Henry Moore’s ‘Knife edge mirror two piece’, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington

by JOHN-PAUL STONARD

Standing at the entrance to the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, Henry Moore’s Knife edge mirror two piece (1976–78; Fig.43) is one of the artist’s best-known works in North America. It keeps company in this respect with the Lincoln Center Reclining figure (1962–65) in New York and Three forms vertebrae (1978–79) outside the Civic Hall in Dallas, as well as Atom piece (1964–66), commemorating the site of the first nuclear chain reaction in Chicago, now renamed Nuclear energy. The latter is one of the few sculptures to have escaped the fate of Moore’s ‘late-period’ works, defined by Peter Fuller over two decades ago, as having received ‘very little critical evaluation or interpretation’, a state of affairs that holds true today.1 From a European perspective, the concentration of important late works, particularly commissions, in North America has led to a narrow view of this period as dominated by monumental, impersonal public sculptures lacking the vivid historical context of the pre-War carvings and wartime Shelter drawings.2 Yet it was only after 1960 that Moore was to create some of the most intriguing works of his career, developing ideas that had first broached in the 1930s. Powerful, complex abstract forms, experimentation with materials and scale, as well as a new dynamic relationship with architecture, define the work of this period. Moreover, it was primarily in North America that Moore found the atmosphere in which it epitomises Moore’s late period, and what might even be described as his transatlantic rebirth.


1 One writer has recently described the ‘Beaux-Arts monumentality’ of these works, revealing the ‘establishment – rather than the avant-garde nature of his late production’; see C. Pearson: Designing UNESCO. Art, Architecture and International Politics at Mid-Century, Farnham 2010, p.264; and C. Stephens, ed.: exh. cat. Henry Moore, London (Tate) and Toronto (Art Gallery of Ontario) 2010, esp. p.17.


4. See, for example, Beckett and Russell, op. cit. (note 2); A. Wagner: Mother Stone, New Haven and London 2003; and Stephens, op. cit. (note 3).
Pennsylvania façade’ of the East Building. He emphasised the importance of Pennsylvania Avenue as the ‘great symbolic way joining the White House with the Capitol and the Supreme Court’, and added that Pei had custom-designed a pedestal at the end of a long sculpture pool on the north side of the building. A mock-up of a small bronze by Moore had already been tried on the architectural model, as photographs in the Gallery archive demonstrate.

Moore accepted the commission immediately. He was visited by Brown at his home and studio in Perry Green, Much Hadham, that summer but it was not until May the next year (1974) that he travelled to Washington to view the site, still under construction, and also to view the large architectural model of the East Building. It was then that Moore suggested a crucial change to the sitting of the sculpture, moving it north of the building line, essentially sliding Pei’s pedestal out from the terrace. Moore’s rationale was clear: he did not want the sculpture to be subservient to the building, to be mere decoration. He was perhaps more mindful of this condition than the other artists commissioned to make works for the new building, including Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, Anthony Caro, David Smith and James Rosati, all of whom contributed sculptures, Joan Miró and Hans Arp, who were represented by tapestries, and Robert Motherwell, who contributed a large painting. Moore’s aversion to producing ‘architectural sculpture’ can be traced back to his involvement with the constructivist milieu of the 1930s, when collaborations were encouraged, which, as his biographer Roger Berthoud has noted, brought out a ‘competitive feeling which marked his attitude to architects and their products for much of his life’, The origins of this were certainly in Moore’s self-conception as an artist who had inherited the task of forging sculpture as an independent art from those such as Gaudier-Brzeska, Brancusi and Epstein at a time when, as Ezra Pound once put it, most sculptors were ‘engaged wholly in making gas-fittings and ornaments for electric light globes . . .’. As Moore later made clear when working on the Reclining figure for the Lincoln Center, this was not only a matter of retaining a free choice of subject-matter, but also of avoiding sculpture being ‘stuck up against the building in such a way that you can’t see it from all sides’. Such sculpture entered a type of ornamental vassalage that Moore particularly loathed.

Brown was obliged to accept Moore’s wish. Pei redesigned the pedestal as a triangular promontory jutting out from the terrace. Shortly after, Pei sent Moore drawings of the redesigned plinth, now named the ‘Henry Moore Sculpture Platform’ (Fig. 45), reassuring Moore that ‘while the base is still part of the building, the sculpture on the other hand is definitely liberated from it’. Moore’s doubts were assuaged by the triangular pedestal, and in April 1975 he wrote proposing the sculpture Spindle piece (Fig. 46). ‘From my memory of the site and its

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6 J. Carter Brown to Henry Moore, 7th May 1973, NGA: E.B. Art – MOORE Spindle Piece (1972–12/1972) (cited hereafter as NGA1). Informal discussions had begun in 1972, and two of Moore’s dealers attempted to intercede. Kurt Delbanco had written in June 1972 that Moore would consider contributing a ‘new monumental vertical sculpture’; Kurt Delbanco to John Ballard, 28th June 1972, NGA1; David Scott replied that discussions were ‘premature’ and that there were ‘several alternatives we must explore first’; David Scott to Kurt Delbanco, 18th July 1972, NGA1. On 1st March 1973 Harry Brooks of Wildenstein & Co., New York, wrote to Charles Parkhurst, the Assistant Director of NGA, sending photographs of six monumental works ‘which Henry Moore proposes’. These were Totem head (1968); Reclining figure: leg arch (1969); Reclining figure (1969–70); Reclining connected forms (1969); Two forms (1966–69); and Sheep piece (1972). Harry A. Brooks to Charles Parkhurst, 1st March 1973, NGA Curatorial Files: Moore, Henry. 1978.43.1. Knife Edge Mirror Two Piece.

7 The work can be identified as a model based on a Reclining figure by Moore from 1969–70; thanks to Michael Phipps for this information.


9 I.M. Pei & Partners created the working model of the East Building at three-eighths-inch-to-one-foot; since destroyed.

surrounding architecture, I think it needs a strong and powerful sculpture, and something with bulk (rather than spatial or ‘elegant’). He enclosed photographs of the three-foot-high working model (dated 1968–69) of which he was in the process of casting a larger version, ‘nearly eleven feet high to know how it works on a bigger scale’ (Fig.44). A larger version still would be needed for the ‘impressive architectural surroundings’ of the East Building, ‘fifteen or sixteen feet high without its pedestal, which in itself could be three or four feet high, and circular in shape – the extra three feet of height would increase its impact’. He explained to Brown the significance of the ‘points’ motif, which had been explored in a number of previous works, from *Three points* (1939), to *Two piece reclining figure: points* (1969–70). But where the points in these earlier works were directed inwards, Moore explained, ‘here in the spine piece the points move outwards, and in my mind suggest the hub of a wheel’. He extended his pitch with a more literal explanation, making a connection between the forms of the sculpture and the idea of Washington as ‘the hub of the world’. ‘Sometimes people need a literary reason as a start to look more favourably on sculpture’, he added. He extended his pitch with a more literal explanation, making a connection between the forms of the sculpture and the idea of Washington as ‘the hub of the world’. ‘Sometimes people need a literary reason as a start to look more favourably on sculpture’, he added.18

Brown and Pei responded positively to Moore’s proposal, although both echoed Moore’s concern about the scale of the existing version – at eleven feet high, it would probably be too small for the setting. When Brown visited Much Hadham during the summer to view the working model for *Spindle piece* (Fig.47), Moore agreed that a larger model would be necessary, but was concerned that it might become too caught up with the architecture: ‘He felt the one problem to be avoided was that of having architectural elements cut the piece visually in some way. Therefore, he felt the limiting factor was having it so high that as one got near it, the soffit would impinge’. Pei, for his part, thought that the sculpture ‘could not be too big’, and was clearly more interested in a monumental, essentially architectural form, rather than a sculpture that might bear a physical relationship to viewers. Photographs show a plasticine model of *Spindle piece* placed on the ‘Sculpture Platform’ (Fig.46).

In spite of the possibility of altering the scale, there was growing unease about the choice of sculpture.21 In a memorandum of his visit Brown noted that Moore had been ‘willing to concede that [the sculpture] must be correct in scale, material, texture, placement, and general mass and form’. Brown’s concern with *Spindle piece* seems to have touched on all these variables – but he was particularly uncomfortable with the pointed forms. He recorded that in his conversation with Moore he had ‘let drop that the last thing we wanted is to have some newspaper man talk about Pinocchio’.

The eleven-foot-high bronze *Spindle piece* was nevertheless shipped, leaving Southampton on 28th March 1976. Moore himself arrived in Washington a couple of weeks later. He had sent plans for the construction of a circular pedestal, to be placed on the existing ‘Henry Moore Sculpture Platform’, ready to receive *Spindle piece*. The sculpture, however, never arrived. On seeing the building semi-complete, it seems that Moore simply decided

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15 ‘Your vision of a truly monumental work of sculpture in front of our Pennsylvania Avenue façade is an exciting concept. Of course, it is on a grander scale than we had anticipated in making our budgetary provisions for your work, but the all-important thing is the sculpture itself. We’ll have to try to work out the means to fit the goal’; J. Carter Brown to Henry Moore, 12th June 1974, NGA1.
16 J. M. Pei to Henry Moore, 18th June 1974, NGA1.
17 Henry Moore to J. Carter Brown, 10th April 1975, NGA1.
18 Ibid.
20 Similar perhaps to Moore’s walk-through sculpture *The arch* (1965), which Pei had commissioned for the plaza outside his Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, Columbus IN.
21 On Brown’s suggestion that he produce a unique work, Moore restated his views on being independent from the site-specific demands of a commission. Sculpture, he told Brown, ‘should look well in a variety of installations, just as a person reveals different aspects of himself in different situations’; letter cited at note 17 above.
22 Brown, op. cit. (note 19).
against the Pennsylvania Avenue façade, owing to the lack of sunlight it received, and stated instead his wish to place a different work at the main Fourth Street entrance to the East Building. The commissioning process for a work by Dubuffet for this spot had commenced, but the work Dubuffet had suggested, Welcome parade, was, in Brown’s eyes at least, not entirely suitable. Moore’s suggestion therefore presented them with a double solution – to the problem of the Dubuffet commission, and the location of the Moore sculpture. In any case, it was impossible for Brown and Pei not to agree: ‘In front of the maestro you don’t say, “No, you’re not going to have that”’, the curator David Scott later noted.

Moore’s suggestion therefore presented them with a double solution – to the problem of the Dubuffet commission, and the location of the Moore sculpture. In any case, it was impossible for Brown and Pei not to agree: ‘In front of the maestro you don’t say, “No, you’re not going to have that”’, the curator David Scott later noted. Spindle piece bypassed Washington and ended its long journey in Raleigh, where Gordon Hanes had purchased it by pre-arrangement for the North Carolina Museum of Art.

Following his dramatic intervention in Washington, Moore travelled to Dallas to inspect the plaza outside Pei’s Civic Hall, for which the architect wanted to commission another work from the artist. On his return to England, Moore wrote immediately to Pei and Brown sending two colour transparencies of alternative works for the East Building, Three piece vertebrae, which became Pei’s ‘Dallas Piece’, and Knife edge two piece (1962–65), a version of which had by that time been placed outside the Houses of Parliament in London (Fig.48). Brown saw immediately that Knife edge solved the problem not only of the placement but also of shape – given a few adjustments here and there. He wrote immediately to Moore that Knife edge was the right choice, but could be ‘perhaps modified sufficiently to make it a unique piece’, and outlined his vision of a ‘golden form bathed in the level rays of the sun [. . .] what with the scale and prominence of that location, tied to an institution of esthetic purpose, we may be on to something very major’.

Moore’s choice of the sculptures may in fact have been based on a conversation with Pei in Dallas; the architect was later to claim that he had in fact chosen Knife edge two piece on the basis of a strong identity between the sculpture and his building, a coincidence of the ‘knife edge’ motif. ‘I secretly wished we could have the Knife Edge because I thought it was appropriate. But I don’t think even Mr Moore knew that. You see, the buildings were already designed before we choose Moore [sic], so when I went through Moore’s entire catalogue and I saw Knife Edge, I liked the name of it. It somehow seemed to be correct. Maybe Carter knows, but I don’t think [so]. I never confided to anyone about the reason why I chose Knife Edge over the other piece’.

The ‘knife edge’ of Moore’s piece clearly mirrors the ‘knife edge’ of the west façade of Pei’s building, the nineteen-degree angle on the corner of the study building triangle. Yet the motif may also be taken as the basis for the sculptural independence of Knife edge mirror from architecture, a formal idea that Moore had developed throughout his career. David Sylvester traced the ‘knife edge’ motif back to certain carvings in alabaster, ironstone and slate of around 1930 that incorporate very thin sections, and in general to works that were inspired by the thin structures of shells and bones. Developed in his monumental post–War works, however, the motif is cut loose from nature and takes on an independent formal dynamic. Although it is the principal subject of the 1961 Standing figure: knife-edge, the sense of a thin, resilient structure is given with more power in the Lincoln Center Reclining figure (1962–65), where the ‘torso’ part is taken to an extreme thinness at the pivotal part of the ‘waist’. Knife edge two piece shows the motif in an even more dramatic fashion, indicating movement and the action of cutting. Indeed, the subject of the East Building Knife edge mirror is the combination of the ‘knife edge’, and the sliced, or ‘mirror’ face of the larger part. The ‘slice’ may be traced as a cognate motif in Moore’s work, and ultimately derives from Brancusi’s use of a similar format in works such as Torso of a young man (1924; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington), where the slice emphasises the imagined bodily solidity of an otherwise hollow sculpture. In Moore’s case the ‘slice’ combined with the ‘knife edge’ suggests an organic form sprung spontaneously from inorganic matter – an apt metaphor for the sculptural autonomy Moore had always desired.

The ‘mirror’ of the title seems not to have originally referred to the sliced surface, however, but to the fact that the forms of the East Building sculpture were obtained by reversing, or mirroring those of the London Knife edge two piece. The suggestion

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23 Alexander Liberman’s Adam (1970), a large and geometric steel work, was lent by the Storm King Art Center to occupy the platform for the opening of the building. It has since remained largely empty.

24 On 2nd July 1974 Brown had viewed a mock-up of Welcome parade in an abandoned munitions factory in the Bois de Vincennes used by Dubuffet for various projects. Brown had reservations about the expressions of the figures: ‘I commented on the fact that the expressions on some of his people seemed rather anguished than joyful, and he leaned heavily on the fact that his art had a high seriousness, bordering on the tragic. I did try to indicate that part of the fun was the sense of welcome, and that one did not want figures that were forbidding to the visitor’. Brown was also concerned about the longevity of the ‘plastic technologies’ Dubuffet was proposing as the construction material; J. Carter Brown, ‘Memorandum to D.W. Scott’ (dictated while abroad, tapes received and transcribed 5th July 1974); NGA, Records of the Office of the Director J. Carter Brown. Building East – Art – Dubuffet.


26 J. Carter Brown, ‘Memorandum for the File’, 19th April 1976, NGA. Hanes, a member of the Collectors Committee formed by Brown to fund the purchase of contemporary art, had offered to pay for transportation of the sculpture, if it was then made available for purchase by the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh; Gordon Hanes to Henry Moore, 10th November 1975, NGA.

to invert the original came, so it seems, also from Pei. Scale models of both options, using miniature photographs and a maquette on the architectural model, show the differing aspects of the sculpture in reversed and ‘normal’ positions (Figs. 49 and 50). Brown was initially in agreement with David Scott that the ‘unreversed’ position was better, but was soon convinced by Pei’s notion that the ‘placement on the terrace (towards the afternoon light and sun)’ and also the open aspect that the sculpture would present on approach from the north, as if channelling visitors in, made the ‘reversed’ position preferable.

Moore reported to Brown in December 1976 that he had begun the ‘mirror-image’ of Knife edge two piece ‘in the working model size, that is about 2 feet 4 inches long, and one foot eight inches high, – this is the size of the two pieces arranged together (and this is a practical size for me to work from when I come to do the full-size sculpture)’. He used Polystyrene (known in America as Styrofoam) as a modelling material to create the new maquette, a plaster cast of which was made and sent to the Gallery at the beginning of the following year (Fig. 51). Polystyrene, to which Moore had been introduced by a former assistant, Derek Howarth, in the late 1960s, is much quicker and easier to shape than plaster, is significantly lighter and, on a large scale, self-supporting. It is also easy to cut, using either a hot wire or worked into with a wire brush. Moore used it not only for the working model but also for the full-scale ‘original’ from which the final work was cast, thus expediting significantly the process of enlargement, a task he left to his assistants, Michael Muller and Malcolm Woodward, while he travelled to Italy for his annual period of stone carving at Forte dei Marmi. The various changes to the commission meant that Moore was far behind schedule, meaning there would be no time for the traditional method of enlargement, involving a laborious build-up of wood, plaster and scrim. The working model for Knife edge mirror was divided into lateral sections, providing a contour that was used to cut enlarged sections from the Polystyrene.

28 It was bought by the Contemporary Art Society and donated to the City of Westminster.
30 NGA, Oral History Program, interview with I.M. Pei, conducted by A.G. Ritchie, 22nd February 1993, pp. 38–39.
33 Brown wrote a memo to David Scott to say that Moore ‘had agreed to consider reversing KNIFE EDGE, to follow I.M.’s desire’; J. Carter Brown to David Scott, 3rd August 1976, NGA3.
34 David Scott to J. Carter Brown, 9th September 1976; Brown to Scott, memo, 11th October 1976; and Brown to Scott, 13th September 1976, NGA3. Similarly, Moore had left to I.M. Pei the orientation of The arch outside the Cleo Rogers Memorial Library, Colombus.
36 It was for this reason that Moore chose not to use his preferred foundry: Noack of Berlin, but rather the Morris Singer Foundry in Basingstoke, England, who were also casting Three piece vertebrae for Dallas. The choice saved both money and shipping time, and allowed close supervision of the work: ‘The English foundry has much less experience in doing large bronzes and I, and my boys, will need to spend much more time working at the English foundry to help them in producing as highly finished surface as I desire!’. Henry Moore to I.M. Pei, 26th October 1976, Henry Moore Foundation Archive, Much Hadham.
When Brown saw the reversed maquette in the following February (after it had been accepted by the Acquisitions Committee), this was exactly the point he raised, writing to Moore: ‘Our one hope is that in working out the final sculpture, it will bear the articulation of surface that your work so often has, giving the sense of your hand having been involved in the finishing of the final piece, and adding visual interest to the surface, particularly on the back . . .’. Brown had made a similar point after seeing the version of Knife edge two piece outside the Houses of Parliament, writing to Moore that he had admired the ‘surface work showing your hand’, although it was ‘less volumetric’ than he had expected. The surface of the London Knife edge two piece is indeed highly articulated, showing the scrapings and scorings that also characterised the Lincoln Centre reclining figure, made shortly before. By contrast, the surface of Knife edge mirror is entirely smooth and unarticulated, and may be compared in this respect with a number of works from the 1960s, such as Pointed torso and Architectural project, both of 1969. Such works moved away from the markings and articulations that, during the 1950s, may be compared to the ‘suffering surfaces’ of Brutalist sculpture, and that in the 1960s more readily provoked comparisons with natural formations, rocks and landscape features. Moore clearly saw that the ‘visual interest’ of such surface markings would be in conflict with the monumental scale of Knife edge mirror, and would not in any case be visible from the distance necessary to view the work as a whole.

Enlargement, the third transformation of the work (alongside mirroring and smoothing) – has proved perhaps the most controversial. On sending images to Pei of Knife edge and Vertebrae, Moore had suggested that he could ‘choose which transparency to blow up to any size, to experiment with and to try out, as suggested, on the building’. At over twenty-three feet, the final version is on an architectural scale comparable with Vertebrae, designed to be walked through and around. It is one of Moore’s largest sculptures. It was precisely this ‘indiscriminate’ enlargement of models that Barbara Rose had criticised a few years earlier. The ‘pernicious’ notion of scale-as-content was exemplified for Rose by Moore’s Lincoln Center Reclining figure, ‘lounging like a great melancholy behemoth in the plaza of Lincoln Center [. . .] a perfect example of a work executed on an inappropriate scale’. Rose’s comments on the Lincoln Center Reclining figure are, to an extent, justifiable; yet by the time Moore came to make Knife edge mirror, ten years later, the problem of scale was greatly resolved. Rather than attempt to mediate between architecture and the human body, the monumental scale of the figure signifies a ‘return’ to architecture, such that the sculpture is only viewable as a whole from a significant distance, and close to can

which were then assembled to form an approximate full-scale model for finishing (Fig. 53). Where the old method of plaster build-up using a stick and rag armature, used for example on the Lincoln Center Reclining figure, encouraged a textured surface, it was impossible with Polystyrene to achieve the same depth of surface texture, even when plaster was added to the Polystyrene model. Although the Polystyrene full-scale models were in many cases only roughly approximate, and were cast by an outside firm before being returned to Moore’s studio for finishing, in many cases the smooth surface of the cast was left untouched.
only be experienced (or at least was originally intended to be), as a ‘walk-through’ structure (Fig.52).

Questions of scale and bodily experience were central to minimalist definitions of sculpture current in North America as Moore’s works were appearing in museums and public spaces around the continent. Works such as Knife edge may be read in apposition to these new definitions of sculpture, based on phenomenological experience and bodily identification. Robert Morris’s definition of sculpture as existing somewhere between the intimacy of an ornament and the anonymity of a monument, is one of the most frequently cited definitions of the somatic basis of minimalist sculpture, and clearly relates monument, is one of the most frequently cited definitions of the intimacy of an ornament and the anonymity of a monument, is one of the most frequently cited definitions of the somatic basis of minimalist sculpture, and clearly relates to the problems of scale and placement that had defined the commissioning of Knife edge mirror. 43 Intriguingly, it seems that Morris derived this definition from Herbert Read, one of Moore’s firmest supporters, in Read’s Mellon lectures on sculpture given in 1954 in Washington, particularly the first lecture, ‘The Monument and the Amulet’. But where Morris saw sculpture as a negation of the ornament and the monument, Read saw sculpture as having its origins in the two extremes, and thus ‘as a method of creating an object with the independence of the amulet and the effect of the monument’. 44

Read’s definition is an apt summary of the ‘knife edge’ on which Moore’s East Building sculpture itself stands: caught at a mid-point between architectural adornment and sculptural independence (Fig.54). 45

The installation 46 and subsequent life of Knife edge mirror are subjects for further investigation, and would include an account both of the changing views of the sculpture and the controversies surrounding its maintenance and restoration. 47 In fact, as we have seen, these controversies and conflicting interpretations were already formative during its commissioning and fabrication. Over thirty years later this history can be assessed, and a ‘critical evaluation and interpretation’ of Moore’s late works, including their reception in North America, becomes possible.

No more telling account could be cited in this respect than that given by the mecenae of the East Building, Paul Mellon, in an interview conducted just over a decade after the opening. ‘I think my father, if he walked into the East Building today, would be horrified! And he would have thought he was in a madhouse! And I think that’s true of my sister. To a certain extent it’s true of me too. There are certain things, especially the hugeness of things. Because I think of art, and I think probably my father did, and my sister did, and a lot of people do, as things that you want to have about you in a house. So that once things become things that are done purely for the public, great canvases, great huge statues, and so forth […] I suppose what I’m saying is I have nothing against it, and I suppose I have the feeling that these are things that two generations from now are going to decide, and it’s not for me to decide’. 48 ‘Two generations’ later the ‘hugeness of things’ has become less an aesthetic shock than a focus for historic description. For Knife edge, as we have seen, this involves not only the means of enlargement and fabrication, and the critical context of minimalism, but also the new relationship between abstract sculpture and monumental architecture that evolved during the 1960s.