

The Observer
Barbara Hepworth

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Sat 1 Feb 2025 11:11 GMT

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Barbara Hepworth sculptures exhibited in public for first time

A new show focusing on the artist's fascination with string includes works unseen beyond private collections



Barbara Hepworth at Trewyn Studio in 1958. Photograph: Michel Ramon

For more than 60 years, Barbara Hepworth's *Winged Figure* has loomed over London's Oxford Street, hanging off the side of its John Lewis store. Made of aluminium and incorporating slender rods, it is one of dozens of "string" sculptures the Cornwall-based artist created during her five-decade career.

Unlike *Winged Figure*, many of these works have never been publicly displayed. That is about to change as they go on show in a London gallery in the first ever dedicated exhibition on Thursday.

By contrast others, such as *Theme on Electronics (Orpheus)*, were once put on display ... but not always to Hepworth's liking.

Mullard, the then well-established British electrical components company, wanted a sculpture for its head office just off Tottenham Court Road, in central London. Inspired by Orpheus playing his lyre, it was placed on a motorised pedestal in the atrium of Mullard House. But, while Mullard was a top electronics company, the sculpture's own electronics flopped.



Theme on Electronics (Orpheus), 1956. Photograph: Piano Nobile/Private Collection

A trail of letters from a disgruntled Hepworth has been found by Piano Nobile, the west London gallery that is staging *Barbara Hepworth: Strings*. "She wrote several times until the early 1970s, after either passing by Mullard's front window or going into its atrium," says Luke Farey, director of research at Piano Nobile, who has trawled the Hepworth archives.

"Barbara always took great interest in her works after they left her studio in St Ives," says Dr Sophie Bowness, her granddaughter and an expert on one of Britain's greatest female sculptors. Hepworth also always ensured that her secretary kept a copy of all letters. In one, from 1966, the sculptor wrote that "the turntable never seems to work". Mullard replied that it would be replaced due to "wear and tear".

Hepworth later wrote that, "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". In yet another letter, she suggested that "*Theme on Electronics* should stand quite still so there is no more fuss about its electronics motor". But Mullard,

determined to prove it was a competent electronics company, produced yet another motorised base.

By the late 70s, Mullard had closed its London head office, while Hepworth herself had died in 1975. The work was transferred to the much larger electronics business Philips, which had absorbed the British company, and the sculpture itself was temporarily "lost". It was then bought in the 2000s by a private individual, who is now loaning the work for its first exhibition display.

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Oval Form with Strings, unframed, 1960. Photograph: University of Birmingham

Also on show will be *Winged Figure 1*, a brass work with twine strings from 1957 and a forerunner of the famed John Lewis sculpture. In 1965, David Hitchcock, an art student at St Martin's teacher training college in Lancaster and a Hepworth fan, was asked by his principal to contact the sculptor about buying a work. "The college would be honoured to have a piece of your work on our new campus," wrote Hitchcock. But they were able to raise only £250. Not enough, replied Hepworth, who still had the sculpture in her studio. However, within a couple of years and with help from Peter Scott, a local art collector, St Martin's had reached £1,000.

Very generously, Hepworth agreed on the figure because they were students. Two college lecturers then had to make an 800-mile round trip, to and from Lancaster to St Ives, in a minibus to pick up the sculpture. *Winged Figure 1* was then placed outside the college chapel. "Unfortunately, some strings were damaged or even broke quite quickly because the sculpture was on a hill where it was affected by strong winds and heavy rains," says Farey. Hepworth was contacted before agreeing that it should be returned to St Ives for restringing.



'Winged Figure', a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth, the day after its installation on the side of the John Lewis store on 22 April 1963. Photograph: Roger Jackson/Getty Images

"Barbara frequently received back at her studio works in need of conservation," says Bowness. "Working under her supervision, her assistants did any restringing that the fishermen's twine she favoured had failed." Hepworth herself made regular visits to the harbour to buy twine. Once *Winged Figure 1* was fixed, it was returned to Lancaster, but, at Hepworth's insistence, placed indoors where it has remained. It is now estimated to be worth "probably north of six figures", says Farey.

Another work, *Pierced Hemisphere (Telstar)*, is going on display publicly for the first time in the UK. Hepworth had been inspired by the 1960s tracking satellite Telstar, and the radio dish receiver at Goonhilly Downs, near St Ives. "Barbara was very excited by space," says Farey, once telling her son-in-law Alan Bowness, father of Sophie, that, "I find such forms of technology very exciting". She even accepted an invitation to go inside the satellite when it was on the ground. But the adventurous Hepworth, though by then in her 60s, wanted to go even further. She once wrote: "I would like to be an astronaut and go around the moon - perhaps for ever."

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