



*Two Figures (Menhirs)*

c. 1954–1955

Barbara Hepworth

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO  
Department of Learning and Public Engagement  
Division of School Programs  
Crown Family Educator Resource Center



# Barbara Hepworth (English, 1903–1975)

## *Two Figures (Menhirs)*, 1954–1955

Teak and paint

144.8 x 61 x 44.4 cm (57 x 24 x 17.5 in.)

Bequest of Solomon B. Smith, 1986.1278

Barbara Hepworth's *Two Figures (Menhirs)* represents the artist's fusion of geometry and nature. The teak sculpture is composed of two vertical forms that are situated on a platform and punctuated by white-painted circular or oval **concavities**. These upright forms could represent persons, **menhirs**, or simply shapes. Hepworth's sculpture merges two major aspects of twentieth-century sculpture by referring to **abstract** geometry and the **organic** qualities of the figure and nature.

Hepworth, born in 1903 in Yorkshire, England, determined at the age of sixteen that she wanted to be a sculptor. She subsequently won a scholarship to Leeds School of Art in 1919, where she met **Henry Moore**, five years her senior, who was to become her lifelong friend and colleague. Another scholarship sent Hepworth to the prestigious Royal College of Art in London, where she spent three years. It was during this period that Hepworth and Moore made their first attempts at carving in stone. In so doing, they were working against the prevailing method of producing sculpture, namely building up a form through **modeling**. Because the modeled form is constructed by adding clay, this process is called additive, whereas carving is referred to as a subtractive technique. Hepworth had the opportunity to explore the subtractive sculptural process further when she won a scholarship to travel and study in Italy for a year. There she learned the techniques of **direct carving** from a master-sculptor named Ardini.

The artist's first ventures with **direct carving** utilized different kinds of stone. Even when later in life she employed workshop assistants to help with the carving of wood or stone, she did not allow the use of power tools, preferring to work directly on the sculptural material with chisels and hammers. To Hepworth and others of her generation, the notion of "truth to materials" dictated that the sculptor's primary responsibility was to the material itself, rather than to the reality sculpture had traditionally imitated. This philosophy freed artists to create **abstract** sculptures with evocative, open-ended meanings.

*Two Figures (Menhirs)* shows Hepworth's interest in **direct carving** with its white-painted oblong **concavities** that contrast with the natural browns of the polished teak wood, which in turn contrast with the base of lighter wood. Hepworth expresses the **organic** qualities inherent in her materials, the smoothness of the teak amplified here by the curving forms, suggesting a play between the inner and outer components of these figures. These interior **concavities** are of varying shapes and sizes, indicating variation, change, and growth, just as the wood grain conveys similar processes.

By painting the **concavities** white and then piercing them with openings, Hepworth emphasizes the contrast of inner and outer, placing an equal emphasis on both. (Her interest in the relationship between inner and outer had led her to pierce a hole, for expressive purposes, in a stone sculpture in 1931.) She wants the viewer to consider the relationship between inside and outside, and also between various geometric forms—ovals, circles, and a square base. Like other artists who make **abstract** works, Hepworth directs the

observer to pay close attention to how she has manipulated the elements of art—such as form, shape, mass, color, texture, and light—as opposed to simply identifying the subject. The sculptor creates a dynamic relationship between these varied forms, for the carved openings are not centered within the white **concavities**. Instead of predictability, we find rhythmical movement and a whimsical quality at play.

Yet, *Two Figures (Menhirs)* also demonstrates how **abstract** forms also can evoke figure and nature. Hepworth's choice of two closely aligned vertical forms prompts the viewer to regard them in relationship to one another, conscious of their close proximity, but also their difference in height. Her title suggests that they may be two figures, and since she specifies no further, the viewer is encouraged to imagine any sort of personage. She **parenthetically** indicates that the two forms may also represent **menhirs**, the **Neolithic** monuments found in Cornwall, on the west coast of England, where the artist and her husband fled in 1939 to escape the bombings in London during World War II. Many 20th-century artists liked to suggest a connection between their artwork and the primitive, since it indicated a direct approach to the materials and processes of art without superimposing a specific subject. Because it is made of natural, nonindustrial materials carved with hand tools into **organic** shapes, *Two Figures (Menhirs)* has the quality of some beings or things formed from the land and of the land.

## Glossary

**abstract art:** art that does not attempt to depict recognizable scenes, people, or objects, but instead uses color, form, texture, etc. for expressive purposes.

**concavity:** hollowed or curving inward.

**direct carving:** removing unwanted material to form a sculpture.

**menhir:** a standing stone usually of prehistoric origin. The term comes from the Celtic words for stone (*men*) and long (*hir*).

**modeling:** working a pliable material like clay or wax into a three-dimensional form.

**Moore, Henry** (1898–1986): prominent twentieth-century British sculptor and Hepworth's lifelong friend who, like Hepworth, advocated **direct carving** and expressed natural forms with stone, bronze, or wood. A bronze cast of his *UNESCO Reclining Figure* (1957) is in the Art Institute collection.

**Neolithic:** relating to a period of the Stone Age dating from approximately 6500–2300 BC.

**organic:** relating to a living plant or animal.

# Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

## ELEMENTARY LEVEL

### Language Arts

Through the title of the work, the artist indicates that these two vertical forms may represent figures. Tell or write a first-person account from the viewpoint of one of the figures. Have the figure give its name, describe its appearance and that of its companion, and relate the story of how they came to be together.

### Science

As a class, discuss the physical properties of this sculpture. Describe its size, shape, color, texture, and physical state (i.e., hard or soft). Focusing on the shapes, trace them, including the “holes,” and cut them out. Students can explore shapes further by categorizing the pieces into circles and ovals. Using the cut-out shapes, have students rearrange them creating new “figures.”

### Social Science

In both title and form, *Two Figures (Menhirs)* shows the influence of the prehistoric monoliths in Cornwall, England. Make a list of ten prehistoric monuments in the world (include at least one on each continent). Trace a world map and locate these sites on the map. Draw a small illustration of each site in its proper geographical location.

You may want to include the following sites: Stonehenge (England), Lascaux Cave Paintings (France), Teotihuacan (Mexico), Machu Picchu (Peru).

### Math

Count the number of shapes you see in this sculpture. How would you describe each shape? Do the overall shapes of these figures remind you of any living creatures? How so?

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

### Language Arts

Write about the sculpture *Two Figures (Menhirs)* from the perspective of newspaper journalists reporting the story of the discovery of this work. In what location might the figures be found? In what circumstances, and by whom? How might people respond to the discovery?

### Math

Given that Figure A (see drawing on previous page) is 54.5 inches high (including the base) and Figure B is 49 inches high (including the base), what is the percentage of B to A?

If Figure A is 54.5 inches high and Shape C is 13 inches high, what is the percentage in height of shape C to figure A? Repeat this for Shapes D & E, given that their heights are 8 inches and 15.5 inches respectively.

### Science

Discuss different kinds of woods and their grains. Bring in scraps of wood such as teak, pine, maple, etc. from the local lumber yard. Learn to tell the difference among wood grains by sketching, or make rubbings of the grains and discuss the differences and similarities. (If visiting the Art Institute, look for these types of wood in sculpture and decorative arts found in the museum's permanent collection.)

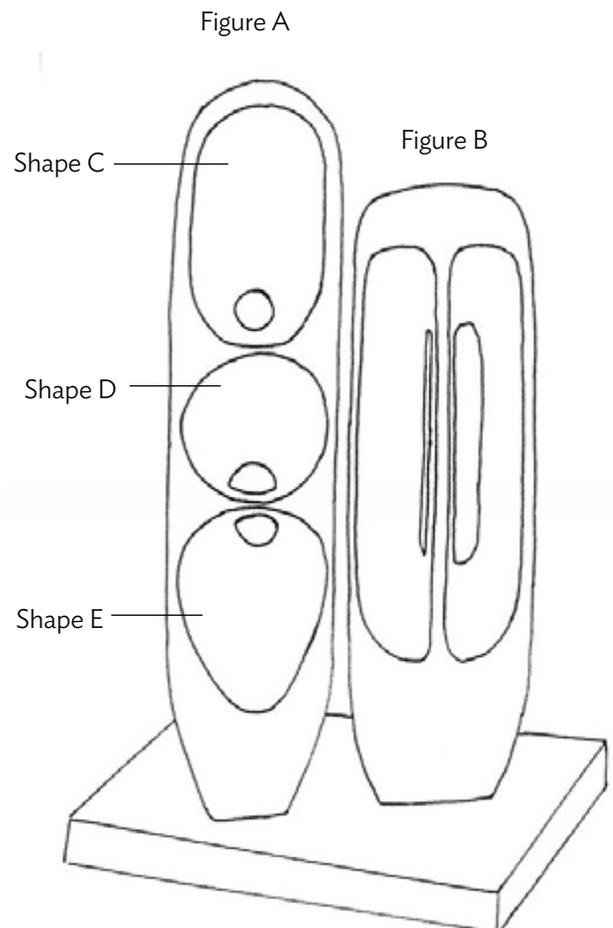
Students can further explore the properties of wood by distinguishing between wood changed by natural and man-made processes. Artists change the appearance of wood by carving, chipping, sanding, and painting it. Bring in hand tools such as chisels, planes, and sand paper and have students alter the pieces of wood.

Collect pieces of wood that have been changed by natural processes: driftwood, burned wood, broken branches, and petrified wood. As a class, compare and contrast this wood to the pieces that have been changed by the hand tools in the exercise above. What might be some advantages or disadvantages to manipulating wood by natural versus manmade processes?

### Social Science

Compare and contrast the materials used by prehistoric peoples with the materials chosen by Hepworth. Where are these materials commonly found? How would each gain access to these materials? What tools were used to carve or **model** each of these pieces? How do these varying uses of materials and sculpting methods reflect the cultures from which these works emerged?

Design your own present-day version of *Two Figures (Menhirs)*. What materials would you use? How would you construct the work? Explain your choices.



## HIGH SCHOOL

### Language Arts

Hepworth parenthetically titled her artwork “menhirs.” She doesn’t literally mean that her sculpture is composed of Neolithic monuments, but suggests the symbolic associations of menhirs. Investigate menhirs, the Neolithic stone monuments found in western England and other parts of Europe. Then write a poem about *Two Figures (Menhirs)* that explores an aspect of this symbolic association.

### Math

The size of *Two Figures (Menhirs)*, as shown on this poster, is smaller than the actual sculpture. The size of the image on the poster is 24.5 inches high but the sculpture’s actual height is 54.5 inches (this measurement includes the wooden base of the sculpture). What is the percentage of the poster height to the actual height of the sculpture? Based on this information, create a two-dimensional sketch of the sculpture to scale (1 inch = 1 inch). Measure everything necessary on the poster and convert it to the true size of the sculpture for your sketch.

### Science

In this sculpture, some shapes are made of solid wood and some shapes are voids carved out of the wood. The solid shapes are “positive” space and the voids are called “negative” space. While looking at the poster, have students identify the positive and negative spaces.

Using foamcore or Styrofoam, have students create their own “figures” by cutting into the material to create positive and negative spaces. Experiment with both organic and geometric shapes. Arrange the “figures” on a Styrofoam pedestal and alter their relationship to each other. Discuss the shapes you see at first glance and those you see at a second glance.

Alternative: Create a three-dimensional sculpture by carving into soap or paraffin wax with a knife for the above activity.

Continue investigating the idea of optical illusions by adding color to the above projects. Warm colors (reds, oranges, and yellows) seem to advance toward the eye, while cool colors (blues, greens, and purples) seem to recede.

### Social Science

Hepworth moved her family to the seaside town of St. Ives in Cornwall at the outset of World War II, hoping that the remote location on the southwestern tip of the United Kingdom would be safer than London.

St. Ives has long been a vacation spot and an artists retreat. Inspired by the rocky coastline and crashing waves of the sea, Hepworth’s sculptures still stand in a public garden devoted to her work. Research the history of Cornwall: how has its geographical location affected its historical fortunes as a refuge in the past and the current day?

Barbara Hepworth. *Two Figures (Menhirs)*, 1954–1955.

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