

## FREELAND

I bought a book on 19th and 20th century sculpture when I first became obsessed by modelling and began mucking about with clay on the farm. It was from this book that I learnt that around 1935 there had been an explosion of new thought in sculptural form that somehow survived the war years and then re-emerged in the 50s and 60s. It was the era of Gabo, Arp, Moore and Hepworth. I suppose it would be fair to say that this movement was probably started by my hero Brancusi, when he rebelled against figurative sculpture, gave up his job as Rodin's assistant, and started to work on his own in Paris.

It was an era of pushing holes through rocks and sometimes lacing string across the space to form a crazy-looking musical instrument. I found all these shapes fascinating and they opened my eyes to the sculptural aspect of nature. When I read that Moore got inspiration from the flints that he found in the chalk fields of Hampshire I was not surprised. I had been brought up on a chalk farm and I well remembered the great flints that would be turned up by the plough as their knobs and holes had always intrigued me. It was not until years later when I read that flints were actually fossil sponges that I understood why they look so organic.



*Fossil sponge flints from Moore's studio*

One summer when we were holidaying with Margie's parents, her father took us in his speedboat down to a stony beach near the entrance of Port Philip Bay. We walked the shore line and I found an incredible three-inch high stone pebble. From one side it looked like a 'deer's head' and from the other it looked as though it was 'walking', and it had a hole right through the middle!

It so intrigued me I took the stone home with me to the farm and made myself an Arp sculpture on a three-foot high rabbit-netting armature and covered it in clay, copying the stone as closely as I could. I took a plaster mould from the clay and then poured concrete into it. When the cement had

set I knocked off the plaster and mounted the sculpture on a two-inch pipe and stood it up in the paddock in front of the house.

I thought it looked very Arp-like when it was finished and my one regret is that I didn't take a photograph of it. However, I still have the stone hanging on the wall of my study so all is not lost. Here is the inspiration for my first and last organic sculpture.



*Deer's head*

*Walking*

I suppose there were several things that combined and then pointed me towards symbolism, but I cannot put my finger on how or why I started to think so much about it. I feel that it was probably something that was slowly building up in my mind without my being conscious of it. For instance I remember being fascinated on finding out about Moore's reasoning behind his sculpture, *Knife Edge Mirror*.



*Knife Edge Mirror*

We see this sculpture all the time on BBC TV News as it is always in the background when politicians are being interviewed outside Parliament, and is much more interesting than what they are saying! I first encountered the sculpture in London when I went to see Rodin's *Burgbers of Calais* across the street from it, but I didn't give it my full attention until I read Moore's explanation of the sculpture. The sculpture has two parts, one a blunt Stone Age hammer tool and the other a sharp flint cutting knife blade. The sculpture symbolises the evolution of flint use and the advancement of human culture.

Once I had realised that the Knife Edge is a symbol I presumably reacted subconsciously to how sculpture could be symbolic rather than just representational. It was soon after this that I thought of my Symbolic Sculpture that I call *Adagio*, of which I have already written.

The apparent success of the Symbolic Sculpture exhibition organised by Ron Beaver in Canberra in 1979, and the winning of *The Universe* commission for the Bank of New South Wales in Melbourne, allowed me to have several of my Symbolic maquettes enlarged to what I call, rather grandly, museum-size pieces, which are between three and five feet high. The further commission of the heroic-size *Eternity* led directly to having the nine-foot high *Elation* fabricated in Italy. I was not at all sure what I was going to do with these sculptures once they were delivered to Agecroft, but I was being carried along on the crest of a wave and just forged ahead and, in hindsight, must have been completely mad.

My first effort to sell the Symbolic maquettes in London was to ask Joanna, the manageress of the gallery in Harrods, to show them as she had been so successful with my Figurative sculptures. She refused saying the gallery was not interested in abstract art. I then tried a gallery in Dover Street off Piccadilly. I made a movie film of about 30 maquettes and asked the gallery owner to watch it. Today with computers we can create moving images but in 1980 I had to balance the maquettes on a revolving 33rpm record turntable and film them with a Super 8 movie camera! The gallery was interested and said they would take three maquettes, which sold, but they then lost interest. I tried a gallery in Bruton Street off Berkeley Square and they sold a museum-size *Womb* to Japan. This was semi-encouraging but not earth shattering. The Symbolic Sculptures were going nowhere fast!

I then thought to myself that perhaps I should buy my own gallery! Why not have a gallery in Bond Street and try and sell them myself? There was one major problem to this idea. Who would run the gallery? I certainly didn't want to live in London and spend every day stuck in a gallery.

There was also the minor problem of finance! Sales of the children were good, but not good enough to buy a lease on a gallery.

My mother had died about two years before the gallery idea came into my head, and my share of the inheritance had been her flat in Cadogan Square. We had become so used to having somewhere to stay when we went to London I thought at first we needed to keep the flat. This turned out to be wrong, because one of the main reasons for going to London had been to see my mother. I decided to swap the flat for a lease on a gallery and have more sculptures cast to put in it and hopefully sell.

However, the problem of finding a manager who knew how to run a gallery remained. One day I was in Harrods making a delivery and Joanna announced that it would be the last time she could take any new sculptures as

Harrods was changing hands and her lease had been terminated! Ouch, there went my main outlet! I asked her what she was going to do and when she said look for another job I said, "Why not run a gallery for me?" We talked about my idea over a cup of coffee in the Harrods café and by the time we had finished it she said that she would take the job. Our next problem was to find a gallery to lease near Bond Street, so that became her first assignment.

About a month later Joanna rang me and said that she thought that she had found something suitable and could I come to town and have a look. She told me that it was opposite Brown's Hotel in Albermarle Street, so very near Piccadilly and Bond Street. I was very excited as it couldn't have been in a better area. I will never forget my first visit.

The gallery was magnificent although rather shabby and in desperate need of a lick of paint. Everything else was absolutely perfect for my needs; in fact it could not have been better. The owners wanted to leave immediately, which meant we could move in immediately. The gallery had two floors joined by a beautiful Georgian staircase. Downstairs there was a main room with a show window, a second smaller exhibition room and a storeroom. Upstairs off the wide landing was a wonderful sitting room with three French windows that gave on to a street balcony. On the other side of the landing were a kitchenette and two loos. My idea was that the sitting room would have two sofa beds and one of the loos should be turned into a shower so that we could stay overnight. It would be illegal, but we would only be doing this once a month, so hopefully no one would find out!

During the day Joanna could use the sitting room as her main office while downstairs we could employ a girl to man the exhibition. Having a helper was one of Joanna's conditions to agreeing to run the gallery, which was fair, as working all day on her own would have been very lonely, although of course we hoped there would be hundreds of clients!

Joanna suggested that we have the floor covered with old French terracotta floor tiles and when they were down it made the perfect setting for both the Figurative and the Symbolic Sculptures. She chose a soft grey for the walls and carpets, to match the fabric of the sofa beds I had bought. I don't think there has ever been a more inviting gallery to visit. When it was finished it was a joy to stay in overnight and Margie and I were like a couple of children we were so happy. I know my mother would have loved it.

When I had first conceived of the idea of owning a gallery and financing it by selling the flat, I had decided to name it Freeland, after my mother's maiden name. I think she would have been delighted to have known this, as after all she was the one who had gone to the fortune-teller and been told that her youngest son would be a sculptor! We painted FREELAND GALLERY along the top of the window and I wished she could have seen it.

The next thing was to have an official opening and as my birthday was in a few weeks' time we decided to hold a picnic on that day and ask all our friends. Invitations were printed, sent out and to our delight everyone accepted to come on Friday May Fourth, 1984.

It was one of the most wonderful evenings of our lives and how we would have loved both our parents to have been there to share it with us! The Symbolic Sculptures were in the West End of London! With the polished bronzes on the floor and the tapestries hanging on the walls it looked like a gem casket full of jewels, a sculptor's dream with everything under one roof.



**FREELAND GALLERY**

Request the Pleasure of your Company  
on Friday May Fourth  
at 7 o'clock

**FOR JOHN'S BIRTHDAY  
"PIQUE NIQUE"**

**18 ALBEMARLE STREET  
MAYFAIR**

R.S.V.P. Agecroft, Galhampton, Yeovil, Somerset.



*Freeland Gallery Opening*

Dotted around between the Symbolic Sculptures we placed the bronze children, while upstairs in the sitting room we had all of the maquettes. Margie had brilliantly organised some delicious picnic food and there was a wine bar. What a party! I had to make a little speech about the gallery being named Freeland after my mother and Allan, my friendly accountant, presented me with an envelope of Red Stickers! The money had fast been dwindling so red sales stickers were something we desperately needed to see.

With the opening over, Joanna got down to the business of selling, but it is one thing to have stock and another thing to find clients. She did make some sales, but there were not nearly enough to make ends meet and wages and rates continued to rapidly drain the coffers. The Freeland Gallery was so perfect and looked so beautiful I couldn't bear the thought of it having to close within six months of opening. I had to come up with another idea.

I decided to invent a way that would appeal to my past clients to invest in my gallery, which is how Edition Limitée came into being. Enzo Plazzotta had introduced me to Mario Benbassat in Geneva and he had bought several Symbolic Sculpture maquettes. I made an appointment with him and presented a plan. My idea was that he and his partners would create Edition Limitée and I would sell them the Copyright of my Symbolic Sculptures for \$125,000. The money from the sale would keep the doors of Freeland Gallery open for another two years. Both Freeland Gallery and Edition Limitée would share the profit equally from a sale of any Symbolic Sculpture. Freeland Gallery would own the Copyright of the Figurative sculptures and keep all the profit from their sale and pay Joanna and her assistant's wages.

Mario approved the plan, created Edition Limitée and bought a share. My friend and patron Peg Newman in Seattle bought two shares, as did another one in Bermuda. My brother Pat bought one and the remaining four were sold to other collectors and the Freeland Gallery was once again solvent!

None of this would have been possible if it had not been for my dear friend Anna Coyle. I had met Anna when she worked for Mario and she was involved in the establishment of Edition Limitée. She had left Mario's bank and set up her own business in Geneva and agreed to run Edition Limitée for the Shareholders and her firm to hold the Copyright of my Symbolic Sculptures. Without Anna's aid and guidance over the years I would not have been able to cope with the organisation required. On top of all that she has become a very close and dear friend to Margie and me.

When I first met Anna she had finished her successful show jumping career, but still rode every morning before going into work. She took us for a ride one afternoon through acres of French woods and as we turned for home the heavens opened. I don't think I have ever galloped faster in my life. Margie thought it was the greatest adventure and likened it to being a highwaywoman!

During our time at the gallery we had some superb exhibitions of other artists, including a quite magnificent exhibition of Rodin bronzes, my brother Pat's paintings and lastly an extravaganza of Enzo Plazzotta's work, my way of saluting the memory of my mentor and friend and thanking him for his help.

The Gallery only stayed open for two years, because by then inflation had changed the economic climate of London. We were warned that the rent on the lease was going to be doubled and all our Rates and Services had spiralled. The writing was on the wall and we had to abandon ship so I asked Joanna to look for a buyer, which, thank God, she quickly found. We closed the doors of Freeland Gallery on August 21st 1986.

It was a sad day in some ways, but in others a blessing. During the two years we had been in business I had met three men who would completely change my life for without them the Symbolic Sculptures would have sunk beneath the sea without a murmur. Because of these three men I no longer needed a Gallery. The gamble had succeeded, but in a way that was completely different to the one I had hoped it would. Such is life!



*Anna Coyle and Baby*

Before I go on to tell the story of my three patrons there is one story that I must tell because it concerns the years the Gallery did operate and was the reason that we were semi-successful.

One day a man walked into the gallery and introduced himself to Joanna as Mr Joseph Mensing of 'Mensing Gallery' in Germany. He said he was interested in buying some children bronzes so she showed him around the fifteen or so children sculptures that we had on the floor. When the tour was over he asked her for a price if he took the lot! Joanna rang me and after a hurried consultation she made him an offer and he accepted.

Margie and I went to an exhibition in Germany of the children that he had bought. Next morning he walked me around his gallery car park and said that he would like something big to attract attention. The outcome of this talk



was that over the next two years he bought the heroic *Hammer Thrower*, *Acrobats* and *Pole Vaulter*. A year later he tragically discovered he had cancer and took his own life. He could not have been a nicer or friendlier man.



*Mr Mensing with the Pole Vaulter*

The three men who changed my life by visiting Freeland Gallery were Damon de Laszlo, Professor Ronnie Brown and Robert A Hefner III. Ronnie and Robert just happened to be passing and, as they were early for their appointments, decided to take a look inside. Damon I knew because he had commissioned me to sculpt his children after seeing the *Leapfrog Children* in the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

Damon was the first to come to the Gallery. On the first night Margie and I illegally slept in the sitting room we asked Damon and his wife Sam in for a drink before dinner. They arrived with their beautiful black Labrador and before going upstairs for the promised drink we did a tour of the gallery and I introduced Damon to the Symbolic Sculptures.



I explained to Damon that the polished sculptures had to be cast in Pietrasanta because the Mariani foundry's castings were free of porosity, something that enabled them to get the high-gloss gold finish. On hearing that, Damon suggested that when I finished sculpting their children they should be cast in Pietrasanta and that they should fly down to choose the patination.

When the sculptures were ready, Margie and I drove down to Italy with a car full of new plasters. The day after our arrival we collected Damon and Sam from Pisa Airport and took them to the foundry to see their bronze children. We also took them up into the mountains to visit the marble quarries, although as it was spring and there was a lot of snow we failed to reach the summit of Mont Altissimo and visit Michelangelo's quarry.

Damon and Sam were intrigued by Pietrasanta and the Carrara Mountains and announced that they would like to come again in the summer. So began my wonderful friendship with Damon.



*Lucy, William and Robert de Laszlo*

By the time Tim and Jenny had given us our first grandchild I had given up sculpting children, but of course it was immediately suggested that I should start again! I compromised by suggesting that I should sculpt one of Charlotte's feet in the first week of her life. I did this in clay while Margie held the baby. I had three copies of the foot cast in bronze so we could give one to Tim and Jenny, one to her parents and keep one for ourselves.

Of course I was then committed to do the same for each of the following six grandchildren, but it has been a nice way to end my figurative sculpting days that had started in the Ninety Mile Desert all those years ago.



*Charlotte Sam Lucy Kim William Harry Amber*

Why a foot? For me, of all Evolution marvels on Planet Earth, *Homo sapiens* feet are the greatest, as our whole existence depends on them. At their birth our grandchildren's feet ranged from a feminine 1.75 inches to a male 2.25. Feet are a miracle! Think of the incredible number of messages that travel ever millisecond between them and our brain. Try walking a straight line with your eyes closed and see where you end up after ten paces.

Our journey started with the adaptation of the primates' foot from grasping to walking. It all followed, literally step by step, after the evolution of the foot! So for me, feet are very important and special.

It is amazing to me that still the feet of half the world's present population remain as bare today as the feet of our primate forefathers when they started to walk upright some four million years ago. That is over six billion feet! And yet, men's feet have also walked on the surface of the Moon!

I apologise, I have drifted away from the subject. The point is that I had completely given up figurative sculpting by the time Charlotte arrived and instead become totally engrossed by my Symbolic Sculpture. What enabled me to continue along this path was my fortunate meeting with Damon de Laszlo and Robert Hefner III and the next part of the Robinson story is bound up with these two men. However, before getting into that adventure I have to tell you about the Third Man, Professor Ronnie Brown.

In 1984 Ronnie was the Head of the School of Mathematics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His speciality was Topology. I had no idea what Topology was and to enlighten those like myself, I will quote from the cover of a book he has written that explains all and hopefully you can make more sense of it than I can!

*This geometric treatment of general topology up to the level of identification spaces, finite cell complexes, with material on function spaces, covers also a range of topics known to specialists, such as the construction of homotopy equivalences.*

Ronnie was on his way to the Royal Institution in Albemarle Street to give a lecture to an august body of scientists. As Freeland Gallery was only two doors away from the Institution and he was early, he decided to pop in and look at the bronze children he had seen in the window. Once inside he saw the Symbolic Sculptures. That chance moment twenty years ago was the beginning of our friendship. Ronnie Brown has since written quite extensively about my Symbolic Sculpture in various scientific journals and I think the best way to tell our joint story is to quote from these articles, but first of all I want to write about my great friend Robert A Hefner III.