

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Reg Butler (Buntingford, Herts 1913 - Berkhamsted, Herts 1981)

Reclining Figure

Circa: 1948

1948

48 x 90 x 35 cm (18 ⁷/₁₆ x 35 ³/₁₆ x 13 ³/₁₆ inches)

In the past six decades so much of what sculpture is, what it aims to achieve and even how it is made has changed. Perhaps, therefore, we might initially find it hard to understand why Reg Butler's first one-man exhibition, held in 1949, was so radical and challenging to contemporary observers. Presented at The Hanover Gallery, one of the leading spaces in London showing new work from both Britain and Europe, this exhibition of welded and forged iron sculptures marked a distinct shift in approach from that vocabulary which, in the hands of Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, had brought British sculpture into the Modernist avant-garde.

Butler's choice of iron as his material defined this shift clearly, the unforgiving qualities of the hard metal being a world away from what the artist described as "...the lump of material, the lump of stone which you carved, which you attended to, as it were, as a midwife attends a birth." [1]. Using the iron to effectively delineate his compositions into being, he developed a shorthand for the human figure whose very sparseness and intentional roughness of surface combined with an almost surrealist sense of the constituent parts having assembled themselves. This animation of the figure is a remarkable feature of Butler's welded sculpture, aligning his work much more with his European contemporaries such as Germaine Richier and Marino Marini (both of whose work was to be later shown at The Hanover Gallery) whose treatment of the human figure seemed to chime with the post-war, post-nuclear world.

The 1949 exhibition, in which Figure Reclining was first shown, placed Butler squarely in the vanguard of a new aesthetic coming to the fore in British Art, and so began two decades of international acclaim. Important works were purchased by The Tate Gallery and the Arts Council and overseas institutions, including MOMA, The Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and he was commissioned to produce two large sculptures for the 1951 Festival of Britain. In 1952 Butler's work was one of the highlights of 'New Aspects of British Sculpture' at the Venice Biennale, and in 1953 he was awarded the first prize in the international competition for a Monument to the Unknown Political

Prisoner.

Figure Reclining is a tour de force, the form of the figure occupying its space with complete assurance, yet this is achieved with such minimal means that one can hardly help wonder how it is done. Butler's deft use of line and his mastery of the metal which creates it gives substance to the spaces he has created, bringing life and meaning to the piece. The austerity of the material imbues the sculpture with a purity, and the artist's unwillingness to disguise the way in which it is made gives the piece a refreshing truth that must have been one of the most outstanding features for a contemporary audience. Indeed, whilst Butler never embraced full abstraction in his work, the impact of Butler's welded sculptures on his contemporaries in 1949-50 can be compared with that of Anthony Caro's painted and welded work of the early 1960's. Now exceptionally rare to encounter outside public collections, Butler's larger welded works such as Figure Reclining are both superb pieces of sculpture in their own right, but also markers of the beginning of a revolution in post-war sculpture in both Britain and abroad.

[1] The Artist, quoted in Warren Forma, 5 British Sculptors (work and talk), Grossman Publishers, New York 1964, p.105

Exhibitions

Exhibition:

Reg Butler, Hanover Gallery, London, 1949, cat. 6

Form in Industry, Hanover Gallery, 1952, London, cat. 15

Reg Butler retrospective, Tate, London, 1983, cat. 11

Literature:

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Melville, Architectural Review September 1950

Margaret Garlake, The Sculpture of Reg Butler, The Henry Moore Foundation & Lund

Humphries, London 2006, cat no. 28 (a small variant illustrated)