Artwork of the Month March 2025

Barbara Hepworth, *SURGEON WAITING* (1948)

Oil and graphite on paper, 80 x 60 cm, York Art Gallery, YORAG R4501

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Dorothy Nott, formerly Chair of the Friends, discusses Hepworth's Surgeon Waiting*, the subject of her talk at the Gallery.*

Barbara Hepworth is mainly known today for her sculptures, both nationally and internationally. We are fortunate in York to live a mere stone's throw from the eponymous Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, housing many of her works as well as a mock-up of her studio. And in the Gallery's collection we have an outstanding example of her skill in drawing in the fine work of art entitled *Surgeon Waiting*, which gives us some idea of the breadth of her skills as an artist. She was clearly a consummate draughtswoman, and an artist who saw both sculpture and drawing as inextricably linked.

But before discussing the drawing itself, I want to start with a quotation from an anonymous surgeon, who wrote in a forward to an exhibition of Hepworth's drawings at the Lefevre Gallery:

> Little perhaps do surgeons realise the classic beauty of their surroundings, a beauty based on perfect architectural conditions. . . Rarely has an artist been found with both stamina and vision who can portray the sincerity and harmony, the power and beauty, the rhythm and tenderness and the simple drama of the operating theatre.

In saying this, the writer is offering a resounding endorsement of Hepworth's work, and this from a practitioner who knows exactly what he or she is talking about, someone who is familiar with the drama of the theatre, and who would recognize the integrity and sensitivity of Hepworth's drawings.

Barbara Hepworth herself may well have agreed with this sentiment before she became engaged in her project to draw upwards of 80 scenes from the operating theatre, as she initially drew back from engaging in such a project and found it hard to imagine what it would be like to be present during an operation and to record her impressions. But this is a very personal journey for her. She had been married twice, firstly to fellow sculptor John Skeaping, by whom she had one son, Paul, who sadly died in a plane crash in 1953, and then to Ben Nicholson with whom she had

triplets. In spite of having four children in the household, Hepworth continued to work throughout. With Nicholson she moved to Cornwall and set up her studio at Trewyn Studios, St Ives. Then in 1944, one of her triplets, Sarah, at that time aged 9, contracted a bone infection, and was treated first in the hospital at Hayle in Cornwall before being transferred to Exeter on account of the gravity of the condition, where she was treated by Norman Capener, the consultant surgeon. At one time Sarah was wrapped almost from head to toe in plaster of paris, an event which did not escape Hepworth in its similarity to her own practice as a sculptor. She herself was using plaster of paris in her sculptures, and so the situation really resonated with her. She remarked that 'the moulding of plaster jackets. . .was very near to my own profession'. During the course of Sarah's treatment, then very expensive as it was pre-1948 and the NHS, Hepworth and her husband Ben Nicholson developed a close personal relationship with Capener who generously waived his fees. He was an art lover and amateur painter who admired Hepworth's work, and in his own convalescence later on spent time at St Ives. He also purchased a number of Hepworth's hospital drawings. It was he who suggested to her that she should attend operations to make drawings, a suggestion she initially found 'very grim'. However, she writes that 'from the very first moment' she 'was entirely enthralled by the classic beauty of what' she 'saw there: classic in the sense that architecture and function were perfectly blended', wording which is echoed in the forward cited above.

Over two years, between 1947 and 1949, Hepworth created a discrete body of works from her experiences in witnessing orthopaedic and ear operations in hospitals in Exeter and London, both as a result of her friendship with Capener and also as a staunch Labour supporter in the wider context of her commitment to the newly formed NHS. There is a real and vibrant synergy between her own craft or profession as she put it and the work she observed in the theatre; she wrote to Herbert Read that she felt all the more keenly the sculptural ideas that the figures inspired. She was awed by the drama and intensity of the operations, and could see immediately why the word theatre where they were performed was so appropriate. She thought of her drawings as a form of exploration, not just as two-dimensional representations of a three-dimensional object. They have an intensely sculptural quality.

As all the figures are robed and masked, Hepworth's focus is on the hands and the eyes - this is especially apparent in this drawing, as it profiles only one figure rather than a group. As Capener observed, she brought 'a highly emotive intensity to the eyes of the subject which along with the hands' - so important in the surgeon - 'dominate the images'; and it is

interesting to note that Capener himself was often the subject of Hepworth's drawings and possibly even this one. This leads to the observation that what Hepworth has achieved is an intense image which manages to be simultaneously personal and disinterestedly objective. It is powerfully modelled, with a strong focus on the eyes of the surgeon which convey both professionalism and empathy in his zeal to do no harm and conscious of the unseen 'person' shortly to be beneath his hands, so as never be callous to his 'material'.

Hepworth herself talks about how her experience 'ratified her previous ideas as a sculptor' and of 'the basic principles of the abstract composition, rhythm, poise and equilibrium which is inherent in human activity when the mind governs the body for the fulfilment of an unselfish end.' For her this had almost a religious quality; although she did admit that some of her drawings verged on portraiture, her interest lay in the basic principles of an underlying structure, and she was deeply affected by her observations. Although the critic Adrian Stokes was referring to Hepworth's sculptures, his comment that 'life and birth and infancy' constituted the underlying subject of her art is equally true of her drawings.

It is not hard to see that, in her outstanding series of drawings, Hepworth stands firmly within the tradition of great artists who have portrayed medical situations, such as Goya, Van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, and Rembrandt. Jonathan Jones, in his critique of an exhibition at the Hepworth in Wakefield, also draws connections with the work of the Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca, and there are also resonances with the drawings by her contemporary and friend Henry Moore of the underground during air raids in London - also a highly charged situation. All very multi-dimensional.

Surgeon Waiting was completed in 1948, the year the NHS came into being. It is created using both oil and graphite, with surface scraping on paper prepared with gesso-itself made from plaster of paris and used as a primer. The scraping of the blue - probably Prussian blue - paint is intense, revealing the base layer, and gives the drawing an almost ethereal quality against the white gesso as well as a feeling of depth; it has been described as 'amongst the most delicate and subtle of all her works on paper' and 'one of the most intensely focused and completely resolved examples of a single figure.' The paper is thick and of good quality, and when the work was purchased for the art gallery the condition report for this work was able to confirm that it was – and still is – in almost perfect condition, the surface free from dirt and abrasion.

When the opportunity came up to purchase the painting in 1998/9, Richard Green, the then curator, spoke of this a being ‘a really marvellous work and a very positive development’. This was especially so as it came just after the awful burglary at the gallery when three paintings were removed (luckily recovered), and several members of staff were terrorised. This is another work in the gallery purchased (for £40,000) with the aid of money from the Friends of York Art Gallery, along with the Art Fund, the V & A, the Henry Moore Foundation, and private subscribers. We are very fortunate to have it in our collection - an important bedfellow to other contemporary works from Yorkshire artists.

Barbara Hepworth was born and raised in Wakefield before moving to St Ives where she established her studio, now open to the public since her death in a fire in 1975. She won a scholarship to study at the Leeds School of Art, followed by the Royal College of Art in London, where she and Henry Moore – her long-term friend and rival – became interested in the interplay between mass and negative space. Influenced by visits to Paris and the studios of Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp, she was very active in the development of abstraction in Britain and, unlike Moore, did not generally go in for figurative sculptures. With Paul Nash, Herbert Read, and Ben Nicholson she helped establish Unit One, a movement designed to unite abstraction and surrealism in Britain. She received recognition in her lifetime and not just from Capener but from the academic and art worlds, receiving several honorary doctorates as well as awards and high-profile commissions including *Winged Figure* (1963) outside John Lewis on Oxford Street. Her most prestigious commission was her tribute to Dag Hammarskjöld outside the UN building in New York. In 1950 Hepworth represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. and in 1951 contributed to the Festival of Britain; in 1965 she was made a Dame for her contribution to sculpture and the art world generally. Possibly the most appreciated award was the grant of the Freedom of St Ives for her contribution to the town’s culture and education and for her encouragement of the programme ‘Art in Schools’ run by Cornwall County Council. Certainly, she put St Ives on the map. and her work had no small part in the Tate’s decision to locate a gallery there.

Dorothy Nott