Lucius, an Australian sculptor, reviews the book “Henry Moore on Sculpture”, edited by Philip James (McDonald).

THE RECENT PUBLICATION of the book Henry Moore on Sculpture gives a pretty clear picture of Moore as sculptor—and man. One hundred and twenty-three black and white plates and sufficient in color to show his work to advantage make an armature for a voluminous and meaty text. This text is a discursive collection of recorded talks and discussions expounding many points curious to the layman and pertinent to the sculptor.

Salient points in Moore’s comments are those referring to the humanist content of his art: “The great, the continual, everlasting problem (for me) is to combine sculptural form (power) — see illustration page 35—with human sensibility and meaning i.e. to try to keep Primitive Power with humanist content.” “... human experience is the only experience that we have got to work from.”

Moore explains simply and clearly what many people innocently believe to be distortion—wilful distortion perhaps. Here is the man, the teacher (Moore taught for many years) prepared to explain much of the elements that compose his work and his aim: to wed a depth of feeling about people to an intense new concept of shape. He is essentially interested in shapes both derivative and suggestive. “The organic shape of the great beech trunk and the shapes of pebbles and mountains”. “Mountains are the earth’s wrinkled skin.” Smooth flint stones with holes have a power of suggestion: “the first hole made through a piece of stone is a revelation” since it is the most satisfying demonstration of the rotundancy of the object. The delicate strength
of bones in shapes of endless variation (see illustration, opposite) and sea shells, all become starting points for sculptural concepts, are all evocative of repeatable shapes in terms of sculpture with never the static preciousness of the thoughtless. And all this is wedded to Moore’s humanist integrity — an integrity shown warmly in his famous war-time shelter drawings and those of miners.

Moore explores the field of the abstract, as did Epstein, and takes what is of value: “Sculpture to me must have life in it, vitality.” “Purely abstract sculpture seems to me to be an activity better fulfilled in another art, such as architecture. Abstract sculptures are too often but models for monuments that are never carried out . . . the constructivist sculptor never gets around to finding the real material solution for his problem.”

The academic dross and trivia of British sculpture had been partially cleared away by Gill, Dobson and Epstein while Moore was young, so that although there was still a strong bias among ‘Art Lovers’ for the conservative — for what was then considered safe — the resistance to new realities such as produced by Moore was weakened. The powerful tenet of “Truth to Material” and the direct carving practised by these three men were means eagerly grasped by Moore.

**Standing Figure (Knife-Edge) 1961**

“SINCE my student days I have liked the shape of bones, and have drawn them in the Natural History Museum, found them on sea-shores and saved them from the stewpot. There are many structural and sculptural principles to be learned from bones, e.g. that in spite of their lightness they have great strength. Some bones, such as the breast-bones of birds, have the lightweight fineness of a knife blade. In 1961 I used this knife-edged thinness throughout a whole figure, and produced this Standing Figure.”
Among the many issues that involve sculptors there has been one that could apply to an understanding of Moore's work. Representation is not readily associated with the attractive quality in natural shapes. One gets something like aesthetic pleasure from the sight and feel of smooth river stones, driftwood and similar found objects. There is a power, some elemental vitality, to be recognised in great rocks and the grand shapes of mountains, in worn boulders and the Dolmen and Menhir* that meant so much to our ancestors. The attraction of the natural shapes of the Dolmen were so strong that they were imbued with a mystique—a symbol of cult ritual venerated with as much sincerity as the most sophisticated religion today applies to its representational accoutrements. Then consider the Stone-age 'Venuses' with some slight carving done on a found shape, and the animals, 'suggested' by simple incisions cut into found stones—the drawings and incisions made around convex shapes discovered on cave walls — shapes that suggested those animals. Bear in mind that these found objects did suggest a representation of living things (related to the cults of hunting and fertility).
Mother-Goddess Figure
from the Cyclades. Prehistoric Greek, third millennium B.C.
Marble, height 16 inches.

Stool
Of a chief in the form of a hula dancer. Hawaii, late 19th century.
Wood, height 26 inches.
British Museum.
This figure, which also stands on its feet, has the sculptural strength and formal power which Moore admires in primitive art.
Family Group 1948-49.
Barclay School, Stevenage (England).
To these art-works the most sophisticated mind can respond with aesthetic pleasure. But was it the immediately recognisable sculptural feel of the thing-found that appealed to these early artists? Or was it the suggested power of representation in the object? There was perhaps a dual attraction.

Throughout the ages there have been many examples of sculptors achieving this reality—this union of the natural power of the material and the rich warmth of life. In much Hittite, Cycladic and Mayan work, for instance, there is often the feeling of the stone still having this initial ‘found’ quality (see illustration page 35). It was this robust vitality that Epstein tried to achieve in his carving. This concept is fully realised in the work of Moore.

Today the charm of drift-wood and pebble is frequently transposed to the rusted engine-block, the debris of the foundry floor and the bric-a-brac of man made rubbish dumps. Such found objects are fabricated with great cunning and often fine craftsmanship. But the subtle aesthetic and the mystique of suggestion of these pieces does tend to lose force considerably on repetition, however transformed and re-shaped. One does not deny that there is a language, however precious, to be recognised in the most abstruse form that can be called sculpture, but if modern man is to realise his urgent need for self-realisation, such needs should be reflected in his culture. Sculpture must contain this reality. Its language must have vitality and power. It must reflect man.

Sculpture today comes in a complexity of shapes and space describing structures that profess to reflect the times. Much of it is confusing to the average person who is daily confronted with a rapidly changing world. “The artist—in the midst of a chaotic world—is subject to many influences. He must choose, reject, accept, that is to say, he has to adopt a position, a standpoint in one way or another.” “The artist’s sensibility, his intense reaction to new situations and realities, makes possible frequent and sudden changes, a development which is richer and more incalculable than that of people with less acute perceptions and fantasy.” (Ernst Fischer, Art and Coexistence).

*Dolmen were huge stones placed on smaller stones to form a table: Dol — table, Men — stone. Menhir: Men — stone, Hir — on end. Mystery surrounds them but it is assumed they were monuments to the dead, or cult shrines of the “Sun-Worshippers”. Stonehenge is one of the best known examples.*
The great recent change in sculpture came during the working life of Rodin (1840-1917); Daumier, Rosso and Bourdelle (to mention a few) figured in the change also. These men were instrumental in getting a public to refocus away from the sweet Romanticism and the job-lot masonry of the Neo-Classicists. It was indeed a revolt. Repercussions and reverberations are still strong. Men like Matisse, Picasso, Laurens and Boccioni explored the endless possibilities of three dimensional form and the changes in sculptural idioms were rapid. It was a revolt against the static concepts of figurization. As the system of change gathered force it gave rise to a branch that turned away from subject matter—tentatively at first—and then completely, which has been broadly termed 'Abstraction'.

It will be borne in mind that there has always been an army of mediocrities following the footsteps of innovators, and so much of the sculpture that has been thrown on to the "market" since the revolt has been merely the work of good or indifferent craftsmen. It is this flood of mediocrity with its literary champions of fashion that so confuses the public and has given rise to the abused art-term 'decadent'. "It is not the search for new means of expression, for new realities, which is 'decadent'. What is really decadent is deception, routine reproduction, clinging to what is outmoded as, for example, in abstract painting (and sculpture—Lucius) which is only defended by the art trade against the even stronger urge for a new objectivity." The modern artist must experiment. But if his experiment is suddenly bought up, if he is now transformed into a 'label' and has to repeat it continuously, then a greater danger arises from this monstrous commercialisation of art." (Fischer, ibid).

One is compelled then, to rise above the created fashions and view the peaks, Picasso, Laurens, Moore, Neizvestni (to mention a few) so as to get a clearer vision of the rich pattern of development in sculpture. Cubism and surrealism among a score of other schools have been quoted as convenient labels to sort out artists but the paths of sculptors cross and recross and artists of talent will often work in several 'stylistic categories' (to the horror of art dealers). "God created the world, the devil created compartments."

But the obvious divergence is between abstract and figurative sculpture. Here it is interesting to note that much of the current abstract work often takes on the surface treatment of early figura-
ive modelling and some of the organic forms connected with that category, while many figurative sculptors take freely from the wealth of discoveries associated with abstraction. In such cases the idioms might run parallel and the divergence is a conceptual one only.

But the flood of fashion-created mediocrity remains, with the artist in conflict—an anarchist too often. Sir Kenneth Clark, in the Moore book, states during an interview: “Recent art has shown very clearly the conflict and the lack of unity of purpose in recent society,” and it is this unhealthy conflict and “lack of unity of purpose” that is a key to the problem.

In the West the progression of technological achievement does not offer any real security—there is no real sense of belonging. Where man is becoming more and more alienated by the machine or relegated to a component part of the machine it is a shock to hear such fine advice as Moore’s “... putting into stone everything that the human figure can teach us and at the same time having just the view of humanity that one warms to.”

It is when the artist feels at one with the community that this dedication to his art will be fruitful: “The sense of integration, the feeling of belonging to a great community in which the individual is incorporated, is overwhelming. It is only with the Industrial Revolution and the victorious capitalist system that this unity was destroyed. Alienation of man became dominant. Individual and society confronted one another as alien forces.” (Fischer).

*Madonna and Child* 1943-44.
Hornton stone, height 59 inches.
Church of St. Matthew, Northampton.