

Lynn CHADWICK

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Controversy and the Venice Biennale are so intimately associated it has become hard to think of one without the other. This year, the object of contention has been Swiss-Icelandic artist Christoph Buchel's *Barca Nostra*, a salvaged fishing boat on display in the Arsenale. When the vessel sank in the Mediterranean in April 2015, some 800 would-be migrants who had embarked in Libya were drowned. The installation has understandably drawn a mixed response, with some observers questioning whether it is more concerned with sensationalism than with art.

The 'but-is-it-art' question is one repeatedly asked, particularly at an event like the Biennale, where work venturing into new and often provocative territory is liable to be on show. Sometimes the controversy is foretold: Buchel must have known his contribution would stir strong emotions. But sometimes a storm can blow up unexpectedly.

Such was the case in August 1956, when a piece in *Apollo* mocked the merits of that year's winner of the Biennale's International Sculpture Prize. The author of *A Shaft from Apollo's Bow* is unknown: the column, which appeared in every issue during this period, is most likely to have been written by then-editor Horace Shipp. One might have expected him to celebrate the fact that a prestigious international prize had been awarded to a British artist. On the contrary, the text pilloried sculptor Lynn Chadwick's prize-winning show, describing one piece as a 'vast and threatening creation'.

Although the centenary of Chadwick's birth in 2014 was commemorated by several exhibitions and his work still sells at auction, the sculptor is no longer as well known today as should be the case. He can be seen as representative of the last century's bleakest decade: in 1952 Herbert Read had enthused that Chadwick's sculptures 'belong to the iconography of despair, of defiance [...]. Here are images of flight, or ragged claws "scuttling across the floors of silent seas", of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear.' Yet Chadwick's name is now far less familiar than those of the somewhat older Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. Beating other exhibitors in the same Biennale, such as

Giacometti and Cesar, he was relatively little known even when he was awarded the prize at Venice. He was so surprised that, as he later remarked, he felt 'rather like the girl being told that she's Miss World'.

Apollo's columnist was similarly taken aback, although for different reasons. He rejoiced that a number of the magazine's readers had expressed their dislike of Chadwick's work, citing one who had declared that 'anything more completely barren it would indeed be hard to imagine'. He then had some fun with a defence of Chadwick mounted by painter Louis le Brocquy who 'as a last word of wisdom, quoted a French critic in a French art magazine (and those of us who follow the French art magazines know how final such an utterance usually is, especially as so many French art magazines appear for one consecutive issue)'.

Le Brocquy, it appears, had complained of the 'native apathy' with which he and other members of his generation (including Chadwick) customarily met. In response, the Apollo writer argued that public apathy was inspired by a widespread feeling of exclusion from the process whereby artists representing their country were chosen. It could be, he proposed, 'that this sort of one-party election, so dear to the heart of the ruling bureaucracy everywhere, does not make for much excitement except among the party members who are conceivably in the running as candidates. When the Art Department of the British Council exercise their dictatorial powers to choose one candidate from the same small group and to give him the advantage of the shopwindow at Venice the result is something of a foregone conclusion'.

Accordingly, he was not amazed, the writer declared, or indeed amused that Chadwick should have been selected to represent Britain at the Biennale, and at public expense. He only hoped that one day 'some outraged sculptor who does not toe this party line, say, Epstein or Charles Wheeler, will withhold a percentage of his income tax and go to prison on behalf of his fellow figurative sculptors as a protest against subsidising his own disparagement'.

Nothing like that happened, of course. But what did occur--and barely a decade later was that Chadwick himself was superseded by a new generation, his work suddenly looking rather old-fashioned and out of step. Five years ago, critics writing on the occasion of his centenary observed that whether he liked it or not, and even though he lived until 2003, Chadwick was forever associated with the 1950s. One suspects the Apollo writer would have found this a fitting retribution.