

## Henry Moore: Neo-Working-Classicist

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With his *Family Group* of 1948–49, Henry Moore seemed to have reneged upon his early-career commitment to modernist experimentation, pivoting towards a more representational style for this large public sculpture, his first major bronze, sculpted for and installed in one of the first purpose-built secondary modern schools of post-war Britain. The results aren't easy to define stylistically. Figurative, certainly, but barely concealing a stockpile of references ranging across centuries and continents.

In this essay I will explore the implications of Moore's stylistic shift with respect to both the contexts of the work's conceptualisation and Moore's personal investment in the opportunities presented to work publicly in that context. Moore's working-class origins will be identified as foundational in the formation of an ideology given plastic purpose in this period, whilst the narratives of working-class experience at mid-century will be drawn upon to account for the ways this work relates to that period of social change.

Taking Andrew Causey's identification of an affinity between Moore's work at this time and Picasso's 'neo-classical' period in the years after the Great War as a starting point, I will explore the consequence of Moore's ostensibly retrogressive turn towards figuration with respect to the questions of context and intent that have informed writings on Picasso before proposing alternative terms on which Moore's figurative turn might be understood, tied up with the socio-political upheavals of mid-century Britain.

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## Introduction

With his *Family Group* of 1948–49, sculpted for and installed in one of the first purpose-built secondary modern schools of post-war Britain—the Barclay School in Stevenage, Britain’s first New Town—Henry Moore seemed to have reneged upon his early-career commitment to modernist sculptural experimentation, pivoting towards a more representational style for this large public sculpture: his first major bronze (**Figure 1**). The results aren’t easy to define stylistically. Figurative, certainly, but barely concealing a palimpsest-like stockpile of references ranging across centuries and continents from the archaic to the Modern that destabilise any easy reading.



**Figure 1:** Henry Moore, *Family Group*, 1948–49 (LH 269). Bronze. Artwork: 152 × 113 × 76 cm. Barclay School, Stevenage. Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation. Photo: Michael Furze.

The art critic Peter Fuller, looking too earnestly for a return to the traditional in Moore's art, identified *Family Group* as the first in a series of post-war public works that 'reveal a growing obsession with classicism', locating in the work's composition 'a poise and an equilibrium for which the word 'classical' seems appropriate' (1993: 42). Sure, there are some classical nods here: the immobile and stoic repose of the figures, the drapery pulled across the mother's knees, the most overt iteration of that which Herbert Read dubbed the 'inherent humanism' of Moore's work (1952: 214). But Fuller's reading lacks any developed attempt to substantiate the claim critically or to explain what this 'obsession' might mean except to say that 'this change in Moore's work was associated with a change in his conception of the sculptor's role in the world' (1993: 42). Counterpose that analysis with the more intuitive response of two 'townspeople' recorded by a local reporter shortly after the work's unveiling in late 1950. 'It does not look like any human being I have ever seen' said one, whilst the postman 'thought it was something from Belsen Camp' (*Daily Dispatch*, 1950). Between these readings lies a chasm demanding further enquiry.

*Family Group* was the second in a series of public works produced by Moore directly informed by the subterranean populations illustrated in his renowned *Shelter Drawings*, the first being a wartime *Madonna and Child* for St. Matthew's Church in Northampton. That series of drawings, made famous through their public exhibition under the aegis of the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC) depict mothers and children sheltering underground from the Blitz, apparently inured to the awfulness of war. And though prompted by a highly personal experience of the war, these drawings were from their first public exhibition in 1941 asked to perform a civic role, 'tempering the onslaught of war and ameliorating the period of reckoning that followed' (Sutton, 2020: 96). Where one might have expected works produced for the war effort to be nationalistically adherent, however, Moore's works remained resolutely class-conscious, representing the squalor and awfulness of war's impact on London's poorest communities over and above any mythic image of national endurance and recovery (Stonebridge, 2003). Yet that is exactly the context in which both his *Shelter Drawings* and the subsequent public works have continued to be understood, if at all, stripped of the ambiguity that enabled a related work like *Family Group* to appear both idealised and inhuman to its audiences.

Just a few of the questions that will direct my attempts to account for and begin to reconcile this dissonance include: what might it mean for a representation of the family sculpted in the wake of the Second World War to exist, simultaneously, in states both ideal and inhuman? Are these differences compatible, or contradictory, and how might the implications of their concurrence help us to evaluate Moore's 'conception of the sculptor's role' in post-war Britain? In what ways might the significance of

these contrasting interpretations be recoverable when looked at through the lens of class? Finally—and this is the primary motivation for much of the argument presented here—it bears asking how these incongruities might have been played out in the public space of a secondary modern schoolyard.

With respect to the issues of both Moore's intent and the contexts underpinning his work, Andrew Causey's identification of an affinity between Moore's turn towards figuration in the 1940s and Picasso's 'neo-classical' turn after the First World War might offers some directions forward (2010: 136). Picasso's retrogressive turn has been written as part of a *rappel à l'ordre*, or 'call to order' in French art: a pulling away from the avant-garde experiments of the pre-war period in favour of a more publicly acceptable style informed—or directed, in some readings—by the prevailing nationalism that took hold in France following the war. By invoking the call to order with respect to Moore's work, Causey recognises a similar conservatism in Moore's approach, dictated by the effects of another world war. It is less clear, however, whether he also meant to suggest a canny awareness and manipulation of that tendency. It is that possibility that interests me.

Recent scholarship has tended to agree that, for Picasso at least, this ostensibly conservative turn was calculated: either ironic, or at least sufficiently self-aware as to mitigate or to circumvent the effect of his contemporaries' nationalistic overtures. Picasso's was a classicism shot through with notes of parody and pastiche, and it was pursued alongside a continued commitment to cubist form. Similarly, Moore's representational turn was concomitant with a continued engagement with 'modernism', and to identify only the most agreeable references in Moore's figuration here is, as with Picasso, to ignore the breadth of visual referents that inform the work, as well as the implications of that breadth. Unlike Picasso, however, Moore appears to have been explicitly searching for a publicly legible style with this work, appropriate, in his own terms, to the demands of the audience for whom the work was intended: children, their families, and the local community surrounding the Barclay School.

The public sculptures that Moore produced after the war speak with a public mandate to both the human experience of war and to the consequent democratisation of Britain's social infrastructures. *Family Group* then, produced for the new and substantially working-class population of Stevenage—mostly young families, relocated from the bombed out inner-city of North and East London—might also be read as a representation of that population. Here is Moore's conception of what a public work suited to the new social structures of post-war Britain could, or should look like. That these three survivors of the war might also look something like the victims of the atrocities at Belsen speaks explicitly to that experience and its context, whilst the

‘inherent humanism’ of these figures speaks to contemporary attempts to recover a semblance of humanity amidst the rubble of war.

It may have been something of that contextually appropriate ambiguity that drove the British Council’s decision to tour and tout Moore’s work internationally in the following decades as a physical manifestation of British humanitarian values. But as James Hyman argues, it was also the ‘openness of Moore’s imagery’ that ‘contributed to its denigration’, noting that Moore was ‘attacked for the remoteness of his vision from contemporary experience’ (2001: 91). In the process of unpicking the meanings of and the motivations for Moore’s artistic choices at this time, I will re-examine some of those criticisms and challenge the assumptions underpinning them.

In Moore’s negotiation of the space between the avant-garde concerns that directed much of his early career and the pursuit of an avowedly public art appropriate to the years of political, physical and social reconstruction in Britain, I will contest that he produced an artwork that mediates the line between both populism and radicalism, and between legibility and obscurity. In that space, a stylistic and ideological motivation can be found that encompasses and begins the work of breaking down the contradictions inherent in the epithet explored in this collection. In the ‘working-class avant-gardism’ explored here, Moore’s navigation of measures of introspection, retrospection and exposition are all intrinsic to the aesthetic and social radicalism of his project, and Moore’s own working-class origins must be placed front and centre of such a study to account for what is both a political and a personal commitment to such a project.

### **A Sculptor is Made, Not Born**

In any discussion of Henry Moore’s life and work, the assertion of his working-class pedigree consistently opens proceedings. The crowded family circumstances of his upbringing, his father’s work in the West Yorkshire mines and Moore’s ultimate circumvention of that expected path by dint of sheer will and talent paint him as the model working-class ‘boy done good’ of the interwar avant-garde. Then come the parables that account for the arousal of his sculptural sensitivities: the metaphor of the mine face as a surface that is carved and worked, Moore’s whittling and modelling objects for childish games, the catalytic discovery of Michelangelo at Sunday School or his visits to the large rocky outcrop in Adel Woods north of Leeds. The sensation of rubbing and kneading his mother’s rheumatic back as a child also serves to account for Moore’s sculptural predilection for the female form. Moore, too, repeated these stories ad nauseum. And finally come pronouncements of the inevitability of his destiny. ‘A sculptor, like a poet, is born, not made’ writes Herbert Read in his 1965 biography of Moore, ‘and I have already given a few indications of the presence in Henry Moore of an

innate plastic sensibility which education might foster but could not create' (1965: 23), all this in spite of the significance of Moore's fortuitous and entirely circumstantial receipt of the sort of scholastic and financial opportunities necessary to push a working-class lad through the highly selective education systems of early 20th-century Britain.

Moore was born at the tail-end of the previous century, and numerous studies of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras in Britain have suggested that it was the turmoil and tumult of these years, rather than The Great War, which ushered in the 20th century (Harris, 1994; Searle, 2004). The rise of the organized labour movement, the extension of legislative reforms to confer upon women autonomous legal rights—that is, outside of, or in lieu of marriage—and the implementation of state maintained elementary education beginning with the 1870 Forster Education Act all served to facilitate the gradual democratisation of British society, as increasing numbers of educational and professional opportunities became available for both women and for those classes of society previously disenfranchised.

In a history of British educational policy and provision from the end of the 19th century through to its publication during wartime, Ernest Green (1942), then General Secretary of the Workers Educational Association, identified a consequential relationship between political and educational reform. As the franchise was extended, so too, eventually, was access to an affordable and ultimately a free education. The Reform Bills of 1832, 67 and 84–85 were followed, respectively, by the First State Grant for Education in 1833, the Forster Education Act of 1870, and the Balfour-Morant Education Act of 1902. The last of these introduced state secondary education, established local education authorities to take control of educational provision at a county level, and made state elementary education universally free for the first time just before Moore began school. Later, the Representation of the People Acts of 1918 and 1928, the last of which extended the franchise equally for the first time to all men and women over the age of 21, were followed by the Fisher Education Act of 1918 and the bill to raise the school leaving age to 15 legislated for in 1936, though unfulfilled until after the Second World War. Moore's educational and personal development was directly shaped by the circumstances of those years, and his philosophy would be defined in relation to it.

Moore was the seventh of eight children born in the small industrial town of Castleford, about 15 miles south-east of Leeds. It was there that Moore received his formal education, first at the local elementary school and then at Castleford Secondary School having received a county minor scholarship only at the third attempt. Before any of those anecdotes which pepper biographies of Moore's early life, I present this detail as singularly important to the development of his career. Moore's attendance at secondary school was an opportunity which, in the early years of the last century, created

opportunities otherwise unavailable. Equally significant, he would then go on to receive an ex-serviceman's grant to attend the Leeds School of Art having fought in the Great War and, subsequently, a Royal Exhibition scholarship to attend the Royal College of Art.

Jose Harris refers to this period as one in which the 'tentacles of class became all-embracing', writing:

Quite apart from the stratifying impact of property distribution and large-scale machine production, between 1870 and 1914 the organization of work, schools, housing, welfare, culture, and recreation all conspired to compartmentalize British society on class-lines (1994: 6–7).

And yet it was also the reformed shape and nature of educational opportunity and provision, Harris argues, that made those lines negotiable, with the county council grammar schools among a selection of educational institutions the emergence and impact of which 'began a slow process, not of dismantling the class system, but of loosening its bonds for selected individuals', and most readily so in the 'frontier... between the upper-working class and the lower-middle class (a frontier whose limits were greatly enlarged by the growth of teaching, clerical and other tertiary occupations)' (1994: 8–9). That Moore and three of his other siblings went on to become schoolteachers is a mark of the navigability of that gap and the importance of education in facilitating that transition, and also of his family's desire to transgress it. Though Moore's experience as a schoolteacher was only fleeting—in the early years of the war before his 18th birthday and then briefly again once the war was over—he would spend the first two decades of his artistic career teaching in art schools before a life spent working with and learning from the numerous assistants that passed through his workshops at Perry Green.

John Carey suggests that the introduction of universal elementary education was the most fundamental and significant factor impacting the lives of Britons at the turn of the century, leading to significant advances in the literacy of the population, writing:

The difference between the nineteenth-century mob and the twentieth-century mass is literacy. For the first time, a huge literate public had come into being, and consequently every aspect of the production and dissemination of the printed text became subject to revolution (1992: 5).

However, Carey also argues that this shift in the cultural fabric of British life was a major factor in the development of modernist literature and art in the early 20th century, which he describes as a 'hostile reaction to the unprecedentedly large reading public'

created by those reforms. The implicit purpose of modernist writing at its origin, he contends, was 'to exclude these newly educated (or 'semi-educated') readers, and so to preserve the intellectual's seclusion from the mass' (1992: preface). Implicit in Carey's reading of the segregation inherent in modernist literature is a cultural bias rooted in class formations.

What, then, to make of an artist like Moore who took advantage of the opportunities presented by the new educational opportunities of Edwardian Britain to negotiate these structures of inclusion and exclusion? How are we to explain his place in the modernist narrative given the attested reactionary and restrictive nature of modernism's direction of travel in the years of his development?

In his much-referenced sociohistorical study of *English Art and Modernism 1900–1939*, Charles Harrison identifies Moore's early career 'commitment to direct carving' as the means by which he forged a 'modernist position in contradistinction to the conservative mainstream', associating this with a 'rejection of the classical style' (1994: 217). Harrison argues that this came, in part, as a result of Moore's class and education which 'militated against the adoption of a *normal* [emphasis my own] English view upon the social hierarchy of activities relevant to sculpture', the 'normal' view invoked here being, of course, that presented and promoted by the establishment. Referencing Wilenski's seminal work on *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, Harrison then positions Moore's partiality for 'primitive', archaic and non-European forms as representative of a determination to circumvent academic conventions in pursuit of an approach to sculptural form that was elementary, inclusive and unfixed: a 'common world-language of form' (Moore, 1941: 598).

For all of the problems of modernist exclusion in the fine arts, the inclusiveness of Moore's form-language, as well as his preference for the craftsmanlike process of direct carving over the academic practice of modelling was a markedly different proposition than that which is the subject of much of Carey's argument. But Harrison also quotes Moore in 1947—by which point he was pre-occupied with the quasi-classical form of works such as *Family Group*—looking back to his college years and the 'realisation that academic discipline is valuable ... in order to earn a living' to claim that 'Moore bought the time he spent foraging in the British Museum with a currency which was recognised even by the most conservative factions at the Royal College of Art' (1994: 219). The inference seems to be that Moore's concern for his own self-improvement, to say nothing of self-preservation, somehow attenuates his claims to a progressive sculptural style, and leans in the direction of a critical attitude disseminated by the likes of Clement Greenberg who found Moore's 'attachment to the past' only 'a helpless fingering of archaeological reminiscences or a supine surrender to the best taste' (1947).



Such dogmatic readings of artistic practice struggle to accommodate either the manner in which Moore's work reconciled opposing tendencies—inclusivity and exclusivity, modernity and tradition—or the value and the power of their being able to do so.

For all that the roots of Moore's artistic practice lay amongst the early 20th-century avant-garde's resistance to and refutation of the rigidly traditional structures of their schooling, his attention to the disciplines of 'modelling and of drawing from the cast and from life' whilst at college—which is to say, his education in the classical tradition—were among the skills that allowed him to remain employed in art schools for the decade or so after completing his own education. Indeed, it was as a result of his panoramic interest in world cultures *including* the European canon that he was able to reconcile and reinterpret the lessons of those heterodox interests in terms appropriate to the various contexts in which he worked and for the divergent audiences to whom his works were directed: audiences which expanded considerably as his career went on. The result was an artistic language that encompassed populist, academic *and* radical forms, and never was this approach pursued more effectively than in the public works Moore produced in the early post-war period.

To adequately evaluate Moore's post-war works with respect to their public role, and to begin to identify the working-class as both subject and audience for the work in discussion without dismantling Moore's claims to the modernist tradition, we must then also look to the problems inherent in the discipline of art history that finds such a duality awkward to explain. That the significance of class on and for Moore's practice has remained accepted without purposeful analysis for so long starts there. Let's turn to Charles Harrison again.

In a paper first delivered at a conference of 1997 concerned with 'Rethinking Englishness', Harrison railed against the tendencies of historians of modern art to uphold the cultural biases of the intellectual class by continuing to prioritise issues of form and aesthetics over the contexts that determine one's access to the 'culture of art appreciation' (1999: 77). Expressing his antipathy towards the formalist claim espoused by the likes of Clive Bell that 'art spoke to those who had ears to hear', Harrison countered that the constituency in question had often

been identified as such long before they had demonstrated their actual competence as interpreters or explainers of art—or of art, at least, that was not preselected for its congeniality to their worldviews and self-images. They were that social section already active in France by the mid-nineteenth century as the self-appointed proprietors of modernist culture and as arbiters of aesthetic virtue: the advanced section of the haute bourgeoisie or hereditary middle class (1999: 77).

Harrison's interrogation of the sociocultural preconditions for formalist sensitivity here follow on from those he began to explore in *English Art and Modernism*, but with an explicitly antagonistic line of attack. Having been asked to respond to the admonition in the original preface to his book that 'there is a need for a study of this period of art which is not subject to the traditional closures on art-historical writing', Harrison instead goes on to present an invective led more by his feeling for the relative mediocrity of British contributions to the development of modernism (in itself a subject-position led by his own estimation of 'competence' and taste) than by any attempt to re-examine the national contexts in which British art may have come to achieve such mediocrity, which are bound up with the inequities of Britain's class structure. What Harrison rejects, in the process, is an opportunity to reformulate the question with class at its centre.

Again, my underlying motivation here is led by asking what it might mean to begin to dislodge the intellectual class from their privileged position as 'arbiters of aesthetic virtue' in an evaluation of works commissioned for the public spaces of post-war Britain, democratised spaces catering to and for populations previously disenfranchised: school yards, public parks, housing estates. An identification of the unfixed and dynamic nature of public space, to be read alongside the opening out of access to education and culture in Britain after 1945, provides an opportunity to begin this work. Education and literacy (both lexical and visual) offered those fortunate enough to acquire it the means by which to begin to influence and even infiltrate the political sphere, and it provided Moore with the tools to begin to resist and even reorient the meaning of 'modernist culture' whilst also continuing to find employment at a time when the market for modern art was by no means a secure one. Moore's belonging to that 'mass' identified by Carey and his appreciation for that position directed his artistic approach as he looked to explore and extend the parameters and the proclivities of modernist form.

The extent to which Moore's formal experimentation would have been legible to the populace of a new town like Stevenage, then, is the ground on which the questions directing this essay are built. Moore's predilection for a mode of artistic enquiry that has been frequently characterised as dealing with archetypal or universal forms should help to register the theoretical amenability of this work to even those members of society without the benefits of an orthodox aesthetic education, whilst on a more elementary level Moore's subjects were intended to be both relatable to and quite straightforwardly representative of the constituents for whom his public works were intended—mothers, children, and families. No wonder his continued popularity, though many still balk at his deserving such a reputation. But the *Family Group* in discussion resists any easy reading, as the assumptions underpinning the meaning of a work on the theme of

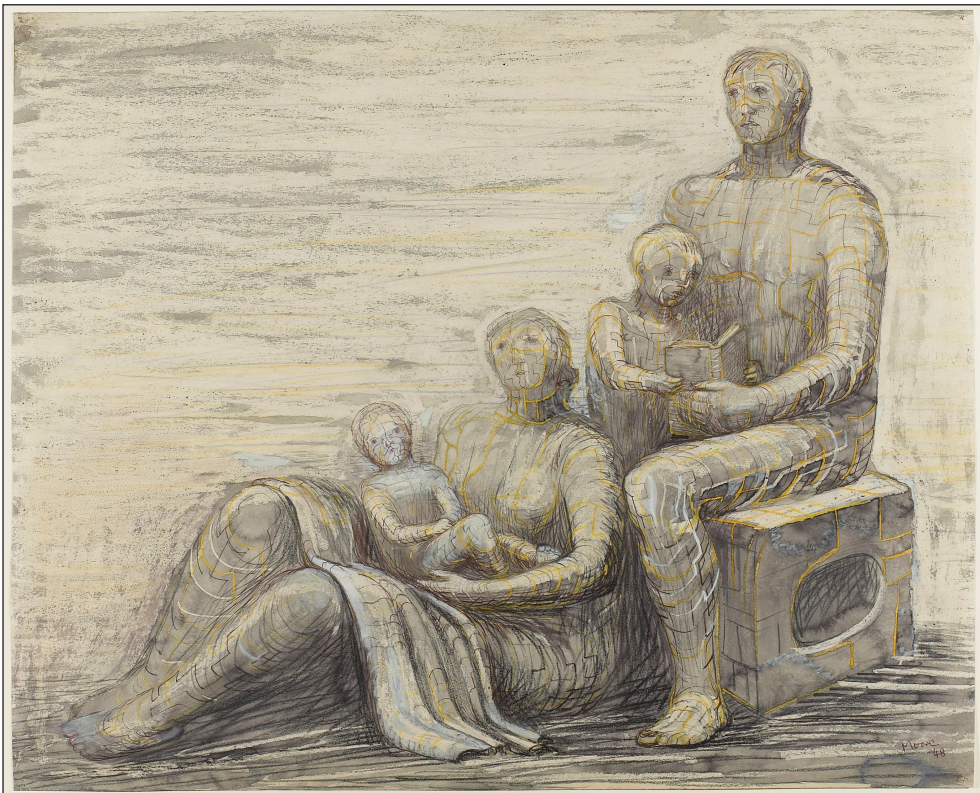
the family produced in the wake of the baby boom, shortly after the birth of his own daughter, and with respect to a period of social democratisation of which he was broadly supportive, are problematised in the process of unpicking its apparent meanings. It is in the careful balancing of the demands—and the comprehension—of his audience with his own less than simple interpretation of the advances made in that period, that Moore's work finds its voice.

### Neo-Working-Classicism

So what do I mean to infer by labelling Moore a 'neo-working-classicist'? What might a neo-working-classicism look like? This ungainly compound adjective started off as a joke as I sought to make sense of an idea I had been exploring for some time about the political potency of Moore's ostensibly retrogressive turn to figuration after 1940, but I'm sticking with it in the belief that it provides a useful starting point for that which I find most noteworthy and contradictory about the stylistic decisions Moore pursued in the years that followed. This is not to identify Moore's *Family Group* as having neo-classical form or even much to do with neo-classicism despite Fuller's insistence, and neither is it to declare the work—or Moore for that matter—as belonging solely to the post-war working-class without substantial equivocation. Rather, it is to set up a discussion about Moore's stylistic intentions, the character of his new audiences and the roots of his practice with respect to the objectives and motivations for this volume's exploration of the subject of the 'working-class avant-garde'.

As introduced at the outset, this approach is informed by a short but suggestive discussion of Moore's engagement with the 'family' theme by Andrew Causey in his monograph on Moore's drawings published in 2010. Analysing one of Moore's large-scale drawings of a family group in pencil, wax crayon and wash produced whilst working on the Barclay School commission (**Figure 2**), Causey identifies a timeless, enduring quality that he suggests results from both the universality of the subject matter and the placement of these figures into a nebulous space that he relates to the indeterminate landscapes found in many of Picasso's 'neoclassical' paintings of the 1920s (2010: 136). Citing Elizabeth Cowling's work on Picasso, Causey describes the resulting effect as one of 'temporal vagueness' which he explains with respect to the turn in each artist's work towards the safety of a timeless classical tradition thought to be necessary as part of the 'healing process' necessary after the war, and following the 'terrible dismemberment bodies had suffered so recently' traced now across two world wars, and linked to the degradation of the human form in modernism (Causey, 2010: 37, 136; Cowling, 2002: 414). Causey then concludes his line of thought and the chapter with the explicit and leading suggestion that Moore's work might be understood to

form part of an equivalent *rappel à l'ordre* following the Second World War, but without any comment on the reactionary nature of much of the work produced in the 1920s or what such an about turn on Moore's part might have meant with respect to the context in which he was working, never mind the fact that Britain didn't have a comparable relationship with the 'classical tradition' invoked by Picasso.



**Figure 2:** Henry Moore, *Family Group*, 1948 (HMF2504). Pen and ink and wash, crayon, opaque watercolour, charcoal pencil and encaustic on paper. Overall (sheet): 56.4 × 69.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario purchase 1974, 74/338. Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation. Photo: AGO.

To invoke the call to order is to suggest a conservatism in Moore's approach, and indeed Causey finds the final bronze form of Moore's *Family Group* 'bland', and with the potential to undo the promise of Moore's avant-garde experiments of the 1930s (133). But in light of much of the recent scholarship on the subject, to register each of these works in relation to the *rappel à l'ordre* is also implicitly to suggest that Moore was playing with that tradition knowingly.

In his survey of the retreat from the avant-gardism of the preceding years in French art produced during the *rappel à l'ordre* following the Great War, Kenneth Silver explores the comparable significance and uses of maternal themes as sources for Picasso and

his contemporaries with respect to the ever-present representations of *La France*, Marianne, and the Nation that proliferated in officially sanctioned French culture. To paint maternal images in representational form at this time, he suggests, was knowingly to enter into dialogue with both an explicitly nationalist world of signs and a longer, palatable Mediterranean tradition, rejecting the excesses of a Brutish, northern European tradition that had become synonymous with modernist experimentation (1989). However, many historians have since noted that this quasi-nationalist turn was less than simple, and frequently ironic given the cosmopolitan make-up of the group of artists that sought to manipulate it amongst the Parisian avant-garde, and given their continued experimentation with more radical artistic approaches. Modern artists working in the context of this post-war world sought to reconcile the demands of a reformulated social hierarchy with their own artistic impetuses through a canny application of form that was, in the first instance, politically aware and deferential, but also, and especially in the case of Picasso, self-interested and astute.

For Alexandra Parigoris, this stylistic adaptability can be understood through the framework of pastiche which helps to explain the ways an artist like Picasso understood and sought to manipulate, interrogate and even undermine the implications of 'tradition' at that time (1990). But more recently, Chris Green has countered that Picasso's work was 'so internally driven that the terms *pastiche* and *parody* can go only so far toward articulating the character of his relationship to antiquity' (2011: 125). Just as with Moore, Picasso's underlying and fundamental concern with the human body as the guiding principle for his work was governed by a need to understand and to express—on his own terms—its full spatial presence, and 'in antiquity he found an inexhaustibly rich resource from which to develop his own ways of answering this need', but always alongside and as part of a 'heterogeneous and growing collection of visual memories picked up from popular cultures as well as from the museums of the great European cities' (Green, 2011: 125–127).

Elizabeth Prettejohn calls this Picasso's 'promiscuity of quotation' in her study of the importance of classical precedents for artists working in the modern period, noting that this manner of working does 'something very different from previous practices in which the visual quotation brings with it some authoritative meaning from its source, like a scholarly footnote' (2012: 234). She continues:

what is under exploration is not so much the authority of the sources or their 'original' meanings as the process by which the artist transforms raw materials ... into the new work of art. In this process both the forms and meanings of the 'source' must be changed. That calls into question the explanatory potential of the usual

art-historical procedures, source-spotting and iconographic decoding: finding out how the visual motif functioned, or what it meant, in its original context may have no bearing on its appearance in the new work (2012: 237).

We are dealing here with an artistic process based on a visual appetite that was boundless, and less interested in academic meaning, iconography or the canon than in the full richness of the visual world, seen without discrimination based on questions of taste or propriety. Quoting Frederic Jameson, Rosalind Krauss referred to the effects of this borrowing as the ‘phenomenological preconditions of stylistic authenticity’, arguing that the ‘sense of an author behind the work’ is to be found in the ‘indelible individuality of that subjective ground from which the work is drawn’ (1998: 203). This of course must be true of any artist, but despite the uniqueness of each artist’s interests and experiences, the variety and, often, the specifics of Moore’s references were eminently comparable to Picasso’s (not coincidentally, and frequently even including Picasso), even if he engaged with them in a less antagonistic or supercilious manner. As Kenneth Clark had it, ‘Where Picasso is volatile, Moore is tenacious; Picasso swoops, Moore burrows’ (1960: 355–356).

In place of volatile and hawkish contestation, Moore’s method was magnanimous and humble, making use of a range of referents that whilst subjective and individualised remained open to interpretation and available for discovery without any training in ‘source-spotting and iconographic decoding’. And where so often Picasso’s references spoke of himself and his imperious campaign to impose his artistic record of that self on the accomplishments of his forebears—‘hidden records of his own persona, the smuggled-in evidence of his presence as authorial subject to the objects represented in his art’ (Krauss, 1998: 204)—Moore’s are better understood as evidence of his congenial encounters with that ‘common-world language of form’. His are attempts to enter into a dialogue with and, in turn, to facilitate our dialogue (continued or nascent) with that broad tradition.

Of more immediate relevance, Moore was also entering into dialogue with the British classical tradition and its legacies which for the average observer in mid-century Britain was perhaps best represented by either the classical, neo-classical and revivalist collections of Britain’s great museums or, more prosaically and more fittingly, the many war memorials produced across Britain after 1918 where the ‘qualities of restraint, harmony, dignity and respect for the past’ associated with classicism were put to use ‘as the nation sought an appropriate mode in which to remember the lost generation’ (Martin, 2016: 11). In that context, Ana Carden-Coyne has argued, classicism was employed

not just a familiar cultural vocabulary or retreat to the safe past, but as a relevant set of values regarding beauty, symmetry and civilization. Since classicism was a universal aesthetic aimed at resolving paradoxes harmoniously, it offered a special understanding of the world in conflict' (2009: 2).

Twenty years and another catastrophic war later, however, those values and any sense of the possibility of 'understanding' might have been harder to define, and Moore's work was no memorial in the usual stance. Indeed, with direct recognition of the changing direction of his practice in the 1940s, Roger Lipsey argues that Moore's classicism

was never a dream of a lost ideal that might be recovered if only we knew how. On the contrary, classical imagery became for him a standard against which he could better see the contemporary human condition—and a vessel into which he poured an extraordinary will to live (1988: 290).

Rather than looking backwards through memorialisation with the purpose of remembrance, Moore's works looked forwards through education and social change, and as a petition for progress; that which as early as 1934 Moore defined with respect to the ethos behind his work as 'an expression of the significance of life, a stimulation to greater effort in living' (1934: 30). It was for this reason that he adopted a formal language that, though it referenced classicism and sought to manifest its lessons and values, should not be read as classical in categorical terms.

Moore's *Family Group*, rendered in a representational form that bears some relation to those classical qualities referenced—restrained, harmonious, dignified, respectful—might be understood as an heir to the memorial lineage of the 1920s now redoubled after a second cataclysmic conflict. It is also, more simply, a meditation on the human condition sculpted in the wake of disaster. But there are also surrealist spectres permeating this work that confront that disaster head on, as well as or including nods to church statuary and funereal monuments (Curtis and Russell, 2003: 131), Moore's many visits to the world collections of the British Museum, and the full breadth of the classical/neo-classical sculptural spectrum ranging from static and idealised studies of human form through to the coded appropriation of neo-classical form in support of the very totalitarian politics Britain had been in conflict with, all subsumed beneath a sufficiently coherent and, for some, bland veneer.

In hindsight, Moore's application of the theme of the family might appear too obviously intended as a symbol of Britain's post-war political order and the 'structures and ideologies of the new Welfare State' (Stephens, 2003: 250), aligned with the societal

promotion of the overlapping concepts of family, community and social welfare upon which a New Jerusalem was to be built, rendered in ostensibly legible terms. However, the metaphor of the family was less stable and more open to interpretation than this suggests.

In positioning Moore's exploration of the themes of landscape and the family in relation to the propaganda campaigns of the war effort, Jay Winter recently pointed to the importance of the family group as a hopeful metaphor representative of anticipated growth and renewal to come after the war, with the promotion of the family unit as an overtly religious symbol of that growth against which the barbarism of the totalitarian regimes being battled against was to be contrasted (2019: 22). Having been established as such, the metaphor was then used by both the Labour and Conservative parties to help express each party's 'cultural references and value systems' after the war (Bernini, 2013: 149). Although William Beveridge had positioned the traditional family structure at the centre of the model that was to become a blueprint for the Labour Party's implementation of the Welfare State after 1945, it also became representative of the resumption of normative family roles and relations after the disruption of war, as well as the promotion of an insular and private conception of the 'nuclear family', positioned now in conflict with an overbearing state and the idea of community to which the family had previously been inextricably linked, and nowhere more so than amongst the working-classes.

The adaptability of the family as a metaphor for community, welfare and reconstruction as well as for individual freedoms and the societal changes engendered by the baby boom is central to the intelligibility of the works that followed and their contrasting interpretations. Indeed, Moore's sensitivity to the potency of these motifs for the demands of the commission at hand can be found in that discrepancy in the early readings of the work quoted from the outset. In being classical-adjacent whilst also wearing the emaciated frame of those who had made it through the war, the form of Moore's *Family Group* quietly communicates something about both the majesty and the fragility of human existence, and about our capacity to learn and to grow from devastation whilst weighed down by its memory. Hope and resignation are both present here, and learning and growing are both key to the work's meaning given both its representation of generational inheritance and the education role it would eventually take on in the context of a schoolyard. In the stylistic referents Moore introduces and interpolates into this *Family Group* we can then begin to uncover the way he looked to adopt and manipulate one the most recognised images of the recent war at home—women and children, invariably working-class, sheltering underground during the Blitz, into which grouping is now added the returning father figure—in order to take up and work through the meanings of and the threats to the individual, the family and the body politic posed by the upheavals of mid-century.



## A Monument to Recent Experience

Though the mother and child theme had absorbed him throughout his career, Moore turned to more realistic figurative depictions having witnessed the Blitz first hand on 11 September 1940, four days into a spell of sustained aerial bombardment when bombs were dropped on London for all but one of a 76-night period. Returning home to Belsize Park by tube late that evening, Moore and his wife were confronted with the spectacle of a torrential barrage of gunfire put up by the British Forces to counter the German attack, and a subterranean population sheltering from its effects on tube platforms (Andrews, 2002: 35–49).

The sketches and drawings prompted by the impact of that experience would form the basis of Moore's well-known *Shelter Drawings*, which would soon be co-opted by the WAAC in support of the war effort, introducing Moore to a wider public than he could ever have imagined a year or so earlier. As a result, Lyndsey Stonebridge identified this as the moment that marked the 'end of a relatively obscure modernist reputation and the beginning of Moore's second career (as John Russell puts it) as one of the "keepers of the public conscience"' (2003: 109). The hyperbole here is effective in alluding to the resonance and the legacy of Moore's drawings, but Stonebridge identifies this apparent moment of rupture also to push against the idea that, having introduced 'naturalist empathy' back into his work, Moore abandoned the radicalism of his earlier work. 'There is a sensibility that cuts across Moore's work', she writes, 'that is less enamoured of redemptive myth-making than his popular image might convey' (2003: 108). Drawing on Angus Calder's important work in debunking the 'Myth of the Blitz', in which he argued against the idea of British 'endurance' during the carpet bombing of its cities, Stonebridge draws out the latent surrealist in Moore, exploring the way his wartime works evince a sense of the war's true horror both internalised and externalised, in relation to which his later and related public works might be shown to shake off the fantasy of art's redemptive capacity.

David Mellor's identification of the use Moore made when developing his *Shelter Drawings* of images from the pages of popular publications such as *Picture Post* helps to account productively for Moore's quite explicit understanding of the reality of the situation during wartime (2010). Moore's obvious reproduction of elements from two photos by Bert Hardy published in *Picture Post* on 12 October 1940 in two of his early *Shelter Drawings* appears to confirm his identification of and with the suffering of London's working-class communities at that time (**Figure 3**), which is described in precise and condemnatory detail in the accompanying article.



**Figure 3:** Henry Moore, *Women and Children in the Tube*, 1940 (HMF 1726). Pencil, wax crayon, chalk, watercolour, wash, pen and ink on paper. Dimensions: 280 × 380 mm. Imperial War Museum. Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation.

In one passage, Mrs. Wright of Ocean Street, Stepney is quoted thus:

‘Last night we had a time-bomb in the middle of the street. I was in the public shelter and the wardens came down and told us not to go home. They said “It is dangerous to go home until further notice.” So now here I am, stuck with my baby and my case. Time-bombers, people call us. “You’re only time-bombers”, they say, “There’s no billets for time-bombers.” So now I don’t know where to go. They told me, “Ask the police.” They said, “The police know.” “The police can tell you everything”, they said.’ (*Picture Post*, 1940)

Having quoted Mrs. Wright at length as well as a policeman she met in the street, the article makes plain that authorities were in fact seldom familiar with the rights of those left vulnerable by the bombing, and red tape remained an obstacle in the way of providing the help many needed, creating an image of life on the margins of society that appears quite desperate.

Something of the tragedy and the disquiet of that experience is plainly visible in Moore’s drawing. Mellor, however, describes Moore’s use of his source material in this

drawing as resulting in a ‘misty, disintegrative and romantic version of a Tube platform scene’, and in his subsequent analysis of the uses to which Moore’s images were later put by the WAAC as part of a broader campaign ‘to envisage and draft propaganda that attempted to bolster civilian morale amongst British subjects’, Mellor writes:

it could be said that Moore was feeding back to the [Ministry of Information] its position of managing events in a reassuring manner. By underlining ‘family devotion’, he was making a form of visual record—however romantic or Gothic—that sustained morale while admitting loss and discomfort (2010: 56–57).

I would argue that both interpretations are possible, simultaneously even, but that they are not easily reconcilable. Read alongside the article accompanying Hardy’s source material, it is very difficult to read the lives of the work’s inhabitants as anything but wretched, defenceless and alone. Moore’s empathy for what he had seen first-hand in the shelters was outlined in a letter to his friend Arthur Sale shortly after completing them:

But what doesn’t seem like a cinematograph reel to me, are the queues, before four o’clock outside some of the tube stations of poor looking women + children waiting to be let in to take shelter for the night— + the dirty old bits of blankets + cloths + pillows stretched out on the tube platforms—its about the most pathetic, sordid + disheartening sight I hope to see (1940).

What’s more, given the public’s familiarity with images of shelterers from the public press—never mind their own personal experiences of aerial bombardment—it is hard to imagine that anyone seeing these drawings wouldn’t have brought their own subjective understanding of that experience to these works alongside any abstracted ideal of ‘family devotion’. Stretching infinitely into the distance, Moore’s shelterers then become representative in microcosm of a much larger problem, as that ‘temporal vagueness’ referenced earlier is deployed here to cut London’s poor off from all they knew, hiding pathetically in the guts of the city.

With the outbreak of the blitz, it became quickly obvious that Britain’s poorest areas were woefully ill-prepared for the full force of the Luftwaffe’s rolling raids on munition factories and industrial centres such as those in the East End of London. In a record of the wartime achievements of the Communist Party, Phil Piratin, Member of Parliament for Stepney from 1945 to 1950, wrote of the Party’s campaign for better shelter provision long before the war began, describing their role, both active and parliamentary, in pushing for the government approved use of the London Underground as de facto public shelters against hostile opposition and the explicit disapproval of the Home Secretary:

The police were given instructions to allow no one to use the Tubes for shelter [but] the Communist Party decided that the Tubes should be open for shelter ... preparations were made to break open the gates of the Tubes which the police were closing immediately the air-raid siren was sounded. At a number of stations these actions were taken. Various implements such as crowbars happened to be available, and while the police stood on duty guarding the gates, they were quickly swept aside by the crowds, the crowbars brought into action, and the people went down. That night tens of thousands sprawled on the Tube platforms. The next day Mr. Herbert Morrison, solemn as an owl, rose to make his world-shattering announcement: the Government had reconsidered its opinion in the matter of the Tubes being used as shelters (1948: 75).

To consider the characters that populate either Moore's *Shelter Drawings* or his later *Family Group* as part of that legacy described by Angus Calder as the 'heroic assertion of popular rights against a legacy of inept bureaucracy and Tory rule' is to register something of their radical potential (Calder, 1991: 47), whilst Moore's personal expression of communist sympathies throughout the 1930s suggests it may not have been a total coincidence that he took such an interest in the subject matter. Indeed, a number of his friends and acquaintances even suggested he may have been a member of the Community Party at this time (Stephenson, 2015).

To make images based on popular political insurgency part of the national record of war, however 'misty' or 'disintegrative', is a far cry from the obsequious and anodyne connotations of Causey's invocation of the call to order, unless properly explored. And yet it is exactly the populist nature of the rebellion to which these drawings relate, and Moore's use of a quasi-classical artistic language to smuggle such radicalism into his work that, again, makes neo-working-classicist appear an appropriate epithet. But despite this background of political and social radicalism, it remains true, as argued by Peter Stansky and William Abrahams three decades ago, that this context to Moore's shelter drawings has continued to be 'underemphasized or ignored' in favour of the heterogeneous art historical associations they harbour: 'Egyptian tombs, Etruscan funereal sculpture, the Nazi death camps and Jungian archetypes' (1994: 43). The social realist painter Carel Weight picked up on the easiest of these analogies in his review of the War Artists' Exhibition of 1944 when he criticised Moore's images of shelterers as appearing 'more like abstractions from Etruscan sculpture than anxious Cockney flesh and blood' (1944: 20). Similarly Angus Calder, despite his appreciation for the myths at play in wartime, fell in line with the official record of these works' abstraction from the realities of war, writing: 'Odoriferous slum dwellers, frightened

small businessmen these cannot be: they are an image of Humanity itself, in heroic repose' (1991: 143). Although apparently in keeping with those readings of Moore's *Shelter Drawings* that claim them as universally significant, the implicitly derogatory nature of this argument becomes clearer as he goes on to suggest in eminently revisionist terms that only the sort of disfiguration represented by Francis Bacon's painting *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* of 1944—'half-human, half-animal figures cramped into a strangely shaped, low-ceilinged space'—was capable of adequately representing the horrors of war, as though only fragmentation and monstrous distortion could do so effectively.

Both Weight and Calder want art to fulfil their own very narrow and contextually-defined ideas of what might constitute appropriate testaments to the experience of war. For Weight, this meant an objective realism representative of the facts on the ground, and for Calder retrospectively this meant visceral, nightmarish expressionism. Given these biases, neither account is able to do justice to Moore's achievements, which are best evidenced by the fact that they remain incompletely understood even now. The significance of their ambiguity, I would argue, becomes clearest when mapped onto subsequent works such as *Family Group*, and when read in relation to the context for which it was made.

Moore's *Family Group* was erected in 1950 outside the Barclay School, one of the first purpose-built secondary moderns completed following the end of war. Positioned on a modest plinth that elevated the sculptures slightly so as to register their above-life size whilst retaining their relatability, this mother, father and child were made available to be observed and encountered, run around, jumped on and bumped into, or simply ignored and walked past. There, in ordinary space, rather than in the culturally biased context of the museum or the gallery, the many possible interpretations of the work already discussed were available to be advanced or inferred by the publics for whom the work was commissioned on their own terms, and without persuasion or judgement. There, children and adults alike might find this family strange or deeply familiar, idealised or inhuman, either stoic and resolute or debilitated and frail, with each of the parents' broad shoulders giving way to stomachs in recession far removed from the fecund matriarchs Moore was known for (**Figure 4**). There, the work might be understood as a monument to recent experience and a post-war legacy not yet defined; not just an 'icon of the post-war social settlement' (Stephens, 2003: 248), but also a testament to the failings and prejudices that preceded and precipitated the social revolution that came after 1945.



**Figure 4:** Henry Moore, *Family Group*, 1948–49 (LH 269). Photograph from the *Daily Express*, 26 September 1950. Photographer unknown. Reproduced by permission of The Henry Moore Foundation.

Reviewing an exhibition of Moore's wartime work at the Imperial War Museum in 2007, Margaret Garlake noted the significance of the Stevenage *Family Group* as a proclamation of the centrality of education for the establishment of a 'New Britain' after the war whilst also noting the close formal relation between Moore's work and Siegfried Charoux's *Islanders*, a monumental work produced for the Festival of Britain 'set firmly within the heroic communist worker genre' (2007: 103). The political implications of the comparison are key, and Moore was surely cognisant of these implications when toying with a neo-classical form-language whilst also recognising that classicism had the ability to represent its opposite too. But as Causey noted in his analysis of Moore's work on the theme, Moore's families are 'different from post-war East European monuments only because of the temperate, non-heroic expressions' (2010: 136). What we are left with, then, are simply workers and students, civilians and their children, not heroes: the same members of the population represented in the *Shelter Drawings*, now monumentalised in bronze on a resolutely human scale, but bearing the scars of their experiences.

The work remains difficult to grasp exactly because it allows for such a diversity of readings all while seeming to offer very little for those ‘arbiters of aesthetic virtue’ trained to look for something other than it offers, whether in terms of its avant-garde credentials or with respect to the connotations of its art historical precedents. Writing on Moore’s drawings in 1974, Kenneth Clark—the man, as chairman of the WAAC, perhaps most responsible for establishing the terms on which Moore’s public works of the 1940s have continued to be misrepresented—describes the final form of Moore’s *Family Group* as having been completed in ‘far more naturalistic and acceptably human terms’ than Moore might have pursued if given the commission a decade earlier. Then, Moore had been more easily recognised as a member of the avant-garde, and engrossed with the earliest of his works on the theme of internal-external forms that Clark conceives would have been ‘beyond the comprehension of the ‘new town’ population for whom [the public works] were intended’ (1974: 250). The argument is obviously patronising, and undermined by the sheer variety of works that were placed into New Towns like Harlow in the following decades. But more importantly, it fails to acknowledge the importance of Moore’s continued work on the internal-external theme throughout the 1940s and in to the 50s, alongside and in tandem with his exploration of those themes deemed suitable for public works, not because they were simple (they weren’t) or ‘acceptably human’ (a designation I would argue is more appropriate than Clark intended), but because they were sufficiently familiar, and thus considered the most appropriate form for the delivery of difficult ideas. Maybe this is what I mean by neo-working-classicist: legible, and universal somehow, with the potential to speak to fundamental human truths, but renewed, revised, and representative of the masses of mid-century Britain.

## Conclusion

In his influential book *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* published in 1932, R.H. Wilenski identified the continued influence of Greek art on Western artistic traditions as a propagandistic one, but one that was not recognised as such ‘because we have all absorbed it in childhood and youth as part of our ordinary education’ (xviii). Two years earlier (but in the spirit of discussions ongoing for more than decade), Moore had described the pan-international spirit of modernism as being like ‘the removal of the Greek spectacles’ that helped artists ‘to realise again the intrinsic emotional significance of shapes instead of seeing mainly a representational value.’ (1930: 408). What, then, had changed by the 1940s that found Moore reaching for vestiges of the classical tradition in the pursuit of a representational art appropriate to the larger audiences to whom his work was now available, and in response to the humanitarian horrors of the Second World War?

Humanism might lie at the heart of this, which as Christa Lichtenstern writes became

the international catchword of the time. It crossed all boundaries and was valid from a Christian as well as from an agnostic perspective. Humanism, in the sense of taking out a reinsurance policy with antiquity—that is, with the beginnings of Western thinking and its art—embraced at the time a strategy of hope for all those who, after Auschwitz, Coventry, Dresden and Hiroshima, pressed for an intellectual *renovatio* (2008: 140).

The ‘intellectual *renovatio*’ invoked here appears something like a revision of the *rappel à l’ordre*, and as early as 1945 the conservative French critic Thierry Maulnier explicitly advocated the need for a ‘classical revolution’ in French post-war literature registered, significantly, as a ‘response to’—rather than an outright rebuttal of—what he calls ‘contemporary problems of expression’ (1945: 304). Arguing that the modernist experiments of the preceding decades had resulted in a general fatigue ‘accompanied by a desire to communicate with the average reader and to find a form of expression at once more restrained and lucid, and less “private”’, Maulnier proposed that the renewed pursuit of an artistic form that prioritised communicable language over and above modernism’s most destructive tendencies represented the best means of growing again after the war, positioning the artist in relation to their publics. He positions this conception of a ‘new classicism’ in opposition to the decadent excesses of an art that claimed for itself ‘total freedom’ (1945).

Maulnier’s association with the right-wing *Action Française* movement who had been so influential in advocating for the revival of nationalist French traditions during the *rappel à l’ordre* of the 1920s makes aspects of his argument problematic, yet the essay’s publication in translation in the pages of *Horizon* appears representative of a broader redemptive and amelioratory trend in Europe after 1945. The decision by the editors of *Horizon* to reproduce some of Moore’s most recent maquettes alongside the essay, however, as though they and Moore supported Maulnier’s arguments, doesn’t do justice to the rationale behind Moore’s reorientation.

Better is Nikolaus Pevsner’s reading of Moore’s work from the pages of *The Listener* that same year:

Why does Henry Moore go on insisting on a hard core of humanity? The answer, if my interpretation of the Shelterers is acceptable, would be that the born abstract artist is a law-giver, not one who patiently listens. Henry Moore does; his note-books show how he lets forms grow. But in growing they lose their humanistic values, and



they lose all their freedom of action. The power they gain is blind and awful. Is it the only power which we can express to-day without giving up sincerity? I am inclined to answer No, and to call upon the Northampton statue as my witness (1945: 47).

For Pevsner, the Northampton Madonna represented a compromise between the radicalism of his artistic impulses and an ideological determination to stop short of the most destructive tendencies of modernism in light of the destruction he had witnessed in the preceding years. Were he writing four years later, Pevsner might equally have called upon Moore's *Family Group* in this regard, though the contemporary falling and fallen warriors reinforce that Moore remained attentive to the thin lines between awful power, death, and redemption.

In the production of public works for the people of Britain, whether in drawings co-opted for the war effort or in sculptures commissioned to augment the new democratised public spaces of post-war Britain, Moore found the means by which to reconcile two sides of his personality: one personal, originating from the industrial working-classes of the West Riding of Yorkshire, and one that developed amongst the European artistic classes of the early twentieth century with a long view of (art) history.

Reflecting on the commission that gave rise to the *Family Group*, Moore stated:

What we have to do is to relate the artist in a realistic way to the living community, and at the same time to enable that community to become acquainted with the artist, to know him and to accept him as easily as they do the doctor or the technician. This is the best way, if it could be brought about, to give the artist occasions for creation and at the same time give the members of the community the most natural opportunity of appreciating the work of the artists (Morris, 1965).

With the *Family Group*, I believe the spirit of this ambition was accomplished, creating a work with the potential to speak openly and honestly, but not imperiously, to its constituents about both the sculptor's and the citizen's 'role in society', all while commenting in appropriately guarded terms on a society in transition, but positioned, unassumingly, in the democratised space of a secondary-modern schoolyard.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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