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Brian Willsher (1930-2010)

Untitled, 1973

P856

Carved Teak Sculpture

Height: 24 in (61 cm)

Width: 12 in (30 cm)

Depth: 4 in (10 cm)

£ 2950

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

Brian Willsher began his sculpting career following no formal artistic training and initially found his way through several different vocations, such as telephone engineer, farm worker and dental technician. Willsher was able to express his many experiences of shape and form through carving and began an exciting career as a sculptor, with a string of successful solo exhibitions in the 1960s as well as five consecutive Royal Academy of Art Summer shows.

However, Willsher's sculpture later caused a national scandal when, in June 1968, the Customs and Excise department made the decision to deny his work the status of fine art. He was therefore, immediately subject to the customary 40% manufacturing tax on 'household decorations' and subsequently forced to declare bankruptcy. This situation was not unique to Willsher, as it so happened that a similar scandal occurred in 1926, involving the high-profile work of Constantin Brancusi. His polished bronze, *Bird in Space*, was denied free entry to the USA by the Federal Customs & Excise Department on the grounds it was 'just a piece of metal', despite being on dispatch to a Guggenheim exhibition in New York.

The scandal concerning Willsher caused a national outrage in Britain and led a number of wellrespected artists to jump to his defence. At the forefront of his supporters was Sir Henry Moore, who was quoted in the Guardian saying, "Here's pure sculpture, indeed! More than that, memorable sculpture!" Newspapers such as the Guardian and the Observer turned the scandal into a national campaign, posing the question of what defines real art, with headlines such as 'When is a sculpture not a sculpture?'

Customs eventually retracted their original decision however, the implications meant Willsher refrained from exhibiting for several years. He did return to the art scene in the 1990s with solo shows at both the Belgrave Gallery and Boundary Gallery. As well as being commissioned to produce larger works, including pieces that can be seen at Lewisham Hospital. Although the Customs outrage forced Willsher to vanish from the art scene for a number of years, it allowed him to leave behind a name resolutely engrained in the challenge of defining art.