodin - though he later moved away from Rodin and became more interested in the 'primitive', for which he professed a profound admiration and sympathy. As for Michelangelo, he said that he came to understand his work by adopting the tools of Cubism - that is, by drawing boxes and then linking them up. He formed a useful relationship with Ezra Pound. Pound came across him at the Allied Artists' exhibition in the Albert Hall, when looking at *Wrestlers*, one of his most famous works (1914); Gaudier-Brzeska introduced himself before suddenly disappearing. Pound invited him to dinner. Gaudier-Brzeska did not go, but in turn invited Pound to his studio, when he was rewarded by the sale of two sculptures. Pound shared the need to return to the 'primitive', and it was not long before Gaudier-Brzeska was engaged in his monumental head of Pound, greatly influenced again by his visits to the British Museum and in particular the Polynesian section. Gaudier-Brzeska was a prodigiously fast worker, the author and playwright Edith Bagnold saying that he worked 'like some marvellous chef who was cooking with both hands'.

If we return to the bust of Alfred Wolmark, you can immediately see the essence of Wolmark's character – bold, defiant, interesting, a face that is

said to bear a strong resemblance to Beethoven, and one that would be hard to overlook. The energy, dynamism, and intense muscularity which exude from this sculpture are truly memorable – the heightened features, the deep ridges in the hair, the prominent nose, the tilt of the head are all extremely suggestive and contribute to the impression of the man. Feeling those angles and ridges under your fingers you get a real sense of this energy, this poetry, this embodiment of Alfred Wolmark. I believe that this work exemplifies Gaudier-Brzeska's remark to Ezra Pound when he sat for him: 'it will not look like you. . . it will not look like you . . . it will be the expression of certain emotions which I get from your character'.

When the opportunity arose of buying this sculpture, one of six cast, all eleven members of the Friends of the York Art Gallery Committee, including Dean Eric Milner-White, approved the purchase, which approval was confirmed by the President, Herbert Read. It has proved popular ever since.

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