Sir Anthony Caro: A conservative revolutionary

Charles Saumarez Smith remembers the ground-breaking sculptor who died last week

Sir Anthony Caro with his sculpture 'Laughter and Crying' (2012) Photo: REX FEATURES

I last met **Tony Caro** a week or so ago at the Frieze Masters art fair. He was, as always, gloriously friendly and un-self-important, being wheeled around with his wife, Sheila Girling, an important artist in her own right, in among the booths containing works of antiquity and an installation by Richard Long, one of Caro's former pupils and himself now an Old Master.

I always liked Caro. He was, as his obituaries have pointed out, admirably unstuffy; to meet, one might have mistaken him as a retired engineer, which is what he first trained to be, rather grizzled, normally in a sports jacket and slacks, a product of the time he spent in the United States in the early 1960s, teaching in Bennington College, Vermont and exhibiting in New York.

I first met him in 1979, during a dinner at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he had been an undergraduate and was an Honorary Fellow. He lent across the table and asked me if I knew whatever happened to his first work of sculpture, a bust of the then Master of the College, Charles Raven, which he had done as an undergraduate. I didn't, and haven't been able to find out since.

Although Caro was always regarded, rightly, as a master of the avant-garde, the heir to Henry Moore, the first person to take sculpture off its pedestal and down on to the floor, the British equivalent in sculpture to the American abstract expressionists, and a hero of the early 1960s, he was, to meet, unexpectedly conservative. Indeed, he occasionally expressed unexpectedly conservative views about the younger generation of the artists in meetings at the Royal Academy, a consequence of the nearly invariable tendency for artists, if they live long, to outlive the aesthetic beliefs of their era.

This occasional conservatism was partly generational (Caro was 89 when he died on Wednesday), and partly a product of his upbringing. He was the son of a stockbroker in Surrey, who wanted him to go into the family stockbroking business. Educated at Charterhouse, where his housemaster introduced him to Charles Wheeler, the British sculptor who later became president of the Royal Academy, Caro was at Cambridge during the Second World War. He was secretary of the squash club.

At its tail-end, he served in the Fleet Air Arm and then, against the wishes of his father, enrolled as a student at the Royal Academy Schools on 10 December 1947, the only sculpture student in his year. His training under sculptors like F.E. McWilliam and Maurice Lambert (described as "The Master of Sculpture"), both at the Royal Academy Schools and at Regent Street Polytechnic, was highly traditional; the curriculum still required him 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."

Caro married Sheila Girling in 1949, and together they moved to Much Hadham in Hertfordshire, where Caro worked as an assistant to Henry Moore. He continued to study drawing at the RA, and

during the early 1950s, in Much Hadham and later in Hampstead, worked in clay, plaster and sometimes in bronze as a figurative sculptor.

What, then, led to the revolution in the way he worked and thought in the late 1950s? The first key influence, as Caro often acknowledged, was the American critic Clement Greenberg, who first came 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. He encouraged Caro to change direction.

The second key influence was his visit to the United States on a Ford Foundation and English Speaking Union grant in 1959. He travelled 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 Laurence Alloway, published in 1961, he said that "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, which included artists such as Barry Flanagan, Richard Long, Bill Woodrow (whose exhibition at the Royal Academy opens next week) 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 as someone to react against, while assimilating some of his influence.

Later in his career, there is no doubt that Caro had 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.

Caro's attitude to the Royal Academy of Art was, as one might expect, always ambivalent. He was several times encouraged to be an RA, but always refused until, towards the end of his life, he accepted becoming a so-called Senior Member on 9 March 2004, the year of his 80th birthday. He then made up for lost time, playing quite an active role, encouraging us to put on an exhibition on Modern British Sculpture, which he would have liked to carry on the narrative from a famous RA exhibition of British sculpture organised by Bryan Kneale in 1972. He wanted Penelope Curtis's exhibition, held in 2011, to demonstrate how the work of his generation of sculptors had evolved. In the end, it was a much broader survey of British sculpture, placing Caro's work of the early 1960s in the context of changes in the practice of sculpture through the twentieth century as a whole.

Caro would have liked to be able to shape the way that the history of his career was written, but, sadly, this is seldom possible. He was certainly a figure of extraordinary importance, but now the great revolutionary changes of the early 1960s are themselves a part of the broad brush of history.