

# JOURNEY TO A LAGUNA BEACH

Taking the Lay  
of the Land:  
Yesterday &  
Today in St Ives

# Sister City

WRITTEN BY GROVE KOGER, PHOTOS BY GROVE KOGER AND THE TATE



BENT SZAMETAT

Exterior of the Barbara Hepworth  
Museum and Sculpture Garden.



**W**e had come zigzagging down  
Devon and Cornwall one hot  
August afternoon on a carriage  
of the Great Western Railway. It  
was the Friday before the last bank  
holiday of the season, and our carriage  
was packed with travelers fleeing London.

As it rolled past our window, Devon's  
countryside was green and soft and hilly,  
punctuated here and there with dense  
copses and distant church spires. Sheep  
grazed peacefully in its lush meadows. To  
our American eyes, it was a quintessentially  
English landscape. But by the time we  
reached Cornwall, in the far southwestern  
tip of the UK, the land had grown flatter and  
more austere, flintier. There were as many  
stone walls as there were hedgerows.



TATE

Barbara Hepworth's stone workshop.



PHOTOS: TATE, MARCUS LEITH & ANDREW DUNKLEY, 2007

LEFT Barbara Hepworth, *Spring* 1966, 85 x 57 x 53 cm; RIGHT Barbara Hepworth, *Four-Square (Walk Through)* 1966, Bronze, 429 x 199 x 229.5 cm  
Lent by the Trustees of the Barbara Hepworth Museum & Sculpture Garden; *River Form* 1965, cast 1973, Bronze, 87 x 193 x 68.8 cm.

Our destination was one of Laguna Beach's "sister" cities, St Ives. Once a thriving fishing port, it grew into an important art colony in the late 1930s, thanks in large part to its mild climate and robust light, and has long been a popular tourist destination. Britain's national art gallery, the Tate, opened a branch in the port in 1993 on the site of a former gasworks.

Bernard Leach, later celebrated as the father of British studio

pottery, set up base in the little port in 1920, and a St Ives Society of Artists was founded a few years later. But the most original artist at work in those early days, although he would have been dumfounded to be told so, was Alfred Wallis. A retired seaman, Wallis had taken to painting scenes on scraps of cardboard with boat and house paint. "What I do mosely," he wrote in an idiosyncratic elegy for the port's vanished way of life, "is what use



LEFT Barbara Hepworth Museum (interior view); RIGHT Barbara Hepworth Museum (interior view).

to Bee out of my own memory what we may never see again."

Young Ben Nicholson, who had studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, met Wallis on a visit one day in 1928. Struck by the crude power of the old seaman's naïve style—Wallis was self-taught and cared nothing for perspective—the up-and-coming artist bought several of his works. A decade later Nicholson married sculptress Barbara Hepworth, and in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, he returned to St Ives with his new wife.

Striving to escape the straitjacket of Britain's "fine art" tradition, Nicholson himself had once experimented with a faux-naïve style. Then, under the influence of the avant-garde works he had seen in Europe, he had begun creating wholly abstract pieces. But now he forged a synthesis of the two approaches. A number of his paintings from this period depict the graceful, simplified lines and muted colors of land- and seascapes glimpsed through a window, often with a homely jug or cup

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In the greenhouse at the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden with plaster work *The Bride from Family of Man*.

resting on the sill. Like his abstracts, they're keenly analytical but more personable, as if the artist were standing next to you sharing the view.

Old St Ives is a maze of cobbled streets spilling down a hillside toward the water. Strolling down one of them the afternoon I arrived, I grasped the logic of Nicholson's paintings. There, over a cascade of slate rooftops glowing with yellow lichen, lay a distant view of the pale sea, and over there, down another stony vista, I glimpsed one of the port's sandy beaches and a pair of weathered boats swinging at anchor. The colors and contours of the land and the sea and the sky echoed and re-echoed in a gentle regression.

Today tea shops, art galleries, pubs and fish-and-chip stands fill the jumble of the port's old stone buildings. It's among these, if you've provided yourself with a good street map, that you'll find the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden. Hepworth bought the property, known as the Trewyn Studio, in 1949, shortly before she and Nicholson divorced, and lived there until her death in 1975. Now it's administered by the Tate. The museum's first floor offers a good overview of the sculptor's life and work, but its greatest attraction is an adjoining garden of Mediterranean lushness displaying a number of her large—and very large—pieces in stone and bronze.

We timed our museum visit to take in a lecture about Hepworth by Tate assistant Andrew Jackson, and ended up returning to hear his lively presentation a second time. It's clear that Hepworth, like Nicholson, drew upon the Cornish landscape for her work, but hers was a more

revolutionary course. Most of her works are abstract, but she maintained that they represented aspects of the physical world. In the case of her famous 1946 sculpture *Pelagos*, a hollowed-out piece of painted elm whose spiraling arms are strung together, she suggested the sweeping shore of the bay at St Ives, the white sand of its beach, and the currents of its wind and water.

Within a short time other artists gravitated to St Ives, including Russian Constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo. It was at Gabo's suggestion that Nicholson gave lessons to budding painter Peter Lanyon, who had been born in the port and who would go on to become a star of a later generation of artists. Lanyon was inspired by the edges of things—"the junction of sea and cliff, wind and cliff, the human body and places," as he put it. Like Nicholson and Hepworth's pieces, his dramatic paintings owe a great deal to Cornwall, and in fact he went on to explore its landscape in a particularly dynamic way, taking up gliding in 1959.

Another important figure was Patrick Heron, who worked at the Leach Pottery as a conscientious objector during the war and whose bright, Apollonian abstracts stand in sharp contrast to Lanyon's furiously Dionysian ones. One of his most famous works is an unleaded stained glass window that he designed for the Tate St Ives—at 15 by 13 feet, one of the largest of its kind in the world. (As luck would have it, the gallery itself was closed for expansion during our visit, but it's scheduled to reopen in 2017.)

However much Barbara Hepworth drew upon Cornwall's landscape, she was adamant that her works fused it with "the human figure and human spirit inhabiting" it. We were able to grasp something of that spirit a few days later thanks to Martyn Jackson, who showed our party some of the area's many standing



Impression of completed Tate St Ives Project, autumn 2017.

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stones—mute but compelling monuments that clearly influenced Hepworth's later works. Martyn and his wife, Amanda, run an enterprise called Ancient Stones of Kernow ("Kernow" being the Cornish name for Cornwall), and there's no better way to learn about the region's distant past than to book your own tour with Martyn. As an added bonus, you'll catch glimpses of abandoned tin works, a reminder that Cornwall's production of the metal spanned four millennia.

Along with high culture and prehistoric monuments, St Ives offers humbler pleasures. One afternoon we crowded into a tiny shop to share a cream tea of freshly baked raisin scones, a bowl heaped with the richest clotted cream imaginable, and a pot of ruby-red strawberry jam. Such teas are a specialty of Devon as well as Cornwall, but the savory pasties (PAH-steez) we devoured the next day with pale ale had a more distinct association with Cornwall, whose miners once found them a handy meal to eat underground. Like so many other aspects of what we had encountered on our visit, the beef-and-vegetable pies represented something old made new again—redolent of the past and yet richly alive. **AT**

Established in January 2008, Laguna Beach Sister Cities Association (LBSCA) Inc. is a broad-based, Laguna Beach City Council approved, all volunteer, non-profit organization. The LBSCA has a primary goal to establish and maintain long-term relationships between the City of Laguna Beach and our sister cities, Menton, France, San José del Cabo, Mexico, and St. Ives, England. These partnerships encourage a collaborative exchange of cultural, educational, and business activities.

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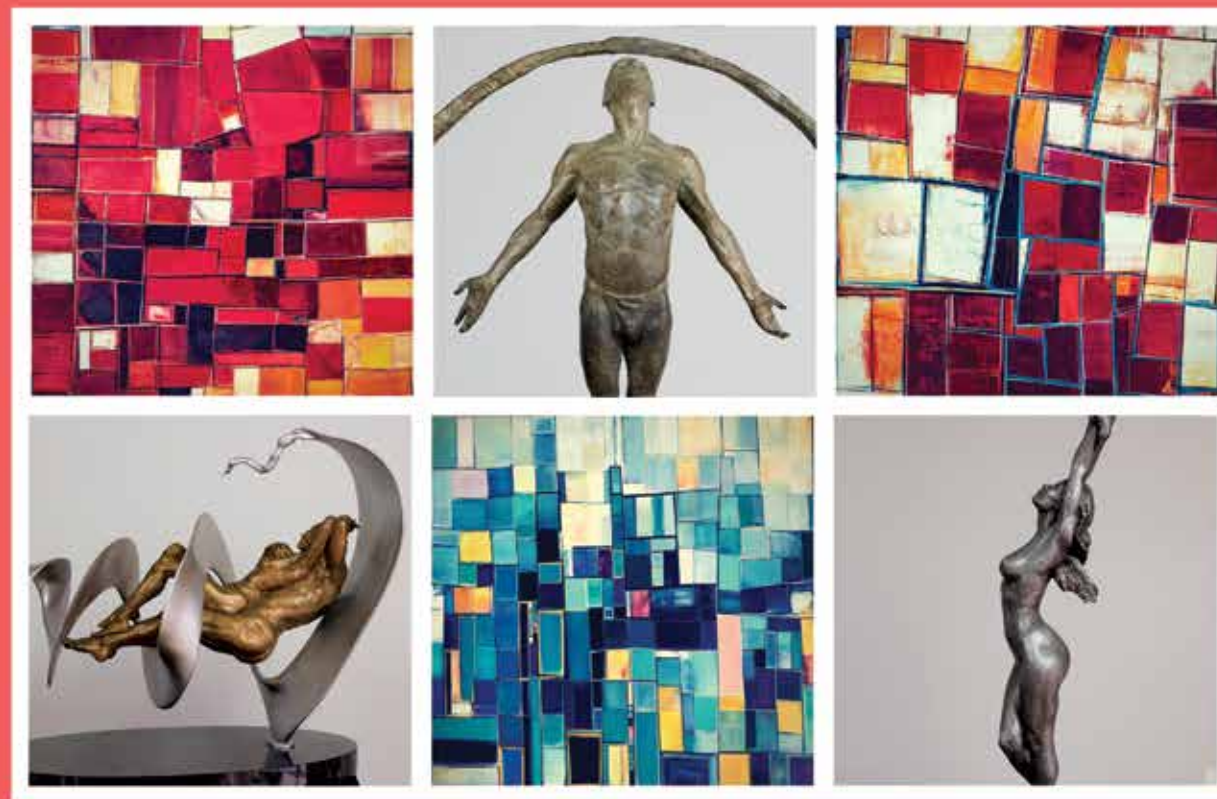
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