

The Daily Telegraph: Art Market Focus with Colin Gleadell

Bronze Age woman: why Elisabeth Frink's expressionist figures are back in favour



Walking Man (Riace I) 1986 by Elisabeth Frink CREDIT: COLIN HAWKINS/BEAUX ARTS

- [Colin Gleadell](#)

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It is now 25 years since the British artist [Elisabeth Frink](#) died, somewhat prematurely at the age of 62. She had achieved much: the Tate and the Arts Council began collecting her work when she was just 21, and her public commissions sprouted up almost annually throughout Britain in the Fifties and Sixties, rivalling [Henry Moore](#).

In 1963, her sculptures played a starring role in Joseph Losey's film, *The Damned*, lending the sequences an air of menace and the macabre. At just 39 she was awarded the CBE, became one of the few female Royal Academicians in her forties and a Dame of the British Empire aged 52.

Despite a solo exhibition at the [Royal Academy](#) in 1985, though, she was not selected for their prestigious *British Art of the 20th Century: The Modern Movement* exhibition, two years later, which disappointed her greatly. The fact was that, in spite of her honours and her popularity with the public, she had been out of favour with museum curators and critics for some time.



Easter Head II 1989 by Elisabeth Frink CREDIT: NICHOLAS MOSS, TODD WHITE ART PHOTOGRAPHY /BEAUX ARTS

Now, two new exhibitions aim to put that right: the first, at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, aims to reestablish Frink as “one of the most important British artists of the 20th century”, according to Centre director, Paul Greenhalgh, who believes Frink became an outsider because she was a woman in a man’s world, and because she pursued a tough, expressionist figuration in her art against the international fashions for abstraction, pop and conceptual art.

The sentiment is echoed by a selling exhibition at the Beaux Arts Gallery in London. In the catalogue, the critic Andrew Lambirth rates Frink as “the most consistently inventive and visionary figurative sculptor of post-war Britain”, marginalised by the undemocratic concept that, “if too many people like the art, it can’t be that important.”

The Sainsbury exhibition builds its case on Frink’s early work – edgy, angst-ridden bronzes of chickens, cats and human torsos that reflect on the human condition and are completely in tune with the post-war existentialism that also permeated the work of Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon.



Dying King 1963 by Elisabeth Frink CREDIT: BEAUX ARTS

She was closely associated with the artists who took the 1952 Venice Biennale by storm – Lynn Chadwick, William Turnbull, Kenneth Armitage et al., who were exponents of what the critic Herbert Read described as “the geometry of fear”, and a pre-occupation with fear is traceable in her work from her predatory bird sculptures of the Fifties, through to her warrior-like Riace figures of the Eighties.

To illustrate her relevance in both international and contemporary contexts, the exhibition juxtaposes her work with examples by Bacon, and with later works by Louise Bourgeois, Rebecca Warren and Douglas Gordon.

The London exhibition takes a similar tack, but here the prices (Beaux Arts has represented Frink and her estate for 40 years), remind us that, while the curatorial elite may have marginalised her, the market has not. Indeed, Frink is one of the few British sculptors of the post-war generation to sell for £1 million at auction. Furthermore, the average price of a Frink sculpture has increased by 8035.6 percent since the mid Seventies.



Walking Man 1977 by Elisabeth Frink CREDIT: BEAUX ARTS

Although she was prolific and one work could have been cast in different sizes and editions, her work has a scarcity factor in that, firstly, some of the editions of her bronzes were never completed (and never will be), and secondly, since her son died last year, no more works from her estate will be sold.

With this in mind, Reg Singh, the proprietor of Beaux Arts, says that his exhibition, which has 27 sculptures and 11 drawings dating from 1953 to 1989, priced from £6,500 for a drawing to £750,000 for the 7ft Riace warrior that stands guard at the entrance, could be the last of its kind for a very long time.