

Willoughby Gerrish  
Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden

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## Austin Wright

Gallery One, Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden  
13 September - 21 December 2024



Austin Wright, *The Argument*, 1955, Bronze

### Highlights:

- Major exhibition of artist Austin Wright's sculpture and work on paper
- Exhibition includes the documentary *The Secret Middle* from the Yorkshire Film Archive which explored his home in Upper Poppleton and the process behind his sculpture
- A representation of Austin Wright's studio will be constructed within Gallery One, including original maquettes, moulds, archival material and unique hanging sculptures

In September there will be a major exhibition of sculpture and works on paper by artist Austin Wright (1911-1997) opening in Gallery One at Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden. Wright was born in Chester in 1911 and grew up in Wales, although he spent the majority of his life living in North Yorkshire in a village just outside of York.

He initially started his career as a teacher in 1934, instructing Modern Languages at The Downs School in Herefordshire where he lived with his colleague and friend the poet W H Auden. In *The Sculpture of Austin Wright*, James Hamilton notes that 'Wright unavoidably became a wry observer of Auden's love affairs, and also his confidante', showing how progressive Wright was during a time when homosexuality was still criminalised. During this period Wright was also developing his own artistic practice, with his earliest surviving wood carving dated from 1939 and is a carving of an abstracted figure made from pinewood.

Wright's sculpture became more widely recognised in the 1950s when he was commissioned by institutions such as Manchester City Council, Wakefield Cathedral and Derby Cathedral to create large-scale pieces. The focus of his work was mainly figurative during this decade, focussing on individuals or small groups of people and abstracting the limbs and heads. In 1955 the art historian and critic Charles Sewter wrote in the *Manchester Guardian* that 'it would not be outrageous to claim that Wright is the most gifted sculptor working in Britain today'. The following year he was asked to participate in the touring British Council show *Young British Sculptors* alongside Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Robert Clatworthy, Hubert Dalwood, Elizabeth Frink, Bernard Meadows, Eduardo Paolozzi, Leslie Thornton and William Turnbull.

Wright was chosen by a prestigious selection committee to participate in the 1957 São Paulo Biennale in Brazil. The committee included some of the most influential curators, critics and writers of the period such as Roland Penrose, Sir Herbert Read, Sir John Rothenstein, and Lilian Somerville. The exhibition was titled *Ten Young British Sculptors* and featured many of the artists who had appeared in the earlier *Young British Sculptors* exhibition, with the additions of F. E. McWilliam, Leslie Thornton and Ben Nicholson. It was here that he was presented with the Richardo Xavier da Silveria Acquisition Prize for his sculpture *The Argument*.

In 1961 Wright was awarded the Gregory Fellowship for a term of three years at the University of Leeds, which caused a shift in his focus from the figurative sculptures he had been producing up to the 1950s to botanical forms. This shift was largely due to his friendship with Professor Irene Manton who he met at the Botany department at the University. Manton not only had a wealth of knowledge about the interior structure of plants, which influenced Wright's work greatly, but she was also a collector of art and antiquities. After her death, Manton donated her collection to the University of Leeds, which included examples from early Egypt, Greece and Cyprus but also of modern art from artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore and Joan Miró. Wright would have no doubt been influenced by the art and antiquities Manton collected as these were displayed throughout Botany House, where she worked while at the university.



Austin Wright, *Man Reading*, 1956, Bronze



Austin Wright, *Hammerhead*, 1956, Bronze

This exhibition will explore the two distinct themes of Wright's work found in his figurative and botanical forms, through examples of his sculptures and works on paper. A representation of the barn where Wright created the majority of his sculptures will be constructed within Gallery One as part of the exhibition and will include original maquettes, moulds and archival material, giving visitors an insight into how the interior of this workshop may have looked. The exhibition will include displaying his unique hanging sculptures from the beams in Gallery One as they were presented within his own studio.

Another exciting addition is the documentary *The Secret Middle* (courtesy of the Yorkshire Film Archive), which was produced and directed by award-winning British screenwriter Harry Duffin in 1967. This film follows Wright around his home in Upper Poppleton as he explains his process. Extracts from this documentary will be played throughout the exhibition



Austin Wright's Studio, Upper Poppleton, York (images courtesy of Crispin Wright)

## Notes to Editor

### **Austin Wright:**

His work is held in collections including Tate; Arts Council; National Museum of Wales, Cardiff; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; University of Leeds, University of York. New College, Oxford and The Hepworth, Wakefield. He had major retrospectives at Wakefield, 1960; Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, 1974; Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 1984; Hull, 1988; and York Art Gallery, 2011.

The Secret Middle documentary: <https://www.yfanefa.com/record/2048>

### **Willoughby Gerrish:**

Willoughby Gerrish is an independent art dealer and consultant, specialising in artworks from the Impressionist, Modern and Post-War periods, with a specific focus on sculpture. He also deals in a select group of established contemporary artists. The gallery holds a regular stock of paintings, sculptures, drawings and editioned works available to view at our Savile Row gallery, located in the heart of London's art world, or in Thirsk, North Yorkshire.

In 2020, the gallery announced its representation for the estates of Michael Lyons (1943–2019) and Austin Wright (1911–1997) and will continue to offer a wide-ranging programme in promotion of each artist's careers. For over fifteen years Willoughby Gerrish has enjoyed a close relationship with the artist Emily Young - arranging multiple public exhibitions and museum projects.

The gallery exhibits at major art fairs, including TEFAF, Maastricht; Masterpiece, London; and The British Art Fair, London.

In summer 2021 Willoughby Gerrish opened Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden in Yorkshire, with an exhibition of monumental steel works by Michael Lyons. The gallery has since exhibited work by a range of modern and contemporary artists such as Kenneth Armitage, Mona Hatoum, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Jeff Lowe, Zak Ove, Austin Wright, and Emily Young.

### **Thirsk Hall:**

Thirsk Hall is a grade II\* listed three-storey town house built in 1723 and extended in 1770 by York architect John Carr. It has been in the Bell family for 300 years and is the location of Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden. In 2021 the picturesque 20-acre garden and parkland at Thirsk Hall opened to the public for the first time with the launch of Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden, curated by Willoughby Gerrish. The sculpture garden showcases modern and contemporary art in a stunning heritage setting, consisting of an outdoor sculpture trail as well as two indoor gallery spaces, The Orangery and Gallery One where exhibitions and events are held throughout the year.

### **Thirsk Hall Sculpture Garden:**

Opening Hours:

Wednesday - Saturday

11am - 5pm

### **Day Tickets:**

Adult £6.50

Concession £5.50

Under 16 FREE

### **Contact details:**

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