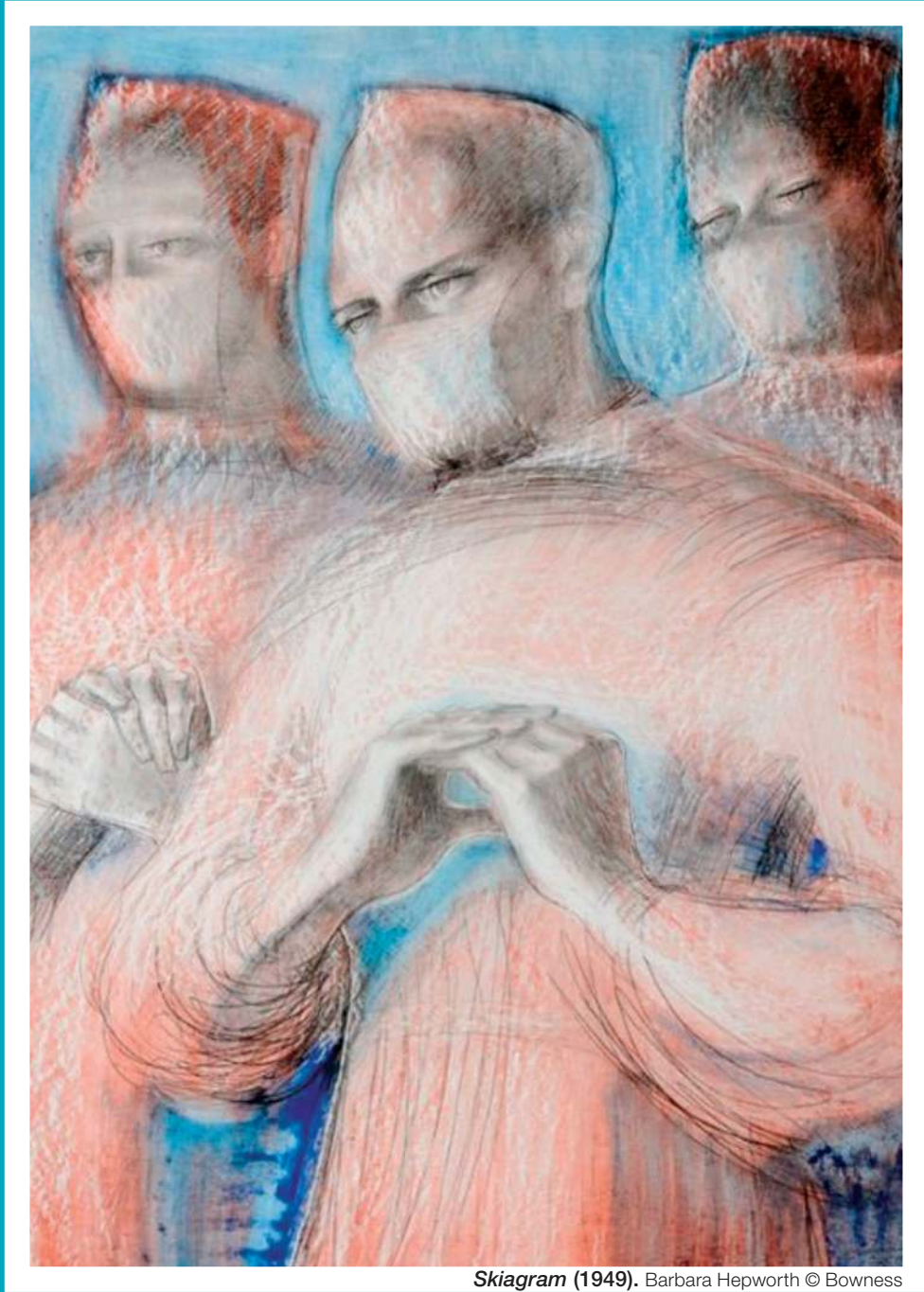


# Artist in surgery:



*Skiagram* (1949). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness

Barbara Hepworth's *Hospital Drawings*

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**B**arbara Hepworth (1903–1975), a modernist sculptor of the mid-20th century known for her smooth, ovoid, fenestrated figures, created a series of life-like drawings of surgeons and operating room (OR) scenes that capture, in her words, “the extraordinary beauty of purpose and coordination between human beings all dedicated to the saving of life.”<sup>1</sup>

Hepworth reimagined the surgeons and sisters (the outdated term used in England for surgical scrub nurses and technicians, then almost all women) as sculptural forms within surgical caps and gowns, engaged in compositions of coordinated effort. The tone of her drawings has a spiritual calm that is seen in the best ORs where participants act in concert, quietly and efficiently, scarcely a word passing among them—with the same mute grace as her carved works.

Created between 1947 and 1949, and collectively known as Hepworth’s *Hospital Drawings*, the works are at first glance an interregnum in her oeuvre in sculpture. They were a transition phase in her concepts of art. “Barbara Hepworth’s *Hospital Drawings*,” wrote Chris Stephens, head of displays at Tate Britain, “are both utterly anomalous in relation to the rest of her work, and at the same time, entirely epitomize everything that she and her art stood for.”<sup>2</sup>

The drawings were done in a phase in her artistic development that she called “rhythm and space,” referring to the sweeping spirals and dynamism of the carved surfaces that appeared in her sculpture after war-imposed inactivity. She identified the years preceding the “rhythm and space” period as her “artist in landscape” phase,<sup>1</sup> where she was an observer in a landscape, “sheltering near some great rocks or reclining in the sun on the grass-covered rocky shapes that make up the double spiral of Pendour Cove.”<sup>1</sup> Those that followed, her “artist in society” period, blended two or more figures in a single composition that reflected her interest in the movement of people in relation to each other and how it reflects human interactions.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to examine Hepworth’s work between 1946 and 1949, a period that was an inflection point in

her artistic sensibilities. She spent much of that time in a children’s hospital in Southwest England observing surgery and interpreting the activity in the operating theatre through her art. An alternative title for the interval between “artist in landscape” and “artist in society” might be “artist in surgery.”

### Early years

Born in Wakefield, Yorkshire, Hepworth remembered riding with her father in his motorcar as he made his rounds as a county surveyor. Once they escaped the industrial boroughs where the earth seemed, in her words, “distant hills wreathed with indigo smoke that the very earth seemed to be exhaling,”<sup>1</sup> their drive through the hilly landscape became a physical experience of “contours of fulnesses and concavities, through hollows and over peaks—feeling, touching, seeing, through mind and hand and eye.”<sup>3</sup>

As a student she was fortunate to have a headmistress, Miss McCroben, who nurtured her artistic sensibilities. McCroben taught an art class where she showed slides of Egyptian sculpture that fired the creative energy of the youngster, then only seven. While her classmates went to the playing fields, the headmistress generously allowed Hepworth to remain in the art room, “miraculously alone with easel, paints and paper.”<sup>3</sup>

Already resolved at the age of 15 to be a sculptor, Hepworth received scholarships in successive years to the Leeds School of Art, then the Royal College of Art at Kensington.<sup>3</sup> Henry Moore was also at the Royal College, five years her senior and there on a post-military scholarship. They received a travel stipend to visit Italy for a year, after which Hepworth extended her stay another 18 months. While in Italy, she married fellow sculptor John Skeaping, with whom she had her first exhibition in 1928.

With abstract painter Ben Nicholson (who she would later marry), she visited leaders of the avant-garde in Paris such as Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, and Picasso.

From her first initial stylized figures of birds and human torsos, she broke away from conventional forms of anatomy and responded to the “harmony [of] the properties of wood or stone, and...discovered a new approach which would allow me to build my own sculptural anatomy dictated only by my poetic demands from the material.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1931, Hepworth produced her first fenestrated piece,



*Pierced Form* (1932). Destroyed in war. Barbara Hepworth © Bowness. Photograph by Paul Laib (Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London)

*Pierced Form*. "I felt the most intense pleasure in piercing the stone in order to make an abstract form and space; quite a different sensation from that of doing it for the purpose of realism.... [It] has been the basis of my work ever since."<sup>1</sup> Later in that decade, she and Nicholson became part of a London-centered Internationalist movement of architecture and art, that included now-famous masters Piet Mondrian and Alexander Calder.

Among her sculptures were spare geometric shapes shorn of the "hills and valleys" of her earlier work: spheres, cones, and ellipsoid forms on rectangular platforms, some with spherical hollows. And, of course, fenestrations.<sup>1</sup>

### World war and a sick child

In 1934, Hepworth had triplets with Nicholson, the sudden expansion of their family complicating their lives. Making ends meet through the sale of her sculptures and Nicholson's paintings, became an impossibility as war loomed at the end of the decade. When World War II began Hepworth and her children found refuge with a community of artists that had settled near St Ives, a fishing village in West Cornwall. The privations imposed by wartime rationing and demands of childrearing precluded any thought

of carving. Money teaching nursery school barely provided for her growing family. "We were picking our salads in the hedgerows, and mushrooms from the fields, while the children's appetites grew bigger and bigger," she wrote.<sup>3</sup>

In 1944, one of the triplets, Sarah, contracted osteomyelitis of her femur and was hospitalized at St. Joseph's Hospital, a small facility in nearby Hayle. During her treatment she "was bandaged in plaster of Paris from head to toe," most likely a body cast with a hip spica that extended below her knee to prevent a permanent contracture of her lower limb weakened by infection. Nathaniel Hepburn, director of the Charleston (the Bloomsbury group museum in Sussex) and curator of an exhibit of the *Hospital Drawings* in 2012–2013, noted that the application of Sarah's cast "must have been a profound aesthetic experience for Hepworth as a sculptor as well as being a traumatic event for her as a mother.... [She] felt that the 'moulding of plaster jackets...was very near to [her] own profession."<sup>2</sup>

Norman Capener, an orthopaedic surgeon and amateur painter with an appreciation for abstract art, was a consultant surgeon at the Princess Elizabeth Hospital, a children's hospital in Exeter. He arranged for immediate transfer of Sarah to Exeter. It was the start of a life-long friendship between surgeon and artist. What began with ideas on beautifying hospital walls with color developed into a shared appreciation of art and aesthetics.

With the end of the war Hepworth took up her mallet and carving tools. In a release of originality after wartime constraints, she added movement in her sculpture through



*Surgeon Moulding Plaster* (1948). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness



spiraled surfaces and curved fenestrations that created imaginative interior spaces. She unveiled her new conceptions in a show in the Lefevre Gallery in London in October 1946.

### The invitation

When Capener contracted hepatitis in 1947 he convalesced at St Ives near Hepworth and Nicholson. Hepworth taught him how to carve stone as therapy. The stay at St Ives led to the suggestion that Hepworth make the reciprocal visit to Capener's operating theater in Exeter. Neither claimed priority for the suggestion, but Hepworth remembered that her "first reaction was one of horror...it seemed to me a grim idea."<sup>1</sup> The artist only asked that she see only reconstructive operations, and nothing that had "any element of catastrophe."<sup>2</sup>

However, the timing of the suggestion was opportune. After the showing at Lefevre, Hepworth entered a competition to decorate the plinths on the Waterloo Bridge. She struggled with scale, finding it difficult to visualize how her scaled down drawings and models, enlarged to architectural adornments, would relate to human beings crossing the structure. She reimagined her work on a human scale, "the size of man himself and his eye level, his reach, the size of his hands, in fact, his whole physiological make-up."

### The hospital drawings

Hepworth made her first visit to Exeter in November 1947. She remembered:

I found there was such beauty in the coordinated human endeavor in the operating theatre that the whole composition—human in appearance—became abstract in shape. I became completely absorbed by two things: first, the extraordinary beauty of



*Pendour* (1947). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness

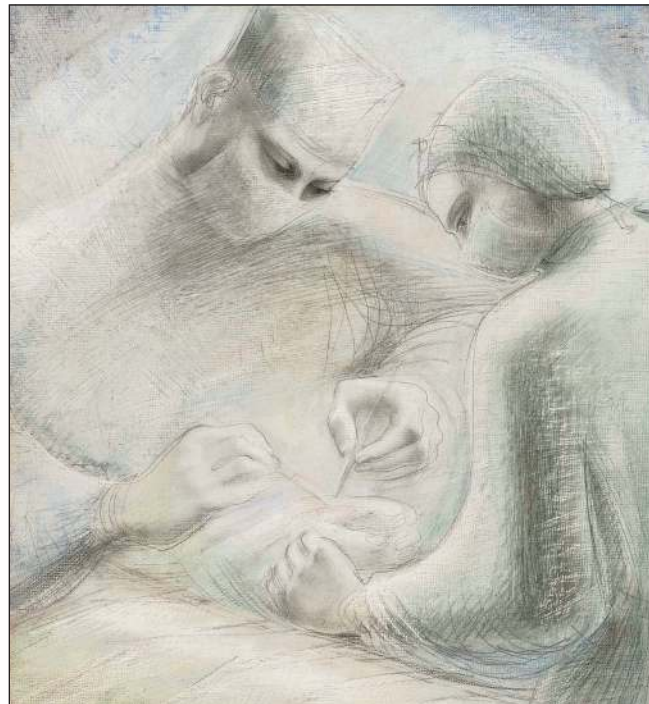
purpose between human beings all dedicated to saving of life; and secondly by the way this special grace (grace of mind and body) induced a spontaneous space composition, an articulated and animated kind of abstract sculpture very close to what I had been seeking in my own work.<sup>3</sup>

The visit sparked, in Hepburn's words, "a flurry of creativity," with 17 drawings in the artist's first month, "often with two or three produced in a single day."<sup>2</sup> The drawings were executed with ink, chalk, crayon, and pencil on paper. More advanced media such as tempera, watercolor, and oil on gesso ground created a textured surface that linked the work to her primary medium of carving.

Capener's daughter, a medical student on duty at the hospital, witnessed one of Hepworth's visits. "She just watched intrigued," she said.<sup>2</sup>

The artist likened her experience to her first visit to Florence as an art student, where she simply absorbed the artistic atmosphere, and only translated her impressions in her own work after she returned to England.<sup>2</sup>

While she also visited the outpatient clinics at the infirmary, the operating theater held her attention. What inspired Hepworth, were the gowned surgeons and sisters, which felt to her like "ready-made statues," and the way they interacted in space.<sup>2</sup> The surgeon turned and bended according to the demands of the procedure; the assistant, to respond to what the surgeon was doing; and for the theatre sister, to anticipate the next step of the operation and what instrument might be needed. The operative field, generally unseen or at most vaguely rendered in Hepworth's drawings, exerted a nearly mystical force on each figure that created a coordinated composition.



*Duo—Surgeon and Sister* (1948). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness



*Concourse II* (1948). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness. Photo credit: The Royal College of Surgeons of England

### Forms in space

Compared with the seemingly random activity of spontaneous human activity in real life, the OR had a choreography imposed by the demands of the operation and the discipline of aseptic technique. Hepworth wrote:

This led me to renewed study of anatomy and structure as well as the structure of integrated groups of two or more figures. I began to consider a group of separate figures as a single sculptural entity, and I started working on the idea of two or more figures as a unity, blended into one carved and rhythmic form.<sup>1</sup>

In *Duo—Surgeon and Sister* (1948), the arms of the surgeon and nurse embrace the operative field with a dynamism Hepworth later recreated in *Forms in Movement* (1956). She tried groupings of three and four, and a theatre full of all its participants, notably in *Concourse II* (1948). Her largest hospital drawing, about the size of a poster (66 cm x 108 cm, or 2 feet x 3.5 feet), is on two panels of pine wood given to her by Capener that she

joined sideways. The surgeon, who had bought the work for a modest sum when Hepworth and Nicholson needed cash, presented it to the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1969. The artist, at that time Dame Barbara Hepworth DBE, attended the event. At the presentation Capener said, “She appears to have summed up her whole experience [in the painting].”<sup>4</sup>

*Concourse II* displays Hepworth’s mastery of rendering eyes, hands, and volume and mass of bodies in space. The center of the composition is a pair of surgeons whose heavy arms and torsos form an ovoid sculptural frame around a pair of hands. The fingers of the surgeon’s left hand deftly holds a pair of fine forceps. The right hand supports the structure operated on, which based on the relative position to the unseen patient, is likely the patient’s hand. To the left is the theatre sister, the brightness of her gown and volume of her form conferring her equivalent status to the center pair. Her eyes, posture, and hands reflect her anticipation. The eyes and postures of the observers are similarly absorbed, eyes intent, postures drawn to the operation. To the right of the painting is the



anesthesia attendant, his left hand caressing the patient's face. It is brilliantly white, as if it glows from the life force of the human beneath it.

The rightward gaze of the figure at the top right of the painting, is away from the drama at the center of the work. Perhaps she is the circulating nurse, attending to duties away from the action in the sterile field, but her posture is one of disengagement.

Each figure has recognizable features, just as colleagues in the OR become more familiar masked and gowned. "She went as near to portraiture as she was prepared to go," Capener said.<sup>4</sup> Hepworth placed herself at the extreme left of the composition, easily identified by her eyes and expressive forehead.

## Hands

Hepworth showed the operative detail in two hand operations, *Duo (Surgeon and Sister)* (1949), and one of her personal favorites, *The Child's Hand* (1948), in which she evokes both tenderness and delicacy in the tiny hand.

She wrote:

A particularly beautiful example of the difference between physical and spiritual animation can be observed in a delicate operation on the human hand. There you have the inanimate hand, asleep, and the active, conscious hand: the relation of these two was so beautiful it made me look in a new light at human faces, hands when people are talking, at the way a tree grows, and a flower.<sup>3</sup>



*The Child's Hand* (1948). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Purchased with the Katharine Levin Farrell Fund and the SmithKline Beecham Corporation Fund for the Ars Medica Collection, 2003, 2003-189-1, Hepworth © Bowness



*Forms in Movement (Pavan)* (1956). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness

In correspondence to Capener, who was then preparing a lecture on the movement of surgeons' hands during operative procedures, Hepworth quoted Henri Focillon, the influential art historian and teacher in France and Yale University, "I do not believe altogether in the eminent dignity of the right hand," he wrote, "Deprived of the left, it retires into a painful, almost sterile solitude."<sup>5</sup> Of her own hands, Hepworth wrote:

My left hand is my thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand, the thinking hand, must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers and grip of this hand into the stone. It is also the listening hand. It listens for basic weaknesses of flaws in the stone: for the possibility or imminence of fractures.<sup>2</sup>

Capener was less philosophical in his assignments of duties to each hand:

For dynamic power and decision, the right hand is used; where passive support and precise control are required the left hand is preferred. When these two characteristics are brought to perfection we have two of the essentials of craftsmanship.<sup>6</sup>

The drawing of hands wielding mallets and chisels (*Blue and Green*, (1947); *Quartet*

*I*, (1948)), and smoothing a body cast (*Surgeon Molding Plaster*, (1948)) no doubt had special significance for both Hepworth and Capener because of the shared activity between art and surgery. Capener included Hepworth's sketches of hands, and a photo of her hands at work with mallet and chisel, in an article on the hand in surgery, the topic of his presidential address to the Orthopaedics Section of the Royal Society of Medicine.<sup>6</sup>

### The time out

Hepworth had several drawings of surgeons, scrubbed and gowned, doing nothing except waiting, an attitude that resembles prayer (*Surgeon Waiting*, (1948)). In a pose seldom seen outside of ORs, one hand holds the other just above the waist. Any lower, they fall below the level of the sterile field and thus are considered contaminated. They cannot comfortably be held higher for any length of time without fatigue.

They are kept still in front of the body to prevent knocking something from the hands of the theatre nurse who is arranging instruments. The surgeon's head may bow a little when preparations take longer than expected, a posture that was also captured by Hepworth.

Today, a pause is an enforced part of the surgical routine, called "the timeout." Just before an incision is made, everyone in the operating room identifies the



*Group I (Concourse)* (1951). Barbara Hepworth © Bowness

patient, the operation, and identifies themselves as a final safety check before proceeding with the procedure. Some use the pause as a final chance for a quiet prayer or meditation, a moment to concentrate on the task at hand.

Not all waiting surgeons are in prayer, however. In *Skiagram* (1949) (an archaic term for an X-ray image on film), three surgeons stand, their faces intent on an unseen lightbox, which suffuses each figure with light. Their eyes, directed to the left of the frame, are assumed to be on an X-ray. The hands of the central figure have a non-religious pose that likely was an unconscious habit of one of Hepworth's surgeon-subjects. She transforms the gesture into her trademark motif, a fenestration, the blue interior of the "O" defined by the hands and fingers is the same color as the background.

### Artist in society

Capener sent a draft of his article commemorating the Royal College event to Hepworth for her review. In return he received transparencies of her work to use as figures for the article. Among them was a marble composition, *Group I (Concourse)* (1951). Capener included the photo in his article and captioned it, "Sculpture derived from the ideas of the drawings."<sup>4</sup> However, scholarly critiques of Hepworth's body of work and her own writings and correspondence "claim no 'obvious link' between the hospital drawings and the *Concourse* series of sculptures." Her comments on surgery "intentionally left no obvious clues"<sup>2</sup>

The *Concourse* sculptural works demonstrate the evolution of her concept of humans in space after she completed her *Hospital Drawings* in 1949 and returned to fulltime sculpture. She became interested in how people moved about spontaneously, outside the structured order of surgery. She hired dancers and had them move about in her studio.<sup>2</sup> During a visit to Venice in 1950, she watched groups of people in the Piazza San Marco. She later wrote to Herbert Read, an art critic and supporter of her work:

The most significant observation I made for my own work was that as soon as people, or groups of people, entered the Piazza they responded to the proportions of architectural space. They walked differently, discovering their innate dignity. They grouped themselves in unconscious recognition of their importance in relation to each other as human beings.<sup>2</sup>

Invisible forces, such as social custom and architectural space, affected the spontaneous movements of humans in society at large. In 1952 Hepworth wrote:

My present concern...[is] sculpture of the community as a unit in the landscape. The two things which interest me most are the significance of human action, gesture, and movement, in the particular circumstance of our contemporary life, and the relation of these human actions to forms which are eternal in their significance.<sup>1</sup>

The *Hospital Drawings* showed people in disciplined activity within the confined space of the OR; the compositions that followed were Hepworth's conception of humans engaged in human interactions and relationships in society at large. The *Concourse* sculptural compositions evolved from her appreciation for the movement of people that she saw in a children's hospital in Southwest England.

### Artist in surgery

Hepworth died May 20, 1975 in an accidental fire at her Trewyn studios. She was 72 years old. Hepworth brought an artist's sensibility to the operating room. As a sculptor she sought fundamental truths in three-dimensional figures. Surgeons and theatre sisters cloaked in gowns, caps, and masks became animated sculptural forms within the discipline of aseptic technique and the demands of a surgical operation. Intense central lighting added drama to each of her renderings. Surgical operations, an everyday endeavor in thousands of hospitals in the world, in Hepworth's hands became artwork that revealed the inherent beauty of human interaction.

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