

Scrapped?

In most cases it is clear why a work of art is lost. It can be wilfully destroyed or accidentally mislaid. It may never have been intended to endure; or the materials used may have proved ephemeral. But sometimes the loss can be the result of a cause or a motive that is more difficult to discern or understand. When a work of art is stolen it is usually obvious that the thieves knew what they were taking and why: to use as collateral in criminal activities, to resell on a black market and make major financial gain, or, occasionally, to grace the home of a private collector. However, in the case of Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* 1969–70, which was stolen one night in 2005, it remains a mystery whether those who perpetrated the crime understood exactly what they were taking and its real value.

The subject of the reclining figure was one of the most important in Henry Moore's work. 'From the very beginning', he once said, 'the reclining figure has been my main theme. The first one I made was around 1924, and probably more than half of my sculptures since then have been reclining figures.' For Moore it was a liberating theme because so familiar: 'within the subject that you've done a dozen times before, you are free to invent a completely new form-idea'.

Moore kept a collection of small bones and stones that appealed to him, and used these as starting points for his large-scale bronze sculptures. He would add some plaster to a piece of bone or stone, subtly transforming its shape, and then create a mould of it from which he would make a plaster positive. To this he might add another bone or stone, or a broken off piece of plaster, to develop the idea of the sculpture, and then create a further mould and a plaster positive, leading to a finished maquette.

The plaster maquette for *Reclining Figure* was only 15 cm long. Though an edition of small bronzes was cast from it, its main purpose was to serve as a model for a scaled-up polystyrene (with some plaster) version from which to make an edition of the large bronzes, each 3.6 metres long and weighing 2.1 tons. Maquettes allowed Moore to envisage the correct size for the final versions of his large-scale sculptures and to plan how best to locate them in particular settings. In 1972, when planning a major retrospective of his work in an old fortress with spectacular views over Florence, he photographed the maquette against a colour photograph of the view over the Italian city from the spot where he envisaged siting the full-scale bronze to study how it would look. This exhibition was a particular challenge for Moore both aesthetically and logistically: Florence was famed for its great Renaissance art and installing two hundred sculptures in a sixteenth-century hillside fort posed technical problems. But Moore was determined to plan the installation himself and used maquettes and photographs to help him do so from his home in England.

The exhibition proved one of the pinnacles of his career. He had been delighted to have the opportunity to stage a major retrospective of his work in Florence, a city associated with sculptors of the stature of Donatello and Michelangelo. In an open letter addressed to the mayor of the city Moore wrote about his longstanding love of the city. 'I feel it is my artistic home', he said. 'No better site for showing sculpture in the open-air, in relationship to architecture, + to a town, could be found anywhere in the world, than the Forte di Belvedere, with its impressive environs + its wonderful panoramic views of the city.' The full-scale bronze example of the *Reclining Figure* was one of the highlights of the exhibition that attracted nearly 400,000 visitors. Later Moore said that the exhibition had encouraged him to work on a large scale.

Reclining Figure had been cast in an edition of six, plus an artist's copy, in 1969 and early 1970 (other works in the edition are now owned by private collectors, a foundation in South Africa and museums in Denmark, Israel and Japan). In 1977 the artist created The Henry Moore Foundation, sited in his own home and studio in the Hertfordshire countryside, and the artist's copy became part of the Foundation's collection.

It was on its return from loan to The Henry Moore Foundation that the huge sculpture was stolen from the Foundation's property. The theft was swift and seemingly professional. CCTV footage revealed that a 4-wheel drive vehicle entered the Foundation's yard at 10.08 pm on 15 December 2005. A waiting lorry with a crane followed and quickly drove away with the sculpture. The theft was discovered the next morning and the police were called but had few leads to go on. On Saturday 17 December a press conference was held, and newspapers and television gave extensive coverage to the crime and reported the offer of a substantial reward. Spokesmen for the Foundation expressed their deep sense of shock at the loss and also their surprise that such a large and heavy sculpture could have been taken so quickly and apparently without trace. Detective Sergeant Rapley, head of the Metropolitan Police Arts and Antiques Unit, commented, 'For many years these objects have been considered unstealable because they are so large and heavy, because they are on public display and because they were seen as unsaleable. They weren't considered a risk. Now it seems they are. The people perpetrating these crimes appear to have no appreciation of, or respect for, the objects they are stealing.'

Others spoke about their fear that the bronze sculpture, worth £3 million at the time, might have been taken simply for its scrap value, which was less than £3,000. Scrap metal prices had been soaring, fuelled by the building boom in the Far East, and it was suspected this may have been the trigger for a recent spate of thefts of large-scale bronze sculptures and plaques. Between 17 and 21 December the police and staff from The Henry Moore Foundation visited a number of scrap yards and telephoned scores of scrap merchants in a concerted effort to locate the sculpture. Helicopters were used to survey areas where the artwork may have been dumped or stored. The lorry used for the theft was found on 18 December, abandoned on a housing estate in Coopersdale, near Epping. It was later revealed that it had been stolen only an hour before the theft

in Royden, Essex. The car, which had also been stolen, was found burnt out in nearby Hoddesdon. The two stolen vehicles were worth far more than the scrap value of the sculpture but police continued to suspect that the artwork had been taken for its metal and not for resale or to order by a collector.

A few years later, in May 2009, the police announced that they were confident on the basis of new intelligence that *Reclining Figure* had been broken into parts and processed as scrap metal the night of the theft. Others, however, were not so sure, partly because the operation had been so professionally executed. Mark Dalrymple, a leading loss adjuster, for example, said in 2006, 'There's a misconception that the Henry Moore stolen in 2005 was taken to be melted down for scrap. I do not believe that is true. There were three or four men involved. They stole a four-wheel drive and took a truck with a grab. It was taken because it was worth £3m. Whether or not they find a buyer is another matter, but they knew what they were doing.' Although the police believe they have solved the mystery of the Moore theft and that the sculpture no longer exists, the questions about who the thieves were, what exactly they did with the sculpture, and whether they had ever planned to realise something close to the piece's value as a work of art remain unanswered.

Even when lost or destroyed, an artwork can continue to exert influence as an image, memory or story. The reputation of Henry Moore and the general incredulity that such a well-known and large sculpture could disappear without trace led to the theft being reported internationally. In Germany the idea that the work had been melted down for its scrap value inspired Fritz Balhaus to create in 2009 a sculpture made from the equivalent weight of bronze of the stolen work. Called *Pure Moore*, the sculpture took the form of 221 ingots arranged roughly in the shape of Moore's *Reclining Figure*. Balhaus had the ingots cast at the Noack foundry in Berlin where the original sculpture had been cast, and installed the piece, with a certain poignancy, in the grounds of the Federal Criminal Police Office in the German capital.

Text—
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