

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

KENNETH ARMITAGE (1916-2002)



Seated Woman with Square Head, 1955

Bronze

61 x 26 x 31 cms

(23.97 x 10.22 in)

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Conceived 1955

Cast in 1984 in an edition of 6 casts

Marked with artist's initials and the Susse Foundry mark

Provenance: Private Collection

Literature: Alan Bowness, *Kenneth Armitage: Life and Work*, p46 (London : Lund Humphries, 1997), KA54 ill. b/w

Norbert Lynton, *Kenneth Armitage*, (London : Methuen, 1962) ill. b/w

Norbert Lynton, *Kenneth Armitage: Art in Progress series* (London : Methuen, 1962): Toby Treves, *British Art in Focus: Patrons' Papers*, (London : Tate, 2004)

Exhibited: 1958 Venice Biennial, catalogue # 71, loaned by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Kenneth Armitage was born in Leeds and before the war attended Leeds College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art. Following war service in the British Army, he held teaching posts at Bath Academy of Art in Wiltshire (1946-1956) and at Leeds University where he held a Gregory Fellowship from 1953-1955. He had his first one-man show at London's Gimpel Fils Gallery in 1952. Armitage began his career carving in stone but soon developed an expressive vocabulary of nervous, spiky forms combining welded steel armatures with plaster modelling. He came to prominence as one of the young British artists who contributed to the New Aspects of British Sculpture exhibition at the XXVI Venice Biennale in 1952. The display prompted the respected art critic Herbert Read to coin the term 'geometry of fear' to describe the mood of post-war anxiety evoked by the work of Armitage and his contemporaries. Armitage's work reveals an abiding fascination with the human figure, which he often rendered in flattened form with schematized oblong or diminutive heads and stick limbs. He also experimented with a kind of relief sculpture with figures emerging from vertical screens and other structures. In the 1950s he began working in clay and later experimented with aluminium, various resins and other materials. In the 1960s he made abstract works comprising sentinel-like columns or slabs surmounted by flared funnel-shaped appendages. His sculpture and graphic work were not without humour and a certain theatricality. Towards the end of his career he made amusing large-scale sculptures based on disembodied arms and legs.

In *Kenneth Armitage: His Life and Work* by Alan Bowness (1997) the artist describes the sculpture displayed here in some detail: *In 1955 I made 'Seated Woman with Square Head'. It was 61cm high, a dumpy fat figure, a cast of which is owned by the Tate. A square head was used on a later work for the Mouton Rothschild commission. So far as I know, I have never been influenced by any contemporary work; one does one's work because it comes from inside and not because of anyone else. But in this case I was struck by Sidney Nolan's series of paintings based on the infamous Australian bandit Ned Kelly with his black steel helmet. Sidney Nolan's paintings were haunting. Titles are very difficult; sometimes it is very natural to call a piece by what is most striking about it, if there is some means of identification, such as a square head*(*Kenneth Armitage: Life and Work*, ed. Tamsyn Woollcombe, The Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries Publishers, London, 1977, p. 44)

Armitage enjoyed a broad international reputation and was widely exhibited, with retrospectives held at Whitechapel Art Gallery (1959), Artcurial, Paris (1985) and Yorkshire Sculpture Park (1996-97). He was awarded a CBE in 1959.