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**Henry Moore - *Elephant Skull***

The artist’s portfolio, and within this I would include the tradition of the livres d’artiste, provides an opportunity for the artist to produce a body of graphic work that can be greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, since the 1960’s it could be argued that the artist’s folio more accurately reflects contemporary practice, a move away from the idea of the singular masterpiece that sits in isolation, towards groups of work around a particular theme or proposition, a view endorsed by Susan Tallman: "It seems to me that people used to be very interested in masterworks, and the whole point of the masterwork is that it is a definitive statement – it stands alone.  Its world is contained within the frame and it doesn’t need anything else.  But certainly from the 60s on, possibly earlier, there’s been much more interest in……the gaps between the things, the idea that nothing is definitive, that everything is permutational or on its way somewhere else".[[1]](#footnote-1)

One can think of numerous examples of portfolios that have become seminal works in their own right; Jasper Johns’s iconic series *0-9* (1963) as an exploration of seriality, Andy Warhol’s variation on the theme of the representation of Marilyn Monroe (1967), Roy Lichtenstein’s graphic homage to Monet in his *Cathedral* series (1969), Alberto Giacometti’s grand series of lithographs, *Paris san fin* (1969), in which the artist escorts the viewer through Paris at night*, Five Tyres Remoulded* where Richard Hamilton lays bear his working process (1971), Christian Boltanski’s *Gynasium Chases* (1991) where the portfolio serves as an act of collective memory or, more recently, Christiane Baumgartner’s visualisation of time and stasis in *1 Sekunde* (2004). These are just a few examples but they demonstrate how the artist’s portfolio can be seen as a condensed embodiment of an artist’s intentions. The portfolio, conceived as a whole, also represents the opportunity for the artist to keep a body of work together in perpetuity and can preserve and determine the order, sequence and context that the work should be viewed. The portfolio is a physical entity, presenting a singular work which begins with the very container, box or presentation case and may include additional items such as title page, colophon or, as in many of the publications of Peter Blum, multiples. In addition, as a composite work, it has the capacity to stand alongside sculptures and paintings and lay claim to sufficient space in the gallery or museum so as to not be overwhelmed.

In essence the portfolio is an exhibition in a box and nowhere is this more apparent than in Henry Moore’s *Elephant Skull* portfolio, published by Gérald Cramer in 1970. The portfolio is a completely self-contained entity, including an essay by the American critic Henry J. Seldis and 28 Etchings. An additional five were printed for the deluxe edition. Each of the etchings is printed on a full sheet of handmade paper, watermarked with Moore’s own design. In addition, each of the individual prints is presented in a folded sheet bearing in typography a title or description by Henry Moore himself. To underline the character of belonging to an inseparable series, a cover, consisting of a large etching printed on cream coloured vellum, unites all plates and the text.

Before considering the prints themselves, I would also suggest that the *Elephant Skull* portfolio in particular offers itself as a time capsule, carrying with it an indication of the deference in which Moore, then at the age of 60 was regarded: "Moore becomes the public sculptor, whose work, through the patronage of the British Council and the Arts council of Great Britain, comes to stand in exhibitions for modern and for British, sculpture."[[2]](#footnote-2) Furthermore, it also provides an insight into the language of art at that time, with Moore the quintessential representation of hard won knowledge gleaned through visual study.

The portfolio takes the narrative structure of a book, and leads the viewer in an immersive journey through the text and images and the folio’s physical qualities of texture and weight to communicate the sense of awe that Moore must have felt in the presence of this monumental elephant skull. He highly treasured this object within his library of forms. This portfolio also serves as a demonstration of Moore’s working method and how he both drew from nature but also looked to it for confirmation. The viewer is taken from the Skull seen as a whole (ill. 1) to close up details, conjuring the image of a mental journey bringing together the micro with the macro landscape. The portfolio offers a deeper reading of Moore’s work than can be gleaned from viewing the prints in isolation. So whilst the individual prints from this series are often shown separately, they are deprived of the much richer multi-layered proposition that is offered when the individual prints are considered as components within this larger singular work. Deborah Wye in the publication *Thinking Print* discusses some of the ways in which artists engage with what she terms multipart projects including "the invitation to take a thematic journey."[[3]](#footnote-3)She also goes on to suggest that the portfolio’s importance, particularly in postmodernist era, lies in the way it serves their interest "in the way our apprehension of art is affected by time and context. Time, of course, is a factor in appreciating the sequential development of series and portfolios, and certainly each individual print affects and is affected by the meaning of the whole group."[[4]](#footnote-4)

Moore’s friends Juliette and Sir John Huxley gave him the elephant skull as a gift, which following cleaning and restoration was installed in his studio at Perry Green in 1968. It was self-evident that Moore felt an immediate and deep connection with both the skull and with elephant itself: "The elephant has this amazing mixture of strength and sensitivity."[[5]](#footnote-5) He would have liked associated these qualities with his own sculptures. But I think this empathy goes further, the qualities of latent power, cultural memory and family ties,’ were also qualities that resonated with Moore both as an artist and moral figure. "Despite their huge bulk elephants have always seemed very gentle creatures to me."[[6]](#footnote-6)

While Picasso took the bull as his alter ego, a symbol of virility and sexual dominance, the associations of passive strength and wisdom associated with the elephant, sit comfortably with Moore’s more sentimental character. It is interesting that the Huxley’s had also given Moore the skull of a rhinoceros which he described as having "a rather repellent, powerful tank-like ferocity"[[7]](#footnote-7), characteristics that he would not have wanted to engage with. Of course, this contrast between the elephant and the rhinoceroses is played out in the popular children’s story of Babar where, in *The Travels of Babar*,[[8]](#footnote-8) the elephants go to war and defeat the militaristic rhinos, as well as in the play Rhinoceros by Eugene Ionesco, which was widely interpreted as a warning against the rise of right wing tendencies.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The *Elephant Skull* represented Moore’s first concerted engagement with etching as a process, lithography had up to then been his preferred medium (ill. 2).[[10]](#footnote-10) But also, and more importantly, it was the first graphic project where Moore worked directly from an external source as opposed to reconfiguring his pre-existing sculptural forms as noted by Pat Gilmour: "Above all, since they were drawn direct on the plate, the creative force lay in the etchings themselves - not in associations with Moore’s other work."[[11]](#footnote-11)

Etching is very distinct from the process of lithography and especially since Moore’s experience with lithography had been predominantly through the indirect transfer-process. This was in turn used as the positive to expose the drawing onto photolithography plates, the approach favoured by Stanley Jones the master printer at Curwen press, where the majority of his lithographs were printed. Working on plastic-film offered great flexibility and the added advantage that Moore could draw directly on the sheets of film with a range of material, without having to overly concern himself with the chemistry of plate and stone lithography or, indeed, that the image might be reversed. Etching by contrast is immediately more physical, beginning with the metal plate itself as an object. The plate would be covered with an acid resistant wax through which the artist inscribes the drawing using an etching needle or any metal implement that can scratch through the wax to expose the metal. The plate is then immersed in acid and the qualities of the lines are determined by how long the plate is left in the acid. A short bite and the line is hardly discernible, a long bite and the line can be deep and black. To proof the image, the wax coating is removed and ink worked into the whole surface before being wiped, leaving the ink only in the etched lines. A sheet of dampened handmade paper is placed directly over the plate and it is then taken through an etching press, much like a mangle, under great pressure, where the ink is transferred from the plate onto the paper. The print is in reverse, a mirror image of the original drawing complete with an embossed plate mark.

Moore had begun to work with the publisher Gérald Cramer in the early 1960’s but it was not until 1966 that he introduced Moore to the master intaglio printer Jacques Frélaut.[[12]](#footnote-12) In 1969 Cramer and Frélaut again came over to England to visit Moore, and set up an etching atelier at Perry Green in the Maquette studio, as Moore began to immerse himself in the possibilities of intaglio printmaking. On the suggestion of Moore’s wife, Irina, it was decided to focus a body of work on an exploration of the elephant skull, which by then had been cleaned and restored. Over a period of 11 days, Moore drew 30 images related to the elephant skull, with Frélaut toing and froing between Perry Green and the Royal College of Art, where, thanks to Alistair Grant, the then professor of printmaking, he could proof the plates and return them to Moore for approval, or further work. Around this time, Cramer met the critic Henry J. Seldis, who was undertaking research for a major exhibition of Moore to be held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The proposal occurred that the *Elephant Skull* etchings being formed into an album to be published by Cramer with Seldis contributing a preface. Moore agreed to make additional images which he worked on with Frélaut in 1970 producing in total 42 plates, from which 29 were selected for the main portfolio, an extra five for the deluxe edition and small prints to be included in the body of the text. In addition, a large etching was printed on vellum to be used as the cover (ill. 3).

The prints that form the main body of the portfolio were presented in a specific order, different from the sequence of their making,[[13]](#footnote-13) and even in some cases, printed upside down. What is clear from the final sequence is that Moore was intent on establishing a "flow and balance of imagery"[[14]](#footnote-14) and imposing a structure over the whole portfolio. Taking the example of ‘William Blake's, invitation "to see the world in a grain of sand"[[15]](#footnote-15) Moore looks to the skull as a portal from which to explore the major themes in his work, mother and child, figure and landscape, the structure of nature, strength and fragility, internal and external forms, interlocking shapes…. This portfolio provides a touchstone for his obsessions. As the critic Michael Glover observed "We see him mining the shape - its surfaces, its curvature, its so suggestive voids – for sculptural ideas."[[16]](#footnote-16) The viewer is taken on an imaginative journey and framing that journey are seven prints picturing the whole skull, which are evenly distributed throughout beginning with Plate I, VII, XI, XIV, XVII, XXII, and ending with Plate XXVIII. Plate I presents the skull face on and gradually the view rotates until with Plate XXVIII we are presented with the reverse (ill. 4). These plates also get progressively darker and the more linear drawing in the early plates becomes denser in the later. In between the full views are details where the viewer is taken in close and the specific identity of the skull gives way to a more ambiguous reading (ill. 5). "Often I would bring the skull so close to me that I could only see a small part of it. This I would draw in much the same way as one would photograph a detailed area of a large landscape."[[17]](#footnote-17)

Moore stresses that the plates were drawn directly from the skull. However he photographed the skull from every angle to explore his three-dimensional and visual qualities. The black and white photographs helped to develop a different idea, turning the bone structure, the various forms and the play of light and shadow into a more abstract direction. According to David Mitchinson, some of the plates were closely worked from these photographs and not directly after the skull.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, as if to counter this, Moore writes "the purpose of getting away from the photographic view point I had to the skull, was to reveal forms contained in it, that most people would simply not be able to see."[[19]](#footnote-19)

Perhaps Moore wanted to conceal his use of photography since it might have undermined the claims made for him as a draughtsman in the grand tradition, and for many at that time, especially his patron, Lord Clarke, working from photographs would have been perceived as unbecoming.

To return to the etchings, the seven prints of the whole skull are drawn with a delicate informal line with a sense of the drawing tool gliding across the surface. It is often overlooked that artists use different materials and tools to create a variety of experiences. Drawing on an etching plate offers the artist a very particular experience since the pressure of the drawn does not determine the strength of the line but, instead, by the length of time the drawing is immersed in the acid. This means that, for example, a fast light drawing can be etched to give the line more substance and authority. Etching also enables the artist to work in stages, proofing the first drawing and then re-working the plate to make corrections or additions. The *Elephant Skull* etchings were worked in this way with many of the images going through 2, 3 or 4 stages before being edited (ill. 6 and 7). What is apparent is that Moore’s changes are principally to develop more depth in the drawing by reworking the tonal areas. The initial drawing remains relatively unaltered. It is clear that he is committed to the image from the outset, and the additions were to enrich rather than to fundamentally alter the image. In addition, etching allows the artist a very wide range of drawing implements and, according to Mitchinson, Moore very much disliked conventional etching tools, "preferring to use defunct dental implements which at each visit to his dentist he managed to scrounge from the staff."[[20]](#footnote-20)

The etchings of the whole skull are restrained and light in tone. Moore is clearly looking at the form of the skull objectively rather than, as one would expect, as a symbol of mortality. This objectivity is reiterated in the titles, given by Moore himself accompanying each etching. For example, Plate I, (made directly in one single state) bears the title *An elephant Skull was recently added to Moore’s Maquette Studio*, while Plate VII’s title offers a similar detachment *Skull side view, eye socket and tusk holes*. Throughout the portfolio, the titles act to provide distance, giving a sense of instruction and knowledge being passed down, as well as a verbalisation of the otherwise visual approach. Likewise, in Seldis’s preface, where Moore’s words are presented as given, not questioned or interrogated. It provides a fascinating insight into Moore’s position as one of the few contemporary British artists that had achieved international stature and unlike for example Francis Bacon, was feted as a trusted and reliable figure of the establishment.

Placed in-between these plates, are the remaining etchings in which Moore moves in close, framing details in turn and through this proposing journeys with associations, memories and a sense of discovery. The first of these details, entitled *Holes, caves and column*, immediately sets the tone as the presence of the skull dissolves and becomes subordinate to the fragment. The print hovers between an objective rendering of form and the desire to engage imaginatively with the forms which metamorphose into landscape forms and beyond. There is a very clear reference in plate VI (ill. 5), to Moore’s own sculpture of the *The Warrior* (1952).[[21]](#footnote-21) This image had in fact originated as a larger plate, which was cut in half and rotated clockwise, with the remaining half forming plate X (ill. 8 and 9). So whilst the portfolio suggests a straightforward interpretation of the skull, the actuality was much more complex and intuitive. Curiously, the titles belie the prints evolution, VI titled simply *Vertical and horizontal forms* while X is pragmatically entitled *Bones have marvellous strength and hard tenseness of form.*

It is a testament both to Moore and the consummate skill of the printer Jacques Frélaut that the line in these etchings is so alive and clear. In all the prints the areas of cross-hatching retain their clarity and the lines never merge into a flat blackness. When examined closely there is a great variety, with some dominant lines dancing across the forms, giving a sense of a record of the artist’s hand in motion. Of course, Frélaut had worked with many of the great modern artists, including Matisse, Mirò, Dali, Hartung, Soulages and Picasso. Moore was quick to acknowledge the importance of Rembrandt's etchings, having seen an exhibition of his prints at the British Museum at the time he was working on the *Elephant Skull*, but in feel, the use of line and undrawn areas owes much more to Picasso, in particular to the Vollard Suite.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The *Elephant Skull* etchings also demonstrate a range of distinct drawing styles; the linear, quite freely drawn images of the whole skull, the deeply worked tonal drawing as in Plate IV with its deep recess, a form of linear mapping where the eye is taken on numerous journeys across the form leaving a trace reminiscent of contour lines on an ordnance survey map, and finally and in some ways the most perplexing, simple line etchings where the form is divided up into interlocking shapes as in the very beautiful and delicate plate XV (aptly titles *Here the etching needle hardly touched the plate*), or in the pair that make for plate XIII. These give a sense of forms constructed out of blocks of stone, the lightness of the drawing and the whiteness of the overall image suggestive of ancient classical ruins. Prints drawn in this style were those used within the text by Seldis, acting as a perfect complement to the letterpress Caslon type and enabling the text and images to coexist without either dominating. The frontispiece for the text is a small horizontal etching, also drawn in this style which seems to refer back to Moore’s *Time Life Frieze* of 1952 (ill. 10 and 11).

In the prints exploring the details, a wide range of associations are created, some explicitly through the titles *Doric Column and underground dungeons* or *Head of a Cyclops,* but also in those plates that lead directly back to his key sculptural themes, such as the figure in landscape, mother and child and the shelter drawings.[[23]](#footnote-23) In Plate XXI, the etching tantalisingly suggests a hand pushing out from below blankets as in a number of his shelter drawings, made twenty years previously. Moore shows great restraint in not making the connection more explicit by simply titling it *I used a hairlike fineness of line to suggest space and mystery*.

As an addition and to complete the portfolio, a further five prints were selected for the deluxe edition. Two of them contrast to all the other etchings. Plate A uses aquatint to differentiate the form from the background (ill. 12), while all the other prints are simply line etchings. And Plate E (ill. 13), the final print which returns to Moore’s sculpture as subject matter with four views of *Two Piece Points Skull* 1969. This suggests that the research in terms of drawing had been completed and this is material to be used for new sculpture. Moore now had a fully functioning etching studio and proofing press at Perry Green and further projects evolved, many with Cramer, most notably *the Sheep Portfolio* 1975. This offers a striking contrast to *The Elephant Skull* portfolio. In this instance, Moore drew directly from the sheep outside his studio window and lyrically observed their life cycle within the landscape, touching most particularly on his theme of mother and child.

The *Elephant Skull* portfolio remains Moore’s finest graphic project ever. Perhaps it was because etching was so new to him and offered a different way to engage with drawing, perhaps because it was a project on a scale he had never previously attempted, perhaps it was due to the experience of working so openly and directly with both printer and publisher. Or perhaps it was because the subject itself, this huge skull, that dominated his collection of objects, demanded a response that enabled him to excel himself. It is probably a combination of all these factors that places the *Elephant Skull* portfolio at the pinnacle of Moore’s graphic work and through this offers a unique insight into "a better understanding of this great artist".[[24]](#footnote-24)

1. Tallman 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Beckett/Russel 2003, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wye 1996, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wye 1996, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quotation by Moore in Henry J. Seldis preface to the *Elephant Skull* portfolio. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Le Voyage de Babar* (1932) by Jean de Brunhoff, the second story in the series of Babar. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Rhinoceros* play by Eugene Ionesco written in 1959 and was featured in Martin Esslin’s book *The Theatre of the Absurd* first published in 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Between 1966 and 1969 Moore had made a few etchings prior to beginning the *Elephant Skull* portfolio including 4 prints as a wine label for Château Mouton Rothschild. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gilmour 1975, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jacques Frélaut had joined the printing workshop Imprimerie Lacourière in Paris just before the outbreak of the second world war and after Lacourière’s retirement in 1970 took over under the new name Lacourière et Frélaut which continued to operate until 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For details relating to the ordering of the prints, see Mitchinson 2010, p.118. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *To see a World in a Grain of Sand*

    *And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,*

    *Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand*

    *And Eternity in an hour*

    William Blake, Auguries of Innocence [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Michael Glover, *The Independent*, 25th Feb 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mitchinson 2010, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Quotation by Moore in Henry J. Seldis preface to the *Elephant Skull* portfolio. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mitchinson 2014, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. "The idea for ‘The Warrior’ came to me at the end of 1952 or very early in 1953. It was evolved from a pebble I found on the seashore in the summer of 1952, and which reminded me of the stump of a leg, amputated at the hip. Just as Leonardo says somewhere in his notebooks that a painter can find a battle scene in the lichen marks on a wall, so this gave me the start of ‘The Warrior’ idea." *-* Henry Moore in a letter dated 15 January 1955; quoted in James 1966, p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See as the last major overview of this series the publication by Coppel 2012. Incidentally the series was printed at Imprimerie Lacourière in the 1930’s before Frélaut joined the workshop. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For the shelter drawings see lately: Andrews 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Henry J. Seldis preface to the *Elephant Skull* portfolio. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)