

A Canova for today



ALEXANDER STODDART'S SUPERB SCULPTURE IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION HAS INSPIRED SOME FRUITFUL COLLABORATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTS.

Recall the late Sir Denys Lasdun once being asked if he could contemplate a work of sculpture being associated with his National Theatre in London. His reply was revealing: yes, he said, a Henry Moore placed...at the other end of Waterloo Bridge. Such is the gulf between the modern architect and the modern sculptor: neither employs a language of form that can contemplate integration. It is a state of affairs so different from most of architectural history; the medieval cathedral, the baroque church almost relied on the sculptor or carver. That great 20th-century English architect Charles Holden thought that it was the hand of the artist that raised building to architecture (he persuaded Moore to make carvings for his London Transport headquarters). Holden's partner, Lionel Pearson, worked with that very great sculptor Charles Sargeant Jagger to produce the most moving and powerful of war memorials in London, the Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner.

The modernist divorce between the sculptor and architect can also be seen in the vexed question of the plinth. In the 19th century, public statues stood on architect-designed, carefully proportioned plinths. Today, the embarrassingly mediocre statues we raise to heroes stand either on crude shoe boxes or, more likely, on nothing at all, to avoid any element of unfashionable elitism. As the sculptor Alexander Stoddart has written, 'Modern liberalism demands that statues be at least plinthless', and he also

The works illustrating this article are by Alexander Stoddart (b. 1959).

1 A detail of the Odysseus Frieze in the vestibule of the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, London. Stoddart made a substantial contribution to the building, designed by James Simpson. Photo: Royal Collection © 2007 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

2 *David Hume*, the Royal Mile, Edinburgh. Photo: Alexander Stoddart

Alexander Stoddart's autobiographical essay is published in *Spirits of the Age: Scottish Self Portraits*, edited by Paul Henderson Scott (Saltire Society, Edinburgh, 2005).

observes that 'All statues are made of sculpture, but few sculptures attain the status of statuary.'

Sandy Stoddart is my mentor in matters of sculpture. He is a self-confessed 'doctrinaire neo-classical sculptor' of – these days – extraordinary accomplishment and sophistication. He was the most impressive individual I encountered during my time teaching in Glasgow: not only a brilliant sculptor but also an artist, an eloquent and inspiring writer, and a powerful polemicist. He is also a heroic figure, for he has had to struggle to produce public monuments in the face of the indifference or contempt of the modern art establishment and most of the official funding bodies. As his heroes are Canova, Bertel Thorvaldsen, G.F. Watts and Jagger, he is dismissed as reactionary, irrelevant. Fortunately you can see his work in such places as Paisley (a statue of John Witherspoon, the founder of Princeton University) and Kilmarnock (a double-statue of Burns and his publisher), as well as in Edinburgh, where there is his *David Hume* (Fig. 2) in the Royal Mile (soon to be joined by one of Adam Smith). All are rich in allusion and symbolism. And all are on proper plinths.

What is particularly remarkable is that, as a sculptor (and as a philosopher), Stoddart is self-



taught. He was a student at the Glasgow School of Art in the 1970s, but, as he describes in a recent autobiographical essay (which ought to be compulsory reading in all art schools), the fashion then was for 'culture-free constructivism on the one hand, object-free conceptualism on the other... You found a railway-sleeper, preferably one rather the worse for wear, then wrapped it in a coil of barbed wire. Onto the barbs you hung a series of, say, smoked mackerel – the better through which to appreciate the "spatial relationships inherent in the intervals between wood, tar, and metal".'

After having done 'a pop-riveted construction which had been a hit at a tutorial', intimation of what sculpture could be came from confronting a plaster cast of the *Apollo Belvedere* that had survived in Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art building. But revelation came with a visit to that strange and resonant polychromatic museum building in Copenhagen designed by Thorwald Binsedøll to house the work of Thorvaldsen. Stoddart was there to do research for a never-to-be-completed thesis and, confronted by the plaster figures and busts by the neo-classical sculptor, he was silenced – and knew what his life's work must be.

It was far from easy to produce works of art that were resolutely unfashionable in style, conception and purpose. It is good to know, however, that he was first helped by an architect (an intelligent modernist, indeed), David Page of Page & Park, who asked him to execute statues to go on the parapet of the Italian Centre in Glasgow, a development of new and

restored buildings. This was the commission that launched Stoddart as a serious public sculptor. Since then he has occasionally but very successfully collaborated with other, rather different architects. One is John Simpson, who asked him to create sculpture for the new Queen's Gallery at Buckingham Palace (Figs. 1 and 4) – where the remarkable bronze bust of the Queen that greets the visitor on the stairs is also Stoddart's work.

And now he is working with another sympathetic architect, if on a rather unlikely commission. This is an isolated, private Roman Catholic chapel in North Britain that, last year, secured the Georgian Group's annual award for the best new building in the classical tradition (Fig. 3). The architect is Craig Hamilton, one of the most intelligent and sophisticated of the so-called new classicists working today, one able to reinterpret precedents with knowledge and conviction. His chapel is an exquisite little building, impeccably detailed, which has echoes of such neo-classicists as Dance, Soane and Cockerell inside but has an entrance façade that plays games in the manner of Michelangelo. Sculpture is an important part of the whole conception. All is by Stoddart, and the devotional images commissioned reveal his own wide and deep knowledge of the history of sculpture.

In the tympanum of the entrance door is a bronze bust of St Rita of Cascia (to whom the chapel is dedicated) in the neo-Florentine manner of Adolf von Hildebrand. In the apse are two framed marble reredos panels in a neo-classical Anglo-Italian manner 'somewhere between Canova and Flaxman'. In the vestibule is to be a figure of St Augustine of Hippo, over life-size in marble, which is Hellenistic in style but pays homage to Thorvaldsen's figure of Christ. Other works will show the influence of, amongst others, Andrea della Robbia, Alfred Gilbert and Jagger. All this – which Stoddart calls a 'confessional accumulation' that explores the debt of Christianity to antiquity – is perhaps surprising for a sculptor whose primary model has hitherto been Greece seen through the work of his neo-classical heroes. But this has been not only an unusual but a disturbing commission for an artist who, as he confesses, thought that his Scots Presbyterian background would keep him detached and so safe from any 'spiritual bruises'.

That, of course, is his problem, but it is extraordinarily interesting, and cheering, to see two accomplished and learned artists – one a sculptor, one an architect – working harmoniously together with a shared respect for tradition. Both have created a true work of architecture in which we can see, in Stoddart's words, 'antiquity and Christian function coming into congress with one another'.

3 The Chapel of St Rita of Cascia, Scotland. Designed by Craig Hamilton, it incorporates an extensive sculptural programme by Stoddart, on which he is currently working. Photo: Craig Hamilton Architects/Simon Harpur

4 A winged genius, one of a pair of figures made for the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace. Photo: Royal Collection © 2007 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

