

Introduction to the exhibition

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska 17 February – 15 April 2007 Gallery 5

"It is part of the war waste. Among many good artists, among other young men of promise there was this one sculptor already great in achievement at the age of twenty-three, incalculably great in promise and in the hopes of his friends."
Ezra Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier Brzeska*, 1916.

The career of the French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was brief. Like many other artists of his generation, Gaudier was tragically killed in action during World War 1. He was 23. From 1911 to 1914 he lived and worked in England and it was during these three and a half years that he created a substantial and advanced body of work, revealing a rich and imaginative mind.

Although he had no formal art training Gaudier was a keen draughtsman, often spending long sessions drawing from life, out in the streets, parks, zoos and museums of London. Sketches like **Head of Woman in a Hat** were often

executed quickly with free flowing, energetic lines.

Initially Gaudier-Brzeska found inspiration in the sculptures of Rodin and Post-impressionist painting. He soon became aware of the latest European artistic developments, finding fascination in the new modern movements such as Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism.

Works like **HEAD OF A GIRL** demonstrate an interest in turning detail into simplistic shapes. **HEAD OF BRODZKY** and **MALE NUDE STANDING** use simple shading to suggest form and volume by reducing the subject to a few essential planes in drawings that are suggestive of sculpture.

Horace Brodzky (1885-1969), the subject of one of the bust, was an artist and critic, who later wrote of this work: *"The bust, to use his own words, was 'cubic'... he has emphasised the planes and exaggerated the asymmetrical in my head"*. Brodzky's bare-chested,

heroic pose is slightly undermined by the playful addition of inverted nipples, and the drawings of a woman's head and a fleeing naked man scratched into the torso.

Throughout his short career Gaudier's primary focus was on experimenting with form. He didn't get too involved in the many theoretical debates surrounding modern art, preferring to explore, through making his work, a new language of abstraction.

Writing in a letter to the Polish writer Zofia Brzeska (his lover whose name he also adopted) he stated that artists "must not try to express an idea by shapes. Make something, the idea will come afterwards...It is not therefore ideas that are the generators of the form, but the form that is the generator of the idea."

In 1914 Gaudier-Brzeska became heavily involved in the Vorticist movement of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. Although it grew out of Cubism, Vorticism is best understood as a British offshoot of Futurism. The Vorticists shared the latter's emphasis on movement and abstraction. Lasting less than three years, the movement was a serious attempt to establish a viable

modern style in England that would probably have succeeded but for WW1. The Vorticist group broke up in 1915, its greatest contribution to still-fledgling modern art in Britain having been its brief but loud advocacy of abstraction and Expressionism.

It was during this time spent with Ezra Pound that Gaudier was exposed to Chinese calligraphy and poetry which had a direct influence on his work. Pound became a close friend of the artist and supported him by buying his work. Pound was so devastated by his early death in the trenches that he memorialized him in the poem "Canto XVI".

This guide is intended as an introduction to the exhibition. Please feel free to ask a steward any questions you have.

There is more information in the Reading Room on the Second Floor which is open every day 12.00 - 6.00pm

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