Man of Steel

Charles Saumarez Smith considers the influence of Sir Anthony Caro during the golden age of British sculpture

Anthony Caro – or Tony as he was always known – was, like many of his generation, a reluctant Royal Academician. He came to the institution late and never wholly embraced it.

It is not generally remembered that Caro trained as a sculptor, against the wishes of his father, at the Royal Academy Schools, the small-scale, somewhat elite art school, that still exists underneath the great exhibition galleries and which retains its Victorian drawing studio. He had read Engineering as an undergraduate at Christ's College, Cambridge, and then served in the Fleet Air Arm at the tail end of the Second World War.

Enrolling at the Academy on 10 December 1947, Caro was the only sculptor in his year. He met his wife, Sheila Girling, there after accidentally taking her place in the drawing studio and inviting her to lunch in recompense. His training under F.E. McWilliam and Maurice Lambert (described as 'The Master of Sculpture'), both at the Royal Academy Schools and at Regent Street Polytechnic, would have been highly traditional. The curriculum required students to copy works of Greek, Etruscan, Romanesque and Gothic sculpture and to learn to draw, morning and afternoon. A report at the time described how, "The new students who have come as probationers since the war are more satisfactory than those who were there before the war. The former are in a more teachable frame of mind, and more willing to put their faith in their instructions. The older ones are just as enthusiastic, but to have had their studies interrupted by six years of war is, to put it mildly, unsettling, and in some cases it has blunted the edges and left them aggressive, over-confident on their own judgment and unaware of their own inexperience."

Reading this, one assumes that Caro was among the more co-operative of the students, eager to learn and to benefit from the teaching, however much he may have later resisted its conservatism. Certainly he remained fond of the RA Schools and, at the time, exhibited in the Summer Exhibition.

Caro later inherited, or certainly shared, the prejudices of his great mentor, Henry Moore, with whom he went to work at Much Hadham after marrying and leaving the Academy in 1951. Moore was said always to cross the street whenever he walked down Piccadilly in order to avoid contamination from an institution which he regarded as the death of art.

By the later 1950s, Caro had become very much a modernist, greatly influenced by the American critic Clement Greenberg, who had
first come to visit him in his studio in 1959. Greenberg was a powerful and dogmatic force, who had argued the case for abstract expressionism in a series of influential essays, and he encouraged Caro to change direction.

The second key influence on Caro in the late 1950s was his visit to the United States on a Ford Foundation and English Speaking Union grant in 1959. He traveled the United States from east to west, meeting all the leading artists of the time, including David Smith, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Diebenkorn and Ed Keinholz. Afterwards, his work changed radically, became abstract, and he started using steel instead of bronze. In an interview with Lawrence Alloway in 1961, he said, "America made me see that there are no barriers and no regulations." In 1963, Bryan Robertson held an exhibition of his work at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, which was the high point of a revolution in his art and consolidated his international reputation.

The third key influence that led Caro to change was the teaching he had received from Henry Moore himself. As often happens in a master-pupil relationship, the pupil ends up doing precisely the opposite of what the master wants. Moore was about large-scale form; Caro was spiky and angular. Moore used marble and stone; Caro used steel. Moore was about physical sensuality in the treatment of the human body; Caro was about grammar and geometry in the treatment of abstract form. Moore described sculpture as "like a fist"; Caro thought of it as Cubism.

As it happened, Caro's revolution was unexpectedly short-lived. The next generation of sculptors, including artists such as Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Bill Woodrow and Gilbert and George – all of whom are always said to have been influenced and taught by him – apparently already regarded him not as a revolutionary, but as a fully paid-up member of the international art establishment; a pure formalist at a time when the next generation was going pop conceptual. Just as Caro had reacted against the teaching of Moore, he was someone to react against, while assimilating some of his influence.

But then new artists grow old. Artists who were once radical can change their views. In 1972 Bryan Kneale, who had been elected an ARA in 1970, was asked by Tom Monnington to organize an exhibition of British sculpture, in which he painted all the galleries white, blocked out all the doorways, and included the work of his generation of sculptors, including Caro. By 1976, when Caro produced Insight, to be offered at Bonhams New York, his work was beginning to look relatively traditional alongside the work of his younger contemporaries, who regarded him as a formalist, making works out of rusted sheet steel in a way which had become an expressive vocabulary.

Later in his career, there is no doubt that Caro took a long view of the practice of art and became increasingly interested in the relationship between his own work and those of the Old Masters. In 1986, he started making work that was inspired by Greek pediment sculpture. In 1998 he had an exhibition at the National Gallery. In 1999, he started to work on a series of sculptures inspired by Duccio's The Annunciation (1311). The once-revolutionary sculptor was beginning to view his work within the long context of history.

In 1990, Roger de Gray, then President of the RA, had asked Caro if he was willing to be considered for membership. Caro replied that he felt "too uneasy about the quality of painting and sculpture in the Summer Show to join". However, he finally succumbed to an invitation to become a Senior Member in 2004, the year of his 80th birthday, when he was invited by his old friend and former colleague, Phillip King, who was President. Caro then became, at least during my time as Secretary, an enthusiastic member, usually attending the annual Varnishing Day lunch and always the Annual Dinner, speaking at meetings of the General Assembly, and occasionally expressing views as to the work of the next generation of artists which were unexpectedly conservative.

It was very much Caro's idea that the Royal Academy should hold an exhibition of Modern British Sculpture in the main galleries in 2011, which he hoped would survey the role and international importance of British sculpture during his lifetime, and to which he had made such a major contribution. He wanted it to take up the narrative from where he felt it had been left in 1972.

But the way that art is studied and analyzed by historians and curators is seldom as straightforward as artists wish. Penelope Curtis, the curator of the exhibition, now Director of Tate Britain, gave a whole room to the display of Caro's Early One Morning, an extraordinarily important work of 1962. But Caro would have liked the work of his generation of sculptors, including his own work, to be shown more prominently and he ended up as a critic of the exhibition, rather than its principal advocate.

I lament his recent death. He was always a shrewd commentator on art and a friendly figure to see. I last saw him being wheeled around Frieze Masters in October. He was as youthful, genial and engaged with the practice of art as ever.

Bonahms Magazine, Issue 38, Spring 2014