

Spring retrospective

This year, London's Piano Nobile will present a landmark event exploring the work of one of the 20th century's most significant artists and sculptors, Barbara Hepworth. Words by Jamie Crocker

The exhibition, Barbara Hepworth: Strings will bring together a significant group of Barbara Hepworth's (1903–1975) string works, drawn from public and private collections, including sculptures as well as drawings and paintings that continue the string motif.

On the 50th anniversary of the artist's death, the exhibition will include several works that have not been shown to the public for over half a century, as well as sculpture that has never been exhibited before.



Installation photograph of Barbara Hepworth, Maquette for Winged figure, 1957 at Piano Nobile

A towering influence on modern sculpture, Hepworth's biomorphic abstract works can be seen in public parks and galleries across the UK and beyond. This exhibition comes at a time in which interest in her work continues to grow, and her legacy as one of the most important artists in the 20th century is becoming assured. Tate Britain staged a major retrospective in 2015, and in 2020 she was honoured with a blue plaque outside her former London home.

Hepworth began making sculptures in a variety of materials that incorporated strings in 1939 and continued the practice throughout her career until her death. Her non-figurative paintings and drawings also used string motifs, and the exhibition will create a dialogue between these two-dimensional works and her stringed sculptures.



LEFT: Hepworth in the studio with Curved form (Delphi) (1955) [BH 199], 1956, photographed by Charles Gimpel. Courtesy Bowness
RIGHT: The Artist, Trewyn Studio, 1958, Photo Michel Ramon. Courtesy Bowness

The stringed sculptures began soon after she arrived in St Ives, which would become her home for the rest of her life and where the eponymous Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden is now located. The landscape of Cornwall influenced her fascination with this new concept, where strings became a metaphor for her connection to the natural world. As she noted, “the strings were the tension I felt between myself and the sea, the wind or the hills”.

In sculpture, the strings often bridge wave-like arms to enclose interiors, or twist through voids of space. They have a rhythmic and musical quality, in which the allegorical and physical are constantly entwined, exemplified in works such as *Curved form (Wave II)* (1959).

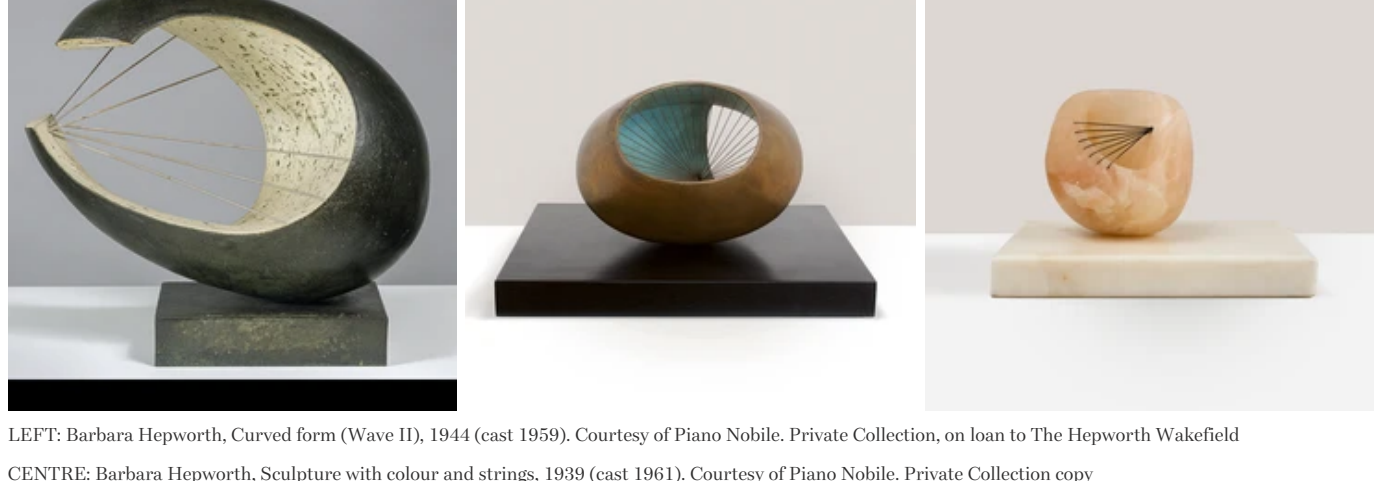
The wide range of works on display will showcase how Hepworth's strings are imbued with a multitude of references and interpretations. A series of works entitled ‘Orpheus’ elicits myths of the Greek musician's lyre and its deep connection to nature, and the first in the series, *Theme on electronics (Orpheus)* (1956), will be exhibited to the public for the first time. Commissioned by the electronics company Mullard, the work is a cold-rolled brass sculpture that provided the stimulus for the Orpheus series which would continue for the next three years. This was an important touchstone in Hepworth's career as she moved from stone and wood to bronze and brass.



Installation photographs of Barbara Hepworth, Stringed figure (Curlew) (Version I), 1956 at Piano Nobile

Hepworth worked strings into both small and large-scale works. The exhibition will include the unique work *Small stone with black strings* (1952) which is the only stringed work that Hepworth made using stone. Very small and delicate, the hand-sized work carved from alabaster measures 14cm across. By contrast *Winged Figure* (1963) was a monumental work, commissioned for John Lewis's flagship store on Oxford Street, featuring strings bursting out from the centre, attaching the bladed wings together, and guiding the eye around the sculpture. *Maquette for Winged Figure* (1957) which uses sheet metal and rods, and was the original proposal that John Lewis accepted, will be on display.

Hepworth's talent took her around the world, and she met many other great artists of the day and experimented with different techniques. Henry Moore (1898–1986) was a contemporary at the Leeds School of Art, and she learnt to carve in Rome following a West Riding Travel Scholarship. Later she would travel to Paris, where string first emerged as a sculptural device, to see the studios of Jean Arp (1886–1986) and Picasso (1881–1973). When in St Ives, she witnessed Naum Gabo's (1890–1970) spiral motif experiments. However, only Hepworth would use string to suggest organic forms and natural rhythms, exploring new territory in modernist sculpture.



LEFT: Barbara Hepworth, Curved form (Wave II), 1944 (cast 1959). Courtesy of Piano Nobile. Private Collection, on loan to The Hepworth Wakefield
CENTRE: Barbara Hepworth, Sculpture with colour and strings, 1939 (cast 1961). Courtesy of Piano Nobile. Private Collection copy

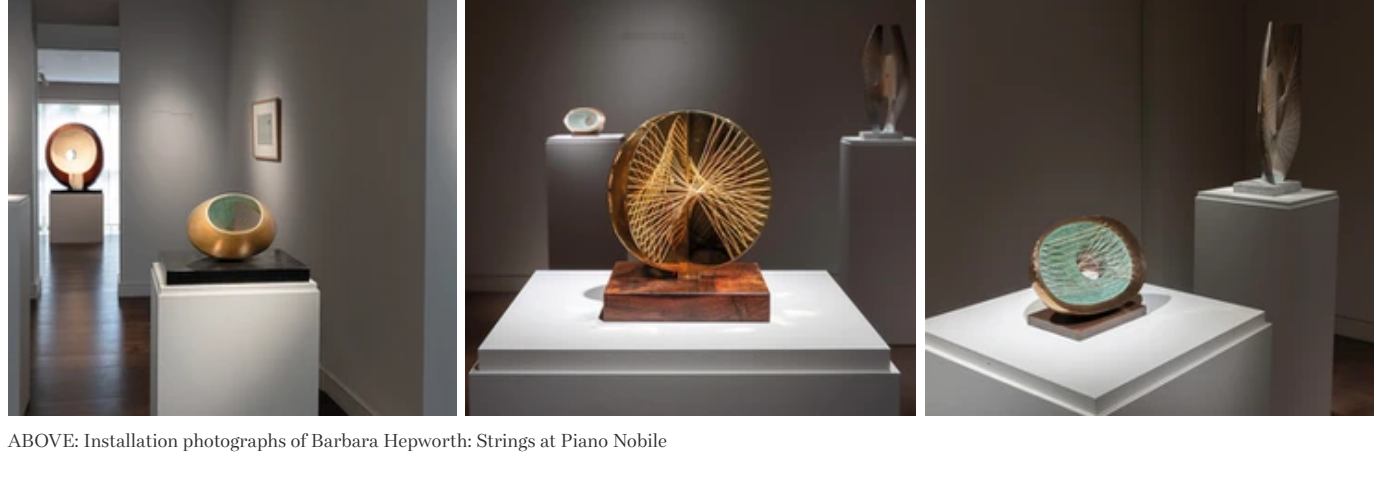
RIGHT: Barbara Hepworth, Small stone with black strings, 1952. Courtesy of Piano Nobile. Private Collection



Installation photograph of Barbara Hepworth, Theme on electronics (Orpheus), 1956 at Piano Nobile

This exhibition will be an exciting and focused look at an artist who influenced the landscape of modernist art in the 20th century and continues to inspire and provoke today. It continues Piano Nobile's recent exploration of important British artists, including a recent, critically acclaimed exhibition on Hepworth's second husband, the artist Ben Nicholson (1894–1982).

Curator Michael Regan said: “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. 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. Most importantly, they symbolised the interconnectivity between the human figure and the landscape in a real, physical sense.”



ABOVE: Installation photographs of Barbara Hepworth: Strings at Piano Nobile

A fully illustrated publication on Hepworth's string works and their historical context will also accompany the exhibition. It will include contributions from the curator as well as other leading and emerging authorities on Hepworth's work. Full details will be released shortly. Piano Nobile is a leading specialist in 20th-century British art. The gallery has established a reputation for authoritative exhibitions and accompanying publications under the gallery's imprint Piano Nobile Publications.

Barbara Hepworth: Strings at Piano Nobile is on from 6th February to the 2nd May 2025 at Piano Nobile, 96 / 129 Portland Road, London W11 4LW. Exhibition visiting hours are Tuesday to Friday 10am-5pm and Saturday 11am-4pm, closed Sunday and Monday.

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Barbara Hepworth, Stringed figure (Curlew) (Version I), 1956. On loan courtesy of Sammlung Pohl, Marburg