

Art & Exhibitions

Barbara Hepworth's Previously Unseen Stringed Sculptures Make Their U.K. Debut

The exhibition is the first to delve into Hepworth's use of string throughout her practice.



Barbara Hepworth in her Trewyn Studio in St. Ives, 1958. Photo: Michel Ramon, courtesy Bowness.

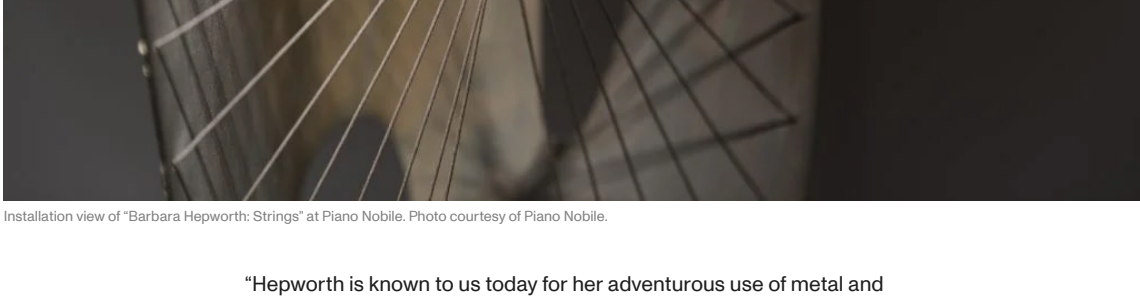
by Min Chen • February 11, 2025 • [Share This Article](#)

Strings first showed up in Barbara Hepworth's practice in 1939—and remained threaded throughout her practice. To the British sculptor, they served her perceptual aims, allowing dramatic views of her carvings from every angle, while representing her connection to nature. Strings, she once noted, were "the tension I felt between myself and the sea, the wind, or the hills."

Hepworth's imaginative use of string is now getting the spotlight in a new show at London's Piano Nobile gallery—the first exhibition to delve into this aspect of her oeuvre. "[Barbara Hepworth: Strings](#)" explores how the artist has woven the material into her famed sculptures, paintings, and drawings, including objects going on view in the U.K. for the very first time.

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Installation view of "Barbara Hepworth: Strings" at Piano Nobile. Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

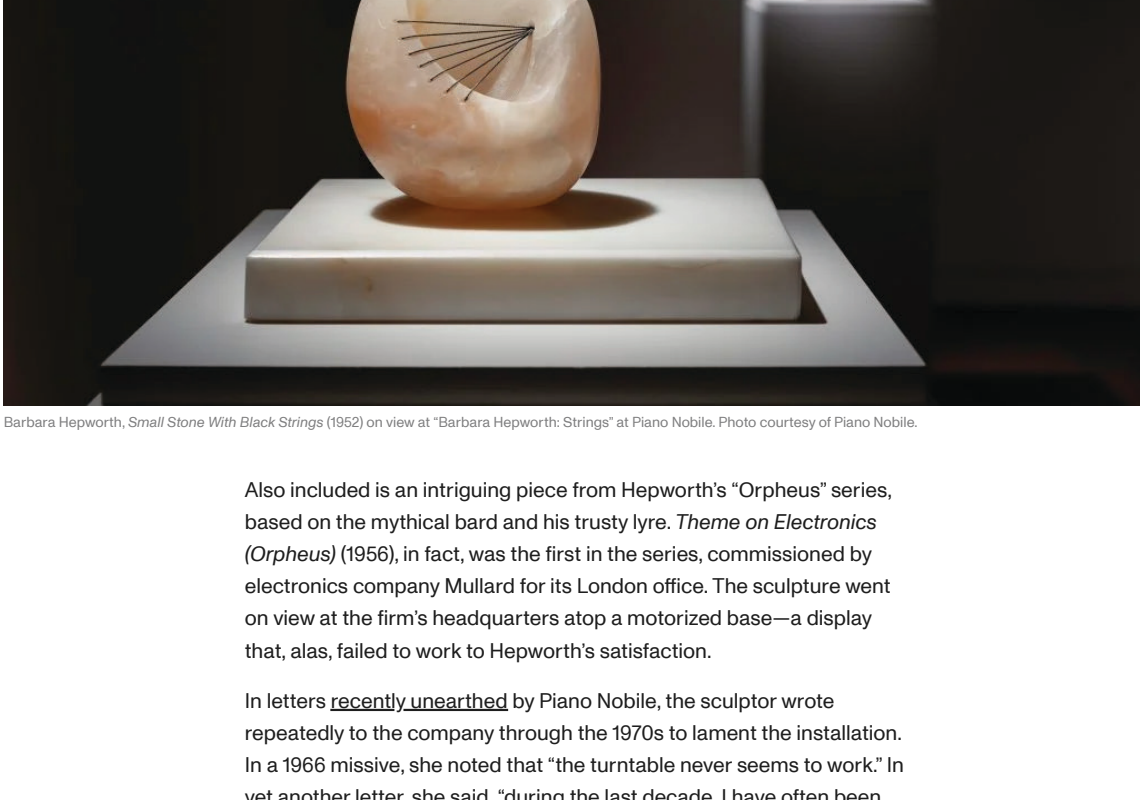
"Hepworth is known to us today for her adventurous use of metal and rock to break down the boundaries between space and mass, giving the same value to both," said curator Michael Regan. "Equally, as this exhibition will show, she used strings to create in her sculptures the tension between light and darkness, presence and absence, solidity and weightlessness."

The show arrives as Hepworth's sculptures continue to command the art market. Her auction record is \$11.5 million, according to the Artnet Price Database, achieved by her 1970 work *The Family of Man: Ancestor II* at Christie's in 2023. The blockbuster [sale of Paul Allen's collection](#) at the same auction house in 2022 saw *Elegy III* (1966) fetch \$8.6 million, her second highest auction result; more recently, Sotheby's sold *Sea Form (Atlantic)* (1964) for \$5 million in June 2024.



Barbara Hepworth, Curved form (Wave II) (1944, cast 1959). Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

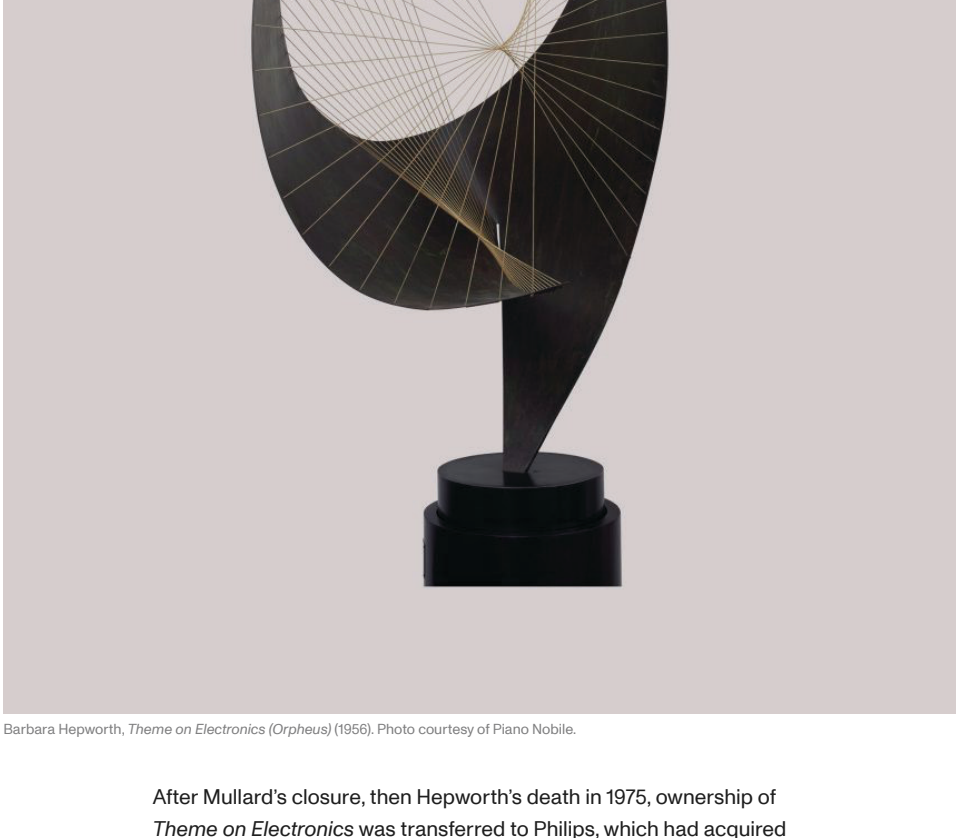
Born in 1903 in West Yorkshire, Hepworth moved just before World War II to St. Ives in Cornwall, where she found a studio that allowed her to "work in open air and space." It's here that she would commence her stringed works, inspired by the region's natural landscapes. The exhibition features objects including *Small Stone With Black Strings* (1952), a dainty work that represents Hepworth's only stringed stone sculpture, and *Curved Form (Wave II)* (1959), in which the strings enclose an organic form.



Barbara Hepworth, Small Stone With Black Strings (1952) on view at "Barbara Hepworth: Strings" at Piano Nobile. Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

Also included is an intriguing piece from Hepworth's "Orpheus" series, based on the mythical bard and his trusty lyre. *Theme on Electronics (Orpheus)* (1956), in fact, was the first in the series, commissioned by electronics company Mullard for its London office. The sculpture went on view at the firm's headquarters atop a motorized base—a display that, alas, failed to work to Hepworth's satisfaction.

In letters recently unearthed by Piano Nobile, the sculptor wrote repeatedly to the company through the 1970s to lament the installation. In a 1966 missive, she noted that "the turntable never seems to work." In yet another letter, she said, "during the last decade, I have often been very dismayed to find that either the work was not moving around, or, if it did, it jerked."



Barbara Hepworth, Theme on Electronics (Orpheus) (1956). Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

After Mullard's closure, then Hepworth's death in 1975, ownership of *Theme on Electronics* was transferred to Philips, which had acquired Mullard. The work was deemed lost until the 2000s when it was snapped up by a private collector, who has loaned it out for its first exhibition.

Another sculpture making its U.K. debut is *Pierced Hemisphere (Telstar)* (1963). Drawing on the silhouette of the commercial satellite Telstar, it features strings emanating from one of Hepworth's signature pierced forms.



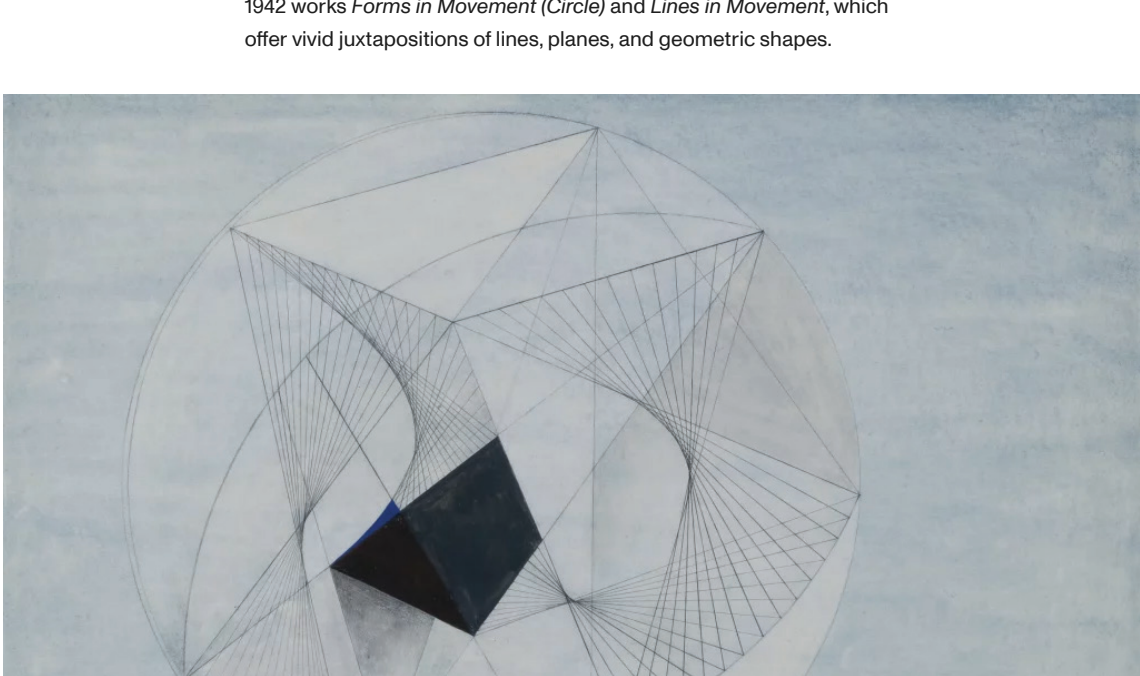
Barbara Hepworth, Pierced hemisphere (Telstar) (1963). Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

Elsewhere in the show is a maquette for perhaps Hepworth's best known stringed work, *Winged Figure* (1963). For decades, the 19-foot-tall sculpture has hung on the side of the John Lewis department store in London, 1963. Photo: Roger Jackson / Central Press / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.



Barbara Hepworth's Winged Figure on display the day after its installation on the side of the John Lewis department store in London, 1963. Photo: Roger Jackson / Central Press / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

Strings and lines also found their way into Hepworth's drawings, some of them sketches and studies for her eventual sculptures. The exhibition surfaces *Oval Form With Strings* (1960), an energetic swirl in which a network of lines appears to be consumed by an oval opening, as well as 1942 works *Forms in Movement (Circle)* and *Lines in Movement*, which offer vivid juxtapositions of lines, planes, and geometric shapes.

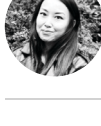


Barbara Hepworth, Forms in Movement (Circle) (1942). Photo courtesy of Piano Nobile.

"When I start drawing and painting abstract forms, I am really exploring new forms, hollows, and tensions which will lead me where I need to go," Hepworth once reflected. Each element injects new dimensions into her work, she added: curves and planes offer "pure rhythm," colors a "mood of place and time," while strings "can twist one from the front to the back."

"Out of all these components, I search for new associations of form and hollow and space," she said, "and a new tautness and awareness for the growth of new sculptures."

"Barbara Hepworth: Strings" is on view at Piano Nobile, 96 and 129 Portland Road, London, the U.K., through May 2.



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