

# Art Gallery of Ontario houses world's largest Moore collection



The art world is still coming to terms with the death last autumn of Henry Moore, whose sculptures won universal acclaim and whose drawings — especially of the Second World War — are works of consummate artistry.

Canadian art lovers in particular will lament Moore's passing, not only because of the high regard they have for Britain's leading sculptor but also because of his close links with the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto.

Thanks to this association, the Gallery now boasts the most extensive collection of the artist's work in the world.

There are, in fact, about 900 items in the AGO's Henry Moore Centre, of which the earliest work, the portrait drawing *Head of an Old Man*, dates from 1921. There are 73 drawings in all, many of them donated to the Gallery by Moore himself, including a number of life drawings and sketchbook pages of studies for sculpture from the 1920s and 1930s.

These include the definitive studies for some of the artist's major carvings of this period, such as the *Manchester Mother and Child* (1924-25), the *Leeds Reclining Figure* (1929) and the *Two Forms* (1934) now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

## The sculptures and later works

These important drawings compensate in large measure for the relatively small number of early sculptures by Moore in the Gallery. There are, in fact, only nine pieces from the 1930s and 1940s, the earliest being the beautiful alabaster *Seated Figure* of 1930 acquired by the Gallery in 1976.

However, the later decades of the artist's development are extremely well represented. Altogether, 133 of Moore's sculptures are on display at the Centre, including original plasters, fibreglass casts and bronzes.

Considering that Moore's bronze reclining figure *Festival* recently changed hands for a record

£1 213 793, Ontario clearly has a priceless asset.

Moore's celebrated wartime drawings are represented by six works, and there are three sheets from his *Coalmine Sketchbook*. The graphic collection, in fact, is the most complete public collection outside the archives at Moore's studio in Much Hadham in Hertfordshire. It includes all but two of his published prints, as well as a number — such as *Spanish Prisoner* (1939) — that were never published commercially. Altogether, there are 630 prints at the Centre, as well as 70 photographs.

## Why Toronto was chosen

Toronto is a long way from Much Hadham, and it may seem curious that an important collection like this should have found its way to the shores of Lake Ontario. But there hangs an interesting tale.

It started in the 1960s when Toronto launched an international competition to design a new city hall. The winning architect, Viljo Revell from Finland, was anxious to have a major sculpture by Moore on the plaza in front of the building. A work called *Three Way Piece No 2: (The Archer)* was chosen in consultation with the artist, but because of cutbacks in the building budget the City Council was unable to finance the purchase.

Matters might have rested there had it not been for the initiative of Revell's Canadian associate, John Parkin. Fearing that Toronto was going to miss out, he persuaded the then-Mayor of Toronto to encourage a group of private citizens to raise the money.

The public subscription was successful, and in October 1966 *The Archer* was unveiled to great acclaim. Some time later at a civic reception attended by Moore, it was suggested that the city acquire other of his works; the idea quickly gained support.

A Henry Moore Sculpture Committee was formed, and John Parkin agreed to collaborate with Moore on the design of an AGO extension which would house his work.

## Moore's generosity

During the course of the design and construction of the Henry Moore Centre, Moore paid several trips to Toronto and established a number of firm friendships. One of these was with Alan Wilkinson, who became curator of the centre and a leading authority on Moore's work.

As he prepared for the first exhibition in the Centre in 1974, the artist's enthusiasm for the project was much in evidence, and this continued until his death. In recent years, the Gallery has received grants from the Henry Moore Foundation as well as a large number of his works. For instance, Moore donated and signed a print from each published edition since 1974, and also gave several editions of lithographs for publication by the Gallery.

William Withrow, Director of the AGO, regards Moore's generosity and sustained interest as 'unique in the annals of Canadian art museum history'.

The efforts of a group of Toronto citizens two decades ago have been amply rewarded. And as Henry Moore's reputation goes from strength to strength, the Ontario Gallery looks set to attract an increasing number of contemporary art connoisseurs.

