

A wartime Artist. Henry Moore and his *Shelter Drawings*

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Fig. 1
Henry Moore
Two Mothers Holding Children, 1941
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

Fig. 2
Henry Moore
Three Seated Figures, 1941
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 3
Myra Hess, promoter of the lunchtime
concerts, during a concert in the empty rooms
of the National Gallery

With all probability it was on the night of 11 September 1940 that the sculptor Henry Moore (1898-1986) and his wife Irina decided to return home on the underground after a dinner with friends in London's West End. Just a few days prior to that date the intensive German bombings of London known as the Blitz had started and the Moores discovered to their surprise that the stations in which their train stopped on the way back to Belsize Park were full of people. Covered with blankets, thousands of men, women and children tried to make themselves comfortable in order to pass the night on the hard floors of the platforms. These improvised shelters that Londoners had decided to use in the face of the imminent attacks remained imprinted on Moore's visual memory and would give rise to one of his most important series of drawings, known as the Shelter Drawings.¹

Two Mothers Holding Children (fig. 1) and *Three Seated Figures* (fig. 2), acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza in the early 1970s and periodically on display in room 47 of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, are two outstanding examples from this series.

A city beneath the bombs

From the outset of the War in September 1939 the possibility that London might come under attack from Nazi bombing raids resulted in the closure of most of the city's cultural centres, concert halls and museums. One of the few exceptions was the National Gallery whose director, Kenneth Clark, decided to continue with that institution's activities, as a result of which the Gallery becomes the driving force behind cultural life in London.

Clark evacuated the Gallery's collection to a remote disused state mine in Wales, away from the bombings and from the threat of Nazi looting. With the Gallery's masterpieces safe from harm, he began to organise numerous activities in the building's empty rooms. The lunchtime concerts became institutions, while numerous and varied temporary exhibitions were organised. Finally, once the worst of the Blitz was over, the Gallery exhibited one painting every month that was brought back from Wales.²

Clark's initiatives went further, and in November 1939 he became the principal figure behind the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC). As had been the case in World War I, the Committee commissioned artists to create works that focused on the conflict. During World War I artists of the stature of Wyndham Lewis and Paul Nash had been asked to produce works, and once again Clark contacted some of the leading names in British art in the 1940s, among them Henry Moore.³



Fig. 4
Henry Moore making sketches in Holborn underground station, 1943
From the documentary by Jill Graigie *Out of Chaos* (photograph, Lee Miller)



Fig. 5
Henry Moore
Helmet, 1939-1940
The Henry Moore Foundation.
Donated by Irina Moore, 1977



Fig. 6
Henry Moore
Madonna and Child,
1943-1944
Church of St. Matthew,
Northampton

Moore was initially reluctant to participate in the WAAC project as proposed by Clark, but his experience that night on the underground at the outset of the *Blitzkrieg* (lightning war) made him change his mind and he decided to produce drawings as a war artist.

A sculptor who drew

Henry Moore's life and work were affected by the outbreak of World War II. The Chelsea School of Art, at which he was a teacher, closed down, while Moore's country house in Kent where he made most of his sculptures was declared a restricted zone due to its proximity to the English Channel. Obtaining material for sculpture became increasingly difficult and the possibility of having to abandon unfinished works in the studio meant that Moore focused more intensively on drawing.

Moore had always championed drawing as the keystone of his sculptural process, considering the lengthy life-drawing sessions and his regular visits to the British Museum to be essential to his artistic development. When drawing became his principal means of expression in 1940 and an autonomous art form, separate from his sculpture, his work in this medium retained some of the characteristics that he had formulated over the previous years.

Notable among them was what the artist defined as the "two-way sectional line method of drawing", in which, and in addition to the line that defined the outline, he introduced others in a horizontal direction that created volumes without the need to use shadows (see, for example, the figure on the right of *Three Seated Figures*, fig. 2).⁴ The sense of volume that he achieved using this method and the "organic sinuosity of the forms, are fully consonant with his sculptures".⁵

"The war brought out and encouraged the humanist side in one's work"

Numerous academic studies have emphasised the importance of Henry Moore's war drawings for his artistic development.⁶ During this period he set aside his chisels and gouges, moving from an idiom associated with Surrealism (fig. 5) to a more humanist vision of the human form that is evident in the works executed immediately after his war drawings (fig. 6).

"The war brought out and encouraged the humanist side in one's work"⁷ Moore noted, aware of the way that the conflict had affected his creative activities. The empathy that he experienced in relation to the Londoners taking shelter in the underground, totally defenceless against what was taking place above their heads, made Moore's drawings more human in their vision. In addition, the quest for a new idiom led him to explore directions opened up by his profound knowledge of art. As he himself noted, "The Italian trip [in 1925] and the Mediterranean tradition came once more to the surface."⁸



Fig. 7
Henry Moore
Women and Children on the Underground, 1940
Imperial War Museum, London

The Mediterranean tradition, which Moore understood as a shared vision of the world that ran from archaic cultures to the Renaissance of Giotto and Masaccio, is present in these works in the monumentality and heroic solemnity of the figures and in the lack of interest in individualising them. Equally unimportant for Moore was the exact location of the scenes, which thus acquire a timeless air that is emphasised by the folds of the blankets that cover the figures in the manner of classical draperies.

The two drawings in the Thyssen Collection manifest another characteristic of Moore's work that relates to his interest in archaic art, namely his focus on the female figure. He generally depicted these figures nude and in repose and they represent the motif through which he expressed all his artistic innovations. The women taking shelter in the underground enabled him to continue with this line of artistic research even though they are depicted clothed. *Two Mothers Holding Children* reflects the artist's interest in depictions of women as mothers and protective figures, while *Three Seated Figures* refers to "the theme of the Three Graces".⁹

The painstaking process of drawing from memory

A few days after his fortuitous encounter with the motif that would occupy him over the following months, Moore executed what he considered to be the first *Shelter Drawing* (fig. 7). As in subsequent compositions of this type, it was his visual recollections of the subject that Moore set down on paper. Starting at that date, the artist regularly went down to the underground platforms where he spent hours observing the chaotic situation around him and memorising it, hardly making any use of sketches in order not to intrude on the scant privacy of the night-time sleepers.

Moore then set down his impressions of the underground in a number of sketchbooks that were done in his studio or his country home at Perry Green, to where he moved after his atelier was destroyed in a bombing raid in October 1940. The first two sketchbooks, produced in 1940 and 1941, have survived intact to the present day,¹⁰ while we also have loose sheets from three more of 1941. The sketches in these notebooks are executed in great detail and are reflected in the final compositions with few changes, as can be seen in the two studies (figs. 8 and 9) of *Two Mothers Holding Children*, which come from a horizontal sketchbook of 1941 of which only a few pages have been identified.¹¹

Finally, Moore translated some of these images to a larger sheet of paper, on which he made use of various techniques. He had used the combination of pencil, watercolour, India ink and charcoal since the 1920s. For the *Shelter Drawings* Moore added wax crayon, whose



Figs. 8 and 9
Henry Moore
Shelter Scene: Clothed Figures with Children, 1941
Private collection, USA

potential he had discovered shortly before the outbreak of the war. Its waterproof quality and the way it could be scraped off with a knife in selected areas allowed him to add new textures to his drawings. Using light coloured wax crayons he defined the outlines, then applied an overall layer of dark-toned watercolour that slid off the greasy areas of wax crayon. Finally, he used ink to better define the forms.

Moore worked on this series from the autumn of 1940 until the summer of 1941. During this period he produced more than sixty drawings, of which the WAAC acquired seventeen that were exhibited with works by other artists at the National Gallery and which are now in various museum collections in the UK. The remainder of the series, totalling more than forty drawings including the two now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, were sold to art dealers.

Moore's interest in the underground shelters waned as the months went by. The British government had imposed regulations on sleeping in the underground and the chaotic scenes that had fascinated the artist were no longer to be seen. Around this time, in August 1941, the WAAC offered him a new commission to draw miners in the north of England.

Notes

- 1 The entire series and its sketches are documented and reproduced in *Henry Moore, Complete Drawings 1916-1983*. Ann Garrould (ed.). London, Henry Moore Foundation-Lund Humphries, 1994-2003, vols. 2 and 3.
- 2 See Suzanne Bosman: *The National Gallery in Wartime*. London, National Gallery Company Limited, 2008.
- 3 Brian Foss: *War Paint. Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945*. New Haven-London, The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art-Yale University Press, 2007.
- 4 For a detailed description of this technique see Alan G. Wilkinson: "Die Zeichnungen Henry Moores". In Seipel, Wilfried (ed.): *Henry Moore: 1898-1986. Eine Retrospektive zum 100. Geburtstag* (exhib. cat. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Milan, Skira, 1998, pp. 106-107.
- 5 Paloma Alarcó: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Pintura Moderna*. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2009, p. 469.
- 6 For example, Alan G. Wilkinson: *The Drawings of Henry Moore* [exhib. cat., London, Tate Gallery; Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1977-1978]. London, Tate Gallery Publications, 1977, or John Russell in *Henry Moore* [exhib. cat., La Jolla, Art Center; Santa Barbara, Museum of Art; Los Angeles, Municipal Art Galleries]. La Jolla, The Center, 1963.
- 7 Cited in Wilkinson 1977, op. cit., p. 36.
- 8 *Henry Moore on Sculpture: a Collection of the Sculptor's Writings and spoken Words*. Philip James (ed.). London, Macdonald, 1966, p. 14.
- 9 Alarcó, op. cit., p. 468.
- 10 The first of them is in the collection of the British Museum, and the second is in the Henry Moore Foundation, Perry Green.
- 11 See the detailed studies undertaken on both works in Christopher Green: *The European Avant-Gardes. Art in France and Western Europe 1904-ca.1945: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Zwemmer, 1995, pp. 352-359.