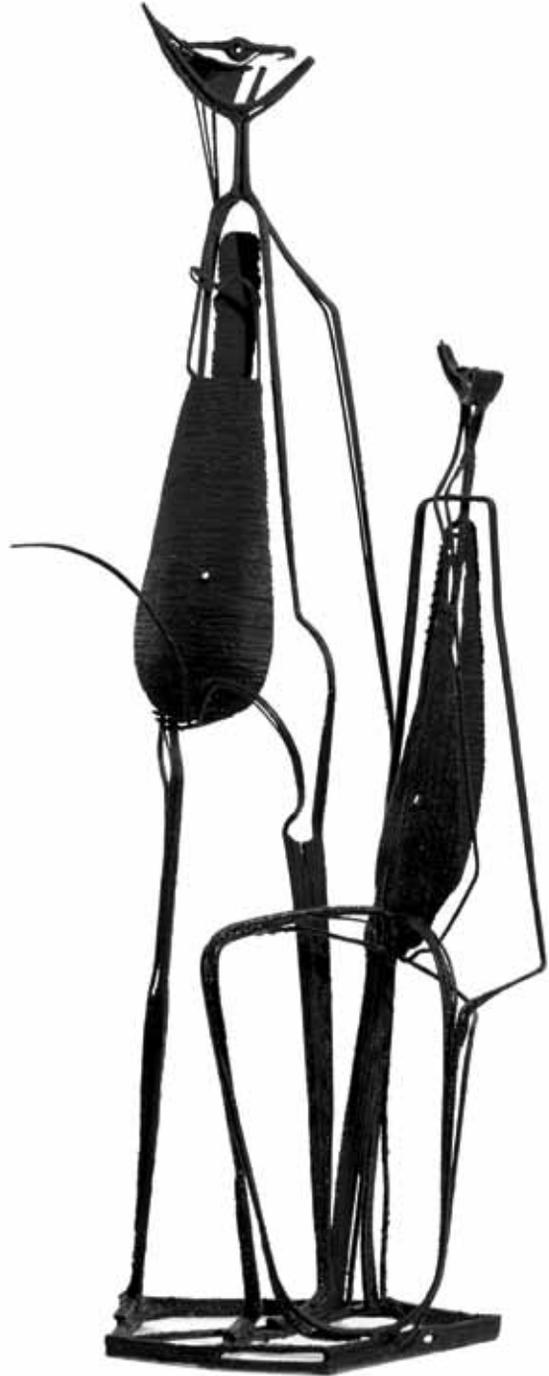


GEOMETRY

OF FEAR

WORKS FROM THE ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION



ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION AT

**SOUTHBANK  
CENTRE**



From left to right:

Eduardo Paolozzi  
*The Cage*, 1951

Robert Adams  
*Apocalyptic Figure*, 1951

Lynn Chadwick  
*The Seasons*, 1956



*These new images belong to the iconography of despair, or of defiance ... Here are images of flight, of ragged claws 'scuttling across the floors of silent seas', of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear ... Their art is close to the nerves, nervous, wiry. They have found metal, in sheet, strip or wire rather than in mass, their favourite medium ... these British sculptors have given sculpture what it never had before our time – a linear, cursive quality.*

Herbert Read, *New Aspects of British Sculpture*, 1952

It is in this text written by Herbert Read in the catalogue for the British Pavilion at the 1952 Venice Biennale that the term 'Geometry of Fear' appeared for the first time. The exhibition included new work by Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi and William Turnbull, all of whom were born between 1913 and 1924. Outside the Pavilion stood Henry Moore's large bronze *Double Standing Figure*, and the contrast between the younger artists' work and that of the older generation, represented by Moore's sculpture, was strikingly clear.



The political and economic context in which artists work can often have an effect on their art, but the conditions experienced by these artists, some of whom served on the front during the Second World War, must have had a particularly powerful impact on their work. The war no doubt also affected the way in which their work was viewed by the public. Many social reforms were initiated in Britain after the war, but during much of the 1950s the reality was shortages and rationing, set against a background of tension and fear as the horrors of war and the Holocaust became more apparent. The Cold War and the rise in nuclear arms were also an ever-present concern.

The artists responded to their time in both subject and technique. In a radio discussion with Barbara Hepworth, Reg Butler asserted that carving was suitable for a leisured (i.e. pre-war) culture, but inadequate for modern needs. Moore's monumental carving had, to a large extent, been replaced inside the Pavilion by the more open, linear work of Butler and the other younger artists. 'A kind of line drawing in three dimensions ... an ability to enclose space without filling it' was how a contemporary review by Philip Hendy referred to Butler's work. The same could equally be said of the open structure

of Eduardo Paolozzi's *The Cage* or Robert Adams' *Apocalyptic Figure*.

The technique of carving in stone and wood, as practised by Moore and Hepworth, was rejected by the younger artists in favour of working in welded metal. Robert Melville, writing in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1952, noted that they had 'replaced the craft of the stonemason with the craft of the blacksmith, the industrial skills of the welder'. As a conscientious objector, Butler had worked as a blacksmith in a Sussex village. The skills and appreciation of the properties of metal that he learned there inform many of his works. In 1950, he moved from hand-forging to welding, and this new procedure, which he called 'steel knitting', enabled him to create complex forms with more tactile surfaces. The ribbing effects that resulted from this process are especially evident in *Girl and Boy*, a sculpture that was originally exhibited at the 1951 Festival of Britain.

Lynn Chadwick was also an expert welder and, like Geoffrey Clarke, he took a welding course at the British Oxygen Company School in Cricklewood. John Hoskin, although Professor of Fine Art at Leicester, nevertheless referred to himself as a welder. It is perhaps not surprising then that this

From left to right:

Geoffrey Clarke  
*Landscape: Birth of a Flower*,  
1951

Kenneth Armitage  
*Figure Lying on its Side*  
(No. 5), 1957



period was heralded as ‘Britain’s new iron age’. However, as Read noted, working in metal was not new. Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Julio González had all made influential metal works in earlier decades, but it was the way in which these young sculptors responded to their time that made their work so interesting.

Although they are often described as the Geometry of Fear sculptors, there was no homogenised group or school as such; some used metal, while others continued to work in wood and bronze. One or two produced sculptures with roughened surfaces that were far from linear in form, for example William Turnbull’s *Head*. This has led many critics over the years to question the appropriateness of applying the words Geometry of Fear to all of the artists who are now associated with the term. For some, it is pertinent. It is likely that it was Bernard Meadows’ work *Crab*, shown in Venice, that Read was specifically referring to in his phrase ‘scuttling across the floors’. Meadows’ sculptures of crabs and cockerels all have an air of threat, predatoriness and vulnerability. As well as admiring Picasso’s 1932 sculpture of a cockerel, Meadows had observed wildlife during war service in India. Like a number of his contemporaries, he used



animals as a vehicle for expressing human emotions, particularly destructive forces or resilience in the face of suffering. Although Elisabeth Frink lacked many of her male contemporaries' first-hand experience of war, her *Bird*, with its emphasis on beak, claw and wings, expresses similar 'strong feelings of panic, tension, aggression and predatoriness'.

Insects, with their long legs, antennae and spiky forms, were another popular subject for these artists. The rhythm of dots and dashes in Paolozzi's collage *Insects' Wings* corresponds to the lines and joins of his sculpture *The Cage*, while the horizontal wing forms echo the structure itself. Chadwick's mobiles rely on fish, spiders and dragonflies for their inspiration, while the spindly legs of *The Seasons* seem more insect-like than human.

However, more than creatures, it was the human figure, often elongated as in Butler's *Girl and Boy* or truncated as in his *Torso*, that was central to the work of these artists. Read draws on T.S. Eliot when he refers to the artists peopling 'the Waste Land with their iron waifs'. New developments in France, in particular the sculpture of Germaine Richier and Alberto Giacometti, were obvious

influences. Both Paolozzi and Turnbull had lived in Paris, and this experience was crucial to the development of their work.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, and faced with the worrying threat of nuclear war, it is perhaps not surprising that many artists expressed an anxiety in their work. Similar concerns were echoed in contemporary paintings by Francis Bacon and Graham Sutherland, the latter exhibiting paintings in another space in the 1952 British Pavilion in Venice. Not all, however, were as obvious as Leslie Thornton's *Dying Warrior* in their interpretation of despair in humanity. Kenneth Armitage's *Figure Lying on its Side (No. 5)* draws on his personal wartime experience of working in aircraft and tank identification. Its body is suggestive of the shape of a tank, while the thin horizontal limbs echo the lines of guns.

There are, however, some seeds of hope for the future in a few of the works rather than just despair at the past. Paolozzi's *The Cage* could be interpreted as protecting as well as containing. A vulnerability rather than aggression is visible in many of the metamorphosed creatures. The towering verticals and upward sweeps in John Berger's painting *Scaffolding – Festival of Britain*

From left to right:

Leslie Thornton  
*Dying Warrior*, 1956

John Berger  
*Scaffolding – Festival of Britain*,  
1950

Elisabeth Frink  
*Bird*, 1952



suggest some of the verve and industry that inspired the Festival. Adams, Butler, Chadwick, Meadows and Paolozzi were all commissioned to make work for the Festival of Britain.

There is no doubt that the 1952 British Pavilion in Venice had an immediate impact on the British art world of the time. It was admired, and drew praise at home and abroad, being declared 'the most outstanding in the exhibition' by *The Daily Telegraph*. The renowned director of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Alfred Barr, specifically praised the Geometry of Fear sculptors, and bought work by Adams, Butler and Chadwick for his museum. Recognition for all followed swiftly. Butler won the international *Unknown Political Prisoner* competition in 1953. Chadwick was awarded the Grand Prize for Sculpture at the 1956 Venice Biennale. Public commissions, solo and survey shows for all of them increased significantly in the years that followed. The contemporary praise awarded to the artists associated with Geometry of Fear was no doubt influenced by the skill with which they interpreted some of the angst of their time. In today's climate of uncertainty and 'collective guilt' these works again have a poignant resonance.

Ann Jones



#### FURTHER READING

Lawrence Alloway, 'Britain's New Iron Age', in *Art News*, June–August 1953

Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998

Margaret Garlake and James Hyman, *Henry Moore and the Geometry of Fear*, exhibition catalogue, James Hyman Fine Art, London, 2003

Martin Harrison, *The London Art Scene in the Fifties*, exhibition catalogue, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2002

Sandy Nairne and Nicholas Serota, *British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1981

Herbert Read, *New Aspects of British Sculpture*, exhibition catalogue, British Council, 1952

The British Pavilion,  
Venice Biennale, 1952



#### LIST OF WORKS

All measurements are in centimetres,  
H x W x D

Robert Adams (1917–84)  
*Apocalyptic Figure*, 1951  
Wood; 310 x 91 x 97.8

Robert Adams  
*Collage*, 1953  
Paper collage; 54 x 32.4

Kenneth Armitage (1916–2002)  
*Mother and Child*, 1953  
Bronze; 21.9 x 15.9 x 5

Kenneth Armitage  
*Figure Lying on its Side (No. 5)*, 1957  
Bronze; 38 x 82.5 x 22.3  
© The Kenneth Armitage Foundation

John Berger (b. 1926)  
*Scaffolding – Festival of Britain*, 1950  
Oil on canvas; 76.2 x 50.8

Reg Butler (1913–81)  
*Girl and Boy*, 1951  
Iron; 200.7 x 66.5 x 84  
© The estate of Reg Butler

Reg Butler  
*Torso*, 1955  
Bronze; 90 x 24 x 21

Lynn Chadwick (1914–2003)  
*The Seasons*, 1956  
Iron; 53.3 x 30.5 x 27.9  
© The estate of the artist / The Bridgeman  
Art Library

Lynn Chadwick  
*Three Studies for 'The Seasons'*, 1956  
Pen and wash; 25 x 17, 25 x 17, 25 x 22

Geoffrey Clarke (b. 1924)  
*Blue Head*, 1951  
Sugar-lift aquatint; 47.2 x 23

Geoffrey Clarke  
*Landscape: Birth of a Flower*, 1951  
Sugar-lift aquatint; 27.6 x 50.8

Geoffrey Clarke  
*Study for a Sculpture*, 1956  
Sugar-lift aquatint; 95.4 x 59.2

Elisabeth Frink (1930–93)  
*Bird*, 1952  
Bronze; 21.6 x 25.4 x 40

Elisabeth Frink  
*Study for Figure*, 1955  
Pen and wash; 75.6 x 26

John Hoskin (1921–90)  
*Standing Figure*, 1956  
Wire and metal; 22 x 15 x 6.5  
and stone base

Peter King (1928–57)  
*Haund*, 1956  
Copper alloy; 11.4 x 24.8 x 3.8

Bernard Meadows (1915–2005)  
*Cock*, 1953  
Bronze; 14.6 x 10.2 x 4.4

Henry Moore (1898–1986)  
*Time-Life Screen  
(working model)*, 1952  
Bronze; 43.2 x 111 x 20

Eduardo Paolozzi (1924–2005)  
*Insects' Wings*, 1951  
Collage; 66 x 96

Eduardo Paolozzi  
*The Cage*, 1951  
Bronze; 148 x 75.6 x 75  
© Trustees of the Paolozzi Foundation.  
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Graham Sutherland (1903–80)  
*Datura Blossoms*, 1950  
Pencil on paper; 50.8 x 43.2

Leslie Thornton (b. 1925)  
*Figure in a Setting*, 1954  
Bronze; 80 x 28.6 x 26

Leslie Thornton  
*Dying Warrior*, 1956  
Bronze; 12.7 x 41.9 x 14.6

William Turnbull (b. 1922)  
*Head*, 1955  
Bronze; 22.9 x 22.9 x 61

#### GEOMETRY OF FEAR

All works in the exhibition are owned by the  
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre,  
London.

The exhibition was launched at the Harley  
Gallery, Worksop, where it was shown from  
7 July – 27 August 2007, before touring to  
Lancaster, Bideford, Doncaster, Newcastle,  
Huddersfield, Cheltenham, Rhyl, Plymouth,  
Ayr and Leamington Spa.

Exhibition curated by Ann Jones, with  
Jill Constantine and Natalie Rudd.

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#### THE ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION

*Geometry of Fear* is one of a series of small-  
scale exhibitions drawn exclusively from the  
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either a monographic or thematic focus.  
Coming soon in 2008 will be *Now Showing*.  
*New Video Work from the Arts Council  
Collection*.

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