



William Turnbull

William Turnbull (1922–2012)

Turnbull was a key figure in post-war British art, known for sculpture and painting that merge the elemental clarity of ancient forms with the innovations of modern abstraction. Born in Dundee, he began as an illustrator and later served as an RAF pilot during the Second World War – experiences that shaped his sensitivity to structure, space and movement. After the war he studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where his singular, independent approach quickly set him apart from his contemporaries. Turnbull's international profile rose sharply with his inclusion in the 1952 Venice Biennale, a seminal exhibition for British sculpture. His career was marked by major institutional recognition, including a Tate Gallery retrospective in 1973, a curated exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in 1995, a large-scale presentation at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2005, and a survey of his sculpture in the Duveen Galleries at Tate Britain in 2006. His centenary was celebrated in 2022 with a significant showcase at No. 9 Cork Street, London. Across bronze, wood, steel, Perspex and fibreglass, Turnbull pursued essential form, balance and a timeless visual language. Influences from prehistoric, non-Western and Asian art brought a sense of calm precision and universality to his work. Today, Turnbull is regarded as one of Britain's most distinctive post-war artists, whose sculpture and painting draw a compelling line between the ancient and the modern.

Short Biography

1922

William Turnbull is born in Dundee, Scotland.

1939-41

Turnbull works in the illustration department of a national periodical company, D.C. Thompson, Dundee, where he also has access to a wide variety of books on art.

1941-46

Turnbull is a pilot in the Royal Air Force, stationed in Canada, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and India.

1946-48

Turnbull studies at the Slade School of Fine Art, London.

1948-50

Turnbull lives in Paris.

1950

Turnbull returns to London permanently, and holds his first solo exhibition at Hanover Gallery in London.

1951

Turnbull exhibits his work in the USA for the first time, in the group exhibition *Abstract Art* at New York's Riverside Museum.

1952

Turnbull begins a decade of teaching at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London. He also exhibits in *Aspects of British Sculpture* in the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

1957

Turnbull meets the sculptor and printmaker Kim Lim. He travels to the USA for the first time.

1960

Turnbull and Lim marry and move to Camden Square, where Turnbull will remain until his death in 2012.

1962

Turnbull's first son, Alex, is born. He travels with Lim to Japan, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

1963

Lim gives birth to a second son, Johnny.

1964-72

Turnbull teaches sculpture at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, London.

1969

Turnbull designs *Basho, the Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*, with lithographs alongside a haiku poetry by the seventeenth-century Japanese writer Matsuo Basho, published in a limited edition by Alastair McAlpine Publishing Ltd.

1970

Turnbull makes a series of drawings to illustrate *The garden of Caresses*, an anonymous Arabian text of around the tenth century A.D., published in a limited edition by Alastair McAlpine Publishing Ltd, London.

1973

A retrospective of Turnbull's work is held at Tate Gallery, London.

1977

Turnbull exhibits in the *Hayward Annual: Current British Art*, where he is on the selection committee with Michael Compton and Howard Hodgkin.

1984

Turnbull exhibits work alongside Kim Lim at the National Museum Art Gallery in Singapore.

1995-96

A second retrospective of Turnbull's work is held at the Serpentine Gallery, London.

1997

Kim Lim passes away in London.

2005

A third retrospective of Turnbull's work is held at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield.

2008

With his two sons, Turnbull establishes Turnbull Studio to showcase his and Lim's work.

2012

Turnbull passes away in London.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1950

Kenneth King, Eduardo Paolozzi, William Turnbull, Hanover Gallery, London

1952

William Turnbull, Hanover Gallery, London

1957

William Turnbull: New Sculpture and Paintings, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

1960

William Turnbull, Molton Gallery, London

1963

Turnbull, Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, New York

William Turnbull, Art Institute, Detroit

1965

Turnbull: Bider 1960-1964, Gallerie Müller, Stuttgart

1966

William Turnbull: Sculpture and Painting, Newport Harbour Pavilion Gallery, Balboa, California

1967

William Turnbull, IX Bienal de São Paulo

1968

William Turnbull, Hayward Gallery, London

1970

William Turnbull, Waddington Galleries, London

1973

William Turnbull: Sculpture and Painting, Tate Gallery, London

1981

William Turnbull, The Scottish Gallery, Edinburgh

1988

William Turnbull, Terry Dintenfass Inc, New York

William Turnbull, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco

1990

Sculpture in the Close: An Exhibition of the Works of William Turnbull, Jesus College, Cambridge

1992

William Turnbull, Galeria Freites, Caracas

William Turnbull, New Sculpture, Galerie Michael Haas, Berlin

William Turnbull, Galerie von Braunbehrens, Munich

1995

William Turnbull: Sculpture and Paintings, Serpentine Gallery, London

2002

William Turnbull: Skulpturen, Galerie Thomas, Munich

William Turnbull, Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York

2005

William Turnbull: Retrospective 1946-1962, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield

2006

William Turnbull, Tate Britain, London

2010

William Turnbull: Beyond Time, Waddington Galleries, London

2012

William Turnbull at Chatsworth, Chatsworth House and Garden, Bakewell

2019

William Turnbull: Head, Mask, Horse, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

2021

William Turnbull: Figures and Natural Forms, Offer Waterman & Co., London

2022

William Turnbull: Centenary Exhibition, No. 9 Cork Street, Offer Waterman, London

2025

William Turnbull, Paintings 1959 – 1962, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, Belgium

2026

William Turnbull, Karma Gallery, New York, USA (Upcoming)

Selected Group Exhibitions

1950

Les mains éblouies, Galerie Maeght, Paris

1950: Aspects of British Art, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

1951

American Abstract Artists 15th Annual Exhibition, Riverside Museum, New York

1952

New Aspects of British Sculpture, XXVI Venice Biennale, British Pavilion, Venice

Young Sculptors, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

1956

This is Tomorrow, Whitechapel Gallery, London

1958

Contemporary British Sculpture: An Open Air Exhibition, Arts Council of Great Britain, London (touring)

New Trends in British Art, New York Art Foundation, Rome

Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh

1962

Modern Sculpture from the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

British Art Today, San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco (touring)

Premio internacional de escultura, Instituto T. di Tella, Buenos Aires

1964

Guggenheim International, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

54-64: Painting and Sculpture of a Decade, Tate Gallery, London

1965

British Sculpture in the Sixties, Tate Gallery, London

Signale, Kunsthalle, Basel

Drawings from the Betty Parsons Collection, New York

Sculpture from the Albert A. List Family Collection, New School Art Center, New York

1966

New Shapes of Colour, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

1968

Documenta 4, Kassel, Germany

Sculpture in the City, Arts Council Gallery, London (touring)

Grabados de Artistas Británicos, Nuevas Tendencias,
XIX Olimpiada Festival Internacional de las Artes, Mexico

1976

The Human Clay, Hayward Gallery, London

1977

British Painting: 1952-77, Royal Academy of Arts, London

1981

British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century: Part 2: Symbol and Imagination 1951-1980, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

1984

Kim Lim and William Turnbull, National Museum Art Gallery, Singapore

1986

Forty Years of Modern Art, 1945-1985, Tate Gallery, London

British Sculpture 1950-1965, New Art Centre, London

1987

British Art in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Movement, Royal Academy of Arts, London, touring to Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

1990

The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (touring)

1992

New Realities, Art in Western Europe 1945-68, Tate Gallery, Liverpool

4 sculpteurs anglais: Armitage, Caro, Chadwick, Turnbull, Artcurial, Paris

1996

Un siècle de sculpture anglaise, Galerie National du Jeu de Paume, Paris

1997

From Blast to Pop: Aspects of Modern British Art, 1915-1965, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

2000

Welded Sculpture of the Twentieth Century, Neuberger Museum of Art, New York

2002

Transition: The London Art Scene in the Fifties, Barbican Art Gallery, London

Blast to Freeze: British Art in the 20th Century, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany

2004

Art and the Sixties: This Was Tomorrow, Tate Britain, London

2008

The Fran and Ray Stark Collection of 20th-Century Sculpture at the J. Paul Getty Museum, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

2012

Modern British Sculpture: Fanning the Flames, Alan Wheatley Art, London

2016

Modernism and Memory: Rhoda Pritzker and the Art of Collecting, Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven

2019

Dialectical Materialism: Aspects of British Sculpture since the 1960s, Karsten Schubert, London

2020

Modern and Contemporary Sculptures, Galerie Thomas, Munich

2023

Phantom Sculpture, Mead Gallery, Warwick Art Centre, Warwick, UK

2025

Human Traces, Axel Vervoordt Gallery, Wijnegem, Belgium

Public Collections

Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York.

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Arts Council Collection, Hayward Gallery, London.

The Berardo Collection – Sintra Museum of Modern Art, Lisbon.

British Council Collection, London.

Contemporary Art Society, London.

David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

Franklin D. Murphy Sculpture Garden, UCLA, Los Angeles.

Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery.

The Government Art Collection, London.

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

Hull University Art Collection, Kingston-upon-Hull.

Hunterian Art Gallery, University of Glasgow.

Jesus College, Cambridge.

Leeds Museums and Galleries.

McManus Gallery, Dundee Museum and Art Gallery.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Tehran.

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, Florida.

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh.

Stanford University, Stanford, California.

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery.

Tate, London.

Tel Aviv Museum of Art: The Riklis Collection of the McCroy Corporation, New York.

University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Alberta, Canada.

University of Liverpool Art Collections.

Selected Publications

Andrew C. Ritchie, *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952).

Isabelle Waldberg, 'Essor de la sculpture anglaise', *Numéro* Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2 (January–March 1953).

Lawrence Alloway, 'The sculpture and painting of William Turnbull', *Art International*/Vol. 5, No. 1 (1 February 1961): 46–52.

- Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Sculpture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964).
- Gene Baro, 'A changed Englishman, William Turnbull', *Art in America* Vol. 54 (March–April 1966): 102–103.
- Frank Whitword, 'Presbyterianischer Zen', *Kunstforum*, October 1973, pp. 205–210.
- Caroline Ngui, 'Sculpture with a presence', *Straits Times*, 19 September 1984.
- Grace Yu, 'Of subtle bronzes and cool stones', *Business Times* (Singapore), 24 September 1984.
- Mona Thomas, 'La sculpture anglaise', *Beaux Arts*, No. 62 (November 1988): 106.
- Sally Bonn, *L'Art en Angleterre 1945–1995* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Françaises, 1996).
- Andrew Causey, *Sculpture Since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Colin Renfrew, *Figuring It Out: The Parallel Visions of Artists and Archaeologists* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).
- Amanda Davidson, *The Sculpture of William Turnbull* (London: Lund Humphries, 2005).
- Jon Wood, 'Introduction to British Sculpture Abroad in the 1960s', *British Art Studies*, no. 3 (Spring 2016).
- Craig Buckley, *Graphic Assembly: Montage, Media, and Experimental Architecture in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- Lachlan Goudie, *The Story of Scottish Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020).
- Margaret Garlake, *Artists Making Landscapes in Post-war Britain* (London: Modern Art Press, 2021).
- Jon Wood (ed), *William Turnbull: International Modern Artist* (London: Lund Humphries, 2022).