

OSBORNE SAMUEL

MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Butler, Reg (1913-1981)



Study for Sacrificial Figure, 1952

Gilded shell bronze and wire

Unique

20 x 23.5 x 15 cm. (7 7/8 x 9 1/4 x 5 7/8 in.)

Length from tip of ear to nose 29.5 cm.

Provenance:

Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York

Offer Waterman, London

Private Collection, UK, Leeds

Osborne Samuel, London

Exhibited:

Hanover Gallery, London, 1954

Curt Valentine, 1955, Cat no. 15

J B Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, Reg Butler 'A Retrospective Exhibition', October 22 - December 1, 1963, cat no.49

Museum of Modern Art (Mima), British Surrealism & Other Realities, Middlesborough, 23 May -17 August, 2008

Leeds Art Gallery, British Surrealism in Context: A Collector's Eye, 10th July - 1st November, 2009,

Hepworth Wakefield, Post-War British Sculpture and Painting, 5 May 2012 - 3 November 2013

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Literature:

The Sculpture of Reg Butler, Margaret Garlake, published by the Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries, 2006, cat. no.110, illustrated in colour Plate 8, p.22

British Surrealism in Context: A Collector's Eye, published by Jeremy Millings Publishing, 2009 to accompany the exhibition of the same title at Leeds City Art Gallery, 10th July - 1st November, 2009, p.127

Reg Butler's powerful *Study for Sacrificial Figure* was conceived concurrently with his prizewinning submission for 'The Unknown Political Prisoner' competition in 1952. Suggesting an elongated horse's head, it appears half-flesh, half-skeleton, with sockets for eyes and twisted cage for a muzzle.

Butler created two sculptures titled *Study for Sacrificial Figure*, both exhibited at his solo Hanover Gallery exhibition in 1954.¹ Tantalisingly, there is no visual record of the larger unlocated work, yet a context for both can be amplified through chronologically adjacent sculptures. Early maquettes for the 'Unknown Political Prisoner' monument (1952) imply confined figures, *St Catherine (relief)* (1953) consists of a wheel and racked torso, while the subject of *Study for Figure Falling* (1953) twists convulsively within its frame: all are victims. Through them, we can trace Butler's interest in Germaine Richier's sculpture, with its emphasis on the metamorphic, mutilated figure, as well as a close reading of Freud, focusing on notions of the 'primitive', the fetish and the sacrificial object.

Between 1951 and 1952 Butler had fluctuated between using iron, to create forged and welded sculpture, and a new technique: shell bronze. The process was laborious, involving creating a model, then a plaster mould, 'pasting' on shell bronze using oxyacetylene, then welding the cast sections together. Its principal advantage lay in the ability to replicate detail with great sensitivity, its disadvantage in the time required to patinate the resulting sculpture by gilding. Yet the technique's liberating potential is instantly apparent. Butler had begun to feel constrained by the dominance of iron, as well as a need, in his sculpture, 'to establish a greater physical presence, more directly related to the subject'.² In *Study for Sacrificial Figure* the wax, poured and modelled over an armature, remains visible in the casting as a molten skin: an effect both tactile and shocking in its immediacy.

Butler's *Study for Sacrificial Figure* was included in a solo exhibition at New York's Curt Valentin Gallery in 1955. Reviewing it for *The New York Times*, Stuart Preston considered Butler to be one of the most vital artists to have emerged in Britain since the war. He identified Marini's influence, in figures that were 'strained, almost tormented, in their expressive distortions', continuing,

They are stripped down to bone and muscle to which skin clings tightly as cerements. Economical and tense, heads thrown back and legs and arms akimbo, they electrify the space about them.³

Vital to this ability to animate space was the inclusion of plates, blocks and protruding wires, suggesting the sculptures' means of construction at the same time as connecting them to the real world. In *Study for Sacrificial Figure* the result is complex. What might be a found object, relic of an apocalyptic disaster, might equally be a totemic head, accessory to an unspecified ritual.

Modern photographs of this work, taken in profile, have encouraged its identification as an animal's head. Butler was himself a keen photographer, adept, as Margaret Garlake notes, at 'exploiting contrasts of tone and lighting to create a minor drama in almost every print'.⁴ From 1949 onwards Butler took considerable care to document his work, also using photography as a tool to gauge the potential scale of a sculpture. Thus it is intriguing that the catalogue for a retrospective at the J. B. Speed Art Museum at Louisville in 1963, which included small-scale images of each of Butler's sixty-one sculptures, shows *Study for Sacrificial Figure* photographed from above.⁵ From this vantage the sculpture appears quite different: a tortured figure, quasi-human, with spine arched, arms thrust outwards, and a piteous head. Voids which suggested eye sockets now imply wounds to the torso, and the twisted fuselage beneath the sculpture perhaps indicates a rack, or its tethering to the ground. While the photographer is uncredited (was it Butler, or did he approve the image?), it seems clear that either interpretation is valid, and that this compelling

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sculpture derives its strength from such ambiguity.

Even as he struggled to articulate his thoughts on Butler's new work, destined for the Venice Biennale in 1952, Herbert Read had noted as much. The British Pavilion included six sculptures by Butler (three iron, three bronze), identified as single female figures, a couple (girl and boy), and an insect. Tracing their origin to a 'precise study of the morphology of nature', Read identified Butler's mode of transformation as the interchange of species to create 'convincing hybrids, endowed with vitality and grace'. *Study for Sacrificial Figure*, contemporary with this reading, hovers uncannily between categories – between animal, human and object.

1. The Hanover Gallery exhibition catalogue lists *Study for Sacrificial Figure* (1952), length 11", cat. 5, and *Study for Sacrificial Figure* (1952), length 22", cat. 6. The catalogue entry (no. 110, p. 134) in Margaret Garlake, *The Sculpture of Reg Butler* (Lund Humphries / The Henry Moore Foundation, 2006), conflates these two sculptures.

2. Reg Butler, 'The Venus of Lespugue and Other Naked Ladies', The William Townsend Lecture (11 November 1980), quoted in *Reg Butler* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1983), p. 89.

3. Stuart Preston, 'Recent Sculpture and Painting', *The New York Times* (16 January 1955).

4. Garlake, *The Sculpture of Reg Butler*, p. 60.

5. *Reg Butler* (J. B. Speed Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, 1963), cat. 49. The catalogue includes an essay by the curator, Addison Franklin Page (1911–1999), who visited Butler at his studio in 1960.

6. Herbert Read, 'New Aspects of British Sculpture', catalogue essay for the XXVI Biennale, Venice (1952).



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