

myth to modern

Bronzes from the Queensland Art Gallery Collection

'Myth to Modern: Bronzes from the Queensland Art Gallery Collection' explores the long-standing use of bronze in a variety of subjects and themes in Western sculpture. Myth, legend and portraiture feature in works dating from c.1700 to the emerging Modernism of Auguste Rodin in the late nineteenth century and the figurative abstraction of Henry Moore in the late twentieth century.

The history and use of bronze for cultural artefacts — including coins, funeral statuary, weaponry and art — by civilisations as diverse as those of ancient China and Rome is an indication of the significance and enduring qualities of this unique material. It is a strange paradox that, in its fiery transformation, this molten amalgam of metals (an alloy of copper and tin) is so adept at intimating flesh and evoking the power and grace of human and animal forms. Bronze also offers the potential for casting multiple copies from a wax or clay model. Its ability to reproduce detail, gesture and texture has defined it as a material of choice for figurative sculpture, most predominantly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

'Myth to Modern' explores aspects of this figuration through bronze sculpture. The artists represented in the exhibition approach the human figure from a variety of perspectives. They also bring aspects of their own time and histories to their works: the terms 'myth' and 'modern' illustrate the broad parameters of the exhibition as well as frameworks for seeing and understanding the world. Myths are defined here as ancient stories of origin, half forgotten and partly remembered, that survive and are transformed through time and retelling. Myths are a form of cosmology, a way of explaining and understanding the world.

Defining 'modernity' is more complex, and initially it would seem to be all that myth is not — a condition of being up-to-date and in the 'real' world of things, people and present time. Like the myths of classical Europe, modernity is a collection of beliefs, practices and sociopolitical mores that

Auguste Rodin
France 1840–1917
L'acrobate
(*The acrobat*) 1909
cast 1956
Bronze, ed. 8/12
29 x 14.6 x 12.3cm
Purchased 1960.
Sir John and Lady
Chandler Citizens'
Appreciation Fund



provides structures by which societies function. Within the context of this exhibition, the term modern is more or less interchangeable with modernity — a period of rapid social, political and cultural change from the late 1870s through to the early years of the twentieth century. Modernism is the most common term used to describe this flourish of creativity in the arts and sciences.

The range of artists and works in 'Myth to Modern' is broad and brings a number of histories into play. The earliest sculpture in the exhibition, Giovanni Battista Foggini's (1652–1725) exquisite work *Hercules and Omphale* c.1700, typically explores a story from the ancient world. The classical world of Greece and Rome was the source of many subjects for Western art from the Renaissance through to the nineteenth century. The small-scale bronze sculptures from this period were often commissioned as gifts to the many royal courts of Europe.

The majority of bronzes in 'Myth to Modern', however, were produced during the nineteenth century, with some looking to the neo-classical convention of myth and allegory, and others addressing the changing nature of sculpture with the development of Modernism. A key point was bronze's use in multiple production. The potential of bronze for reproduction has been exploited from the time of its discovery and development, such as the replication of Roman coins. For sculptors, several copies of an original work (in wax or clay) could be cast from the original moulds, as distinct from stone or wood sculpture, which are carved as unique objects. This encouraged collectors, particularly during the nineteenth century when an expanding urban middle class created a new market for art objects, particularly in Europe.

Works by Bertram Mackennal (1863–1931) and Alfred Gilbert (1854–1934) are typical of late nineteenth-century sculptures which drew on

French neo-classical and academic traditions, and echoed the poetry, myth and aesthetics of ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance. Although Bertram Mackennal was born in Australia, he achieved success and recognition in Europe during the 1890s where he established studios in Paris and London. Mackennal's *Truth* 1894 is one of a series of finely finished bronzes drawing on figures of myth and legend such as Circe, Salome and Daphne. The youthful female form in *Truth* is conceived as an allegorical figure holding a disc symbolic of the sun, which provides the light in which 'truth' is revealed.

Alfred Gilbert was born in London and studied in France and Italy during the mid to late 1870s. Perhaps his most renowned sculpture is the statue of Eros for the Shaftsbury Memorial Fountain in London's Piccadilly Circus. Gilbert's bronze *Perseus arming* c.1882 is also one of the artist's best known works and is part of a series in which myth and allegory were used to illustrate the course of his own life. One of Perseus's tasks was to find and behead Medusa, one of the Gorgons whose gaze turned men to stone. Gilbert's *Perseus arming* depicts the hero casting a casual glance behind him to check the winged sandals which had been given to him by Hermes, the messenger of the gods. The sandals allowed Perseus to move swiftly across land and sea in his search for Medusa. Gilbert saw the allegory of the battle as an echo of his own preparation for exhibiting his work at the prestigious Paris Salon and the Royal Academy in London, where critics and judges could make or break a young artist's career.

The Australian-born sculptor Harold Parker (1873–1962) trained in Queensland before moving to London in 1896 to chance his fortune in the great art centre. He achieved considerable success during the early 1900s — the Tate Gallery exhibited Parker's life-sized marble of Ariadne in 1908. Parker's *Eve repentant* 1928 draws on

Bertram Mackennal
Australia/England
1863–1931
Truth 1894, Bronze
62 x 19.5 x 17.5cm
Purchased 1989
from the estate of
Lady Trout with a
special allocation
from the Queensland
Government



Right:
Daphne Mayo
Australia 1895–1982
Susannah 1942
cast 1980
Bronze
38.5 x 15 x 8cm;
40.5 x 15 x 11cm
(with base)
Commissioned 1980

Harold Parker
Australia 1873–1962
Eve repentant 1928
Bronze on
marble base
45.5 x 19 x 19cm
53 x 19 x 19cm
(with base)
Purchased 1989
from the estate of
Lady Trout with a
special allocation
from the Queensland
Government



the biblical story of the Fall¹ for its subject and was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1928. Its style reflects the revival of sculpture in England during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. Eve is depicted as a young woman awakened to her nakedness as she modestly turns her gaze downward in a gesture of shame.

This Australian emphasis on European classical themes was continued by Daphne Mayo (1895–1982). She established a reputation as one of Australia's most important sculptors of the interwar years. As a child, she moved to Brisbane with her family and later studied at the Brisbane Technical College. She travelled to London in 1919 and her talent earned her a place at the Royal Academy School where she was awarded prizes and a travelling scholarship to Rome in 1923. Her works *Susannah* 1942 and *The Olympian* c.1946 represent two quite different sculptural approaches. *Susannah* recalls a theme from Christian art, while the life-sized torso of *The Olympian* represents a modern and expressive interpretation of the classical human form. This truncated figure reflects the influence of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, who radically transformed the academic conventions of nineteenth-century sculpture.

Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) was one of the most significant figures in the development of a modern style in bronze sculpture. His influence was widely felt by both sculptors and painters because of the freedom he imparted to the interpretation and representation of the human figure. Both *Torse de jeune femme* (*A young woman's torso*) 1909 and *L'acrobate* (*The acrobat*) 1909 were produced in the later part of Rodin's career when his reputation and his work were widely known. Initially, the decision to display a partial figure or a fragment, such as a torso, as a finished work was seen to be vastly different from the classical conventions of nineteenth-century sculpture. Rodin's aim was to invest sculpture with a

Tour schedule

Hervey Bay Regional Gallery
24 May – 30 June 2007

Mount Isa Civic Centre
12 July – 18 August 2007

Dalby Regional Gallery
24 August – 7 October 2007

Gladstone Regional Art Gallery & Museum
12 December 2007 – 23 February 2008

Rockhampton Art Gallery
29 February – 13 April 2008

Bundaberg Arts Centre
16 May – 29 June 2008

Caloundra Regional Art Gallery
9 July – 17 August 2008

Cooloolo Shire Public Gallery, Gympie
21 August – 4 October 2008

Cairns Regional Gallery
11 October – 30 November 2008

Artspace Mackay
5 December 2008 – 1 February 2009

Outback Regional Gallery, Winton
7 February – 27 March 2009

Roma on Bungil Gallery
3 April – 17 May 2009

Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery
22 May – 5 July 2009

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psychological and emotional dimension which had less to do with symbolism than with the desire to express a tangible realism, energy and vitality through the object itself, rather than its narrative.

Rodin's contemporary Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) explored very different themes and subjects. His bronze *Madame Schuffenecker* c.1890 is simplified in form. Details such as the model's hair are reduced to essential shapes while the overall elegance and poise of the model is expressed. The Schuffenecker family became supporters of Gauguin and other artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Emile Bernard and Odilon Redon. Gauguin, best known for his boldly coloured paintings of the people and landscapes of Brittany and Tahiti, exhibited in the impressionist exhibitions from 1879 to 1886. Eventually deciding that painting had lost much of its spiritual and symbolic value, Gauguin looked for renewal in simple rural subjects in Brittany. In 1891, he travelled to Tahiti where he lived until his death in 1903.

Choosing close family and friends as subjects for sculpture was, in fact, a radical departure from the previous history of memorialising great public figures in sculpture. Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) is well known as an impressionist painter, and only in his later years did he begin making sculpture. As rheumatism limited his ability to work, he had assistants mould and shape clay to his instructions. *Portrait of Madame Renoir* c.1916 is one such work, created with the assistance of Richard Guino, who worked with Renoir from 1913 until 1917. The work is one of two made to commemorate his wife Aline Renoir after her death in 1915.

Finally, the works of Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) and Henry Moore (1898–1986) in this exhibition represent the modernist aesthetic of the early twentieth century. American-born Epstein spent most of his working career in England and became widely known for some outstanding



public monuments, including a commission of 18 figures for the facade of the British Medical Association building. Again, Epstein's portrait busts of his daughter Kitty and of the writer George Bernard Shaw address aspects of the artist's own world rather than a mythical past. He used the material in a vigorous and robust manner to evoke the character of his subjects.

With Henry Moore we see the transition to Modernism completed. He developed an approach to sculpture and the human form representing a radical departure with the past while also recalling ancient forms of non-Western art such as those from Mexico, Oceania and Africa. Moore found the abstract treatment of the human figure in these art traditions influenced his own development as a sculptor. *Reclining figure: Prop* 1975 is a maquette for a larger public sculpture. This small work is characteristic of Moore's treatment of space, or void, as equivalent and in harmony with solid mass. It also captures a major theme of his art in drawing parallels between the human form and the landscape. While Moore developed his work in a modern world, his themes of maternity, shelter and harmony are as ancient and as enduring as any myth.

Twenty years after Henry Moore's death, contemporary sculpture is made in a diverse range of materials. Steel, tin, wood, cast concrete, plastics, and an entire range extending to video installations and natural materials like earth are now often used in sculptures. However, bronze remains a popular and much-loved medium for public sculpture — you may see it in almost every town in Australia.

endnote

- 1 The first act of disobedience of Adam and Eve (eating the forbidden fruit), whereby humans lost their primal innocence and entered upon their actual condition of sin and toil.

Left:
Paul Gauguin
France 1848–1903
Madame Schuffenecker
c.1890, cast c.1960
Bronze, at least 20 casts
44 x 32.5 x 18cm
Purchased 1982.
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Henry Moore
England 1898–1986
Reclining figure: Prop 1975
Bronze maquette, prop. ed. 6/9
12.7 x 28 x 15cm
Purchased 1976

Right:
Bertram Mackennal
Australia/England 1863–1931
Truth (detail) 1894,
Bronze
62 x 19.5 x 17.5cm
Purchased 1989
from the estate of Lady Trout with a special allocation from the Queensland Government

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