Barbara Hepworth: The Hospital Drawings
16 February – 2 June 2013

Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, West Sussex, is delighted to present Barbara Hepworth: The Hospital Drawings.

The exhibition reveals the remarkable series of drawings and paintings made by the artist during the late 1940s, illustrating surgeons at work in operating theatres within Post-War Britain. Featuring over 30 works, including Hepworth’s sketchbook, the exhibition is the most significant presentation of this extraordinary series to date, comprising key loans from national, public and private collections.

The Hospital Drawings offer a unique insight into a little-known aspect of one of Britain’s best-loved sculptors - Hepworth’s skill as a draughtsman - revealing how drawing was an important means of exploring forms that influenced her practice as a sculptor. In contrast to the pure abstract work for which Hepworth (1903 –1975) is celebrated, the drawings also reveal Hepworth’s aptitude for narrative realism. Like Henry Moore’s Underground shelter drawings, the series function as invaluable social documents, rendered with extraordinary emotional intensity.

The exhibition at Pallant House Gallery coincides with the 65th anniversary year of the launch of Britain’s pioneering National Health Service in 1948. A groundbreaking change within Post-War Britain society, the NHS was embraced by artists like Hepworth, who supported the broad left ideals behind the social reconstruction of Britain, to develop a fairer, more inclusive society.

Hepworth embarked the series of studies of the operating theatre at the invitation of her friend, the surgeon Norman Capener. Following the hospitalisation of their daughter Sarah in 1944, Hepworth and her husband, the artist Ben Nicholson, struck up a friendship with Capener, the surgeon who treated Sarah at the Princess Elizabeth Orthopaedic Hospital in Exeter, who was himself an artist.

Through this friendship, Hepworth was invited to witness a variety of surgical procedures at Exeter and the London Clinic, and over a two-year period (1947-49) she produced around 70 works within the series. As well as pencil, ink and chalk drawings, many were executed in both pencil and oil paint on board, and as such can be seen as both paintings and drawings.

Impressed by the close connection she felt between her art and the skilled craftsmanship of the surgeon, Hepworth was particularly fascinated by the rhythmic movement of hands during the medical procedures unfolding before her. Hepworth’s own hands are featured prominently in portraits throughout her career and between 1949 and 1950 she made a bronze sculpture of Norman Capener’s hand entitled Hand II (horizontal). This is included in the exhibition along with her earlier sculpture based on a cast of her own hand, ‘Barbara Hepworth’s Hand’ (c1943–4).

The artist explains in her previously unpublished lecture delivered to an audience of surgeons in the early 1950s, shortly after she completed the series: “There is, it seems to me, a close affinity between the work and approach both of physicians and surgeons, and painters and sculptors.”

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Hepworth remained in regular contact with Capener until his death on 30 March 1975, within two months of her own. They met regularly in London, when her monthly visits to trustee meetings at Tate coincided with Capener’s trips to the Royal College of Surgeons.

Simon Martin, Head of Collections and Exhibition at Pallant House Gallery said: “Although Hepworth’s sculptures are widely known and admired, for many the Hospital Drawings will be a remarkable discovery. We are delighted to be bringing them to wider attention at Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, and to be presenting a different view on the work of one of Britain’s most important modern artists.”

Notes to Editors:

A press preview for the exhibition will be held at Pallant House Gallery on Thursday 14 February at 2pm. A small number of complimentary train tickets from London Victoria will be available for press. Please contact Emma Robertson if you would like a ticket as soon as possible.

Barbara Hepworth: Hospital Drawings is a Mascalls Gallery exhibition curated by Nathaniel Hepburn. It comes to Chichester from The Hepworth, Wakefield, as part of a three venue tour Following its showing at Pallant House Gallery the exhibition will tour to Mascalls Gallery, Kent from 14 June to 24 August 2013.

The exhibition is accompanied by a new publication published by Tate, the first to focus specifically on this area of Hepworth’s work. It includes a previously unpublished lecture about the works delivered by Hepworth in the early 1950s to an audience of surgeons and a new essay by Nathaniel Hepburn (Curator, Mascalls Gallery). Dr Chris Stephens, Head of Displays & Curator (Modern British Art), Tate Britain has provided the foreword.

The exhibition at Pallant House Gallery will be accompanied by a series of related events including a talk on ‘Inter-related Masses: Barbara Hepworth and the Art of Commitment’ by Dr Chris Stephens, an introduction to the Hospital Drawings by Curator Nathaniel Hepburn and a personal and medical perspective on the works by Paul Bowness, Barbara Hepworth’s grandson and Professor of Experimental Rheumatology at University of Oxford. www.pallant.org.uk