

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

HENRY MOORE (1898-1986)



Mother and Child: Arms

Bronze
60 x 80 x 47 cms
(23.58 x 31.44 in)

Conceived 1976-80; cast 1980-81
Signed and numbered from the edition of 9

Provenance: The artist
Weintraub Gallery, New York
Jeffrey Loria, New York
Private collection, California

Exhibitions: 2000-01 Beijing/Guangzhou/Shanghai, Moore in China (cast 0/8)

Literature: A. Bowness (ed.), *Henry Moore: Complete Sculpture 1974-80*, London, 1994, vol. V, no. 698 (illustrated)

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

A cast of this bronze is held at Prefectural Museum of Modern Art, Fukushima, Japan. Another is held by the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

The original plaster and a bronze cast is held at the Henry Moore Foundation, Much Hadham, UK

Notes: 'The 'Mother and Child' idea is one of my two or three obsessions, one of my inexhaustible subjects. This may have something to do with the fact that the 'Madonna and Child' was so important in the art of the past and that one loves the old masters and has learned so much from them... But the subject itself is eternal and unending, with so many sculptural possibilities in it – a small form in relation to a big form protecting the small one, and so on. It is such a rich subject, both humanly and compositionally, that I will always go on using it.' Henry Moore quoted in *Henry Moore Drawings 1969-79*, Pace Wildenstein Gallery, New York, 1979, p.29. Henry Moore's obsession with the Mother and Child theme was rooted in his desire to step beyond the overt meaning of the composition to engage with broader and more innovative sculptural possibilities. The repetition of such a common trope frees it of its overt meaning allowing the sculptor, as Moore himself noted, 'to invent a completely new form idea.' (Henry Moore, quoted in J. Russell, *Henry Moore*, London, 1968, p. 28).

By this repeated engagement with the theme each new iteration brought new discoveries, building to an extraordinarily fertile period in the 1970s. As the critic John Berger observed, 'The last period of Moore's working life – and notably the years when he was in his late 70s or over 80 – was of an incomparable richness. Here he joins the company of Titian or Matisse in the sense that his life's work becomes cumulative: his last works an apogee' (J. Berger, 'A Sense of Touch', *The Guardian*, 21 September 1989, pp. 25, 47, quoted in *Bacon Moore*, p. 13).

The Mother and Child theme can be traced back to a sculpture made while Moore was still a student at the Royal College of Art, London. That sculpture shows the totemic, angular influence of Pre-Columbian carvings studied at the British Museum, reflective of Moore's exploration of ideas outside the Western canon and a search for primal form. He returned frequently to the theme, by turns abstract and expressive, through the 1920s and 1930s, and most significantly during the war years. The most significant expression comes in the 1943 commission for a Madonna and Child for the church of St Matthew, Northampton, although the specifically religious context seems a little incongruous in view of the universality of the theme.

Throughout, the theme of mother and child refers not just to the parental relationship but to an expression of fundamental concepts of fertility and creation, of birth and life, and to Moore's exploration of the essential rhythms of nature. Fascinatingly, this search folds in on itself in the sculptor's own practice, as he himself breathes life into his models. Perhaps not surprisingly, these ideas crystallised with the birth of Moore's own daughter Mary, named for his mother, in May 1946, which launched an even more profound campaign of exploration. This found expression in the lively sequence of Mother and Child groups of the early 1950s, such as *Variation of Rocking Chair 2*, which look forward to the arrangement of for *Mother and Child: Arms*.

Gail Gelburd expands on the significance to Moore of the relationship between the mother and child theme and artistic practice: "Moore continuously found new ways of exploring the theme so that the imagery could take on meaning beyond the aesthetics of its form. The development of the mother and child imagery reveals that Moore's involvement in this theme reaches beyond maternity to an inquiry into birth and creativity. The theme of the mother and child, the mother giving birth, the child struggling to emerge from the maternal womb, is like the stone giving birth to the form, the form struggling to emerge from the block of stone" (*Mother and Child, The Art of Henry Moore*

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

, exh. cat., Hofstra University Museum, Hempstead, New York, 1987, p. 37). In the present work, the mother figure rocks back on her hips almost into the pose of that other great Moore theme the *Reclining Figure*. Her legs thrusting forward under drapery echo the form of rolling hills, the outlines at once maternal and geological, the forms worn as smooth as an alluvial pebble, or a river landscape. The web of limbs linking mother and child cocoons the womb-like negative space between the two figures. The angularity of the limbs emphasises the contrast between the movement of the child and the stability of the mother, between creator and progeny. The forward thrust of the infant draws the two heads almost on to the same level, closing the circle based in the swooping curves of the mother's lap. This struggle between dependent forms sets up a tension, elegantly resolved between the two figures (evident even in his maquettes), the interlocking forms creating an interplay of differing scales which had long been a feature of both Moore's figurative and more abstract sculpture.

The importance of this recurrent theme in Moore's work is internationally recognised and celebrated; other editions of *Mother and Child: Arms* can be found in institutions such as the Henry Moore Foundation in the UK, the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia and the Prefectural Museum of Modern Art in Japan.