

THE SCULPTURES - SYMBOLISM AND FUNCTION

Introduction

The range of sculptures on the twenty one buildings described in the previous section are a selection from a total of perhaps fifty or sixty buildings with sculptures, which were built in London in the period between the wars. Some others of the period, such as those at the Gas and Electricity showrooms at Hornsey, the Fire Station at Lambeth, the cinema in Shaftesbury Avenue, Derry and Toms store in Kensington High Street, and various other buildings in the City and Whitehall, are also important examples of their type, each with unique individual features and each contributing something special to an overview of architectural sculpture of the period. The aim here however has not been completeness for its own sake, but rather to include as many buildings with their sculptures which demonstrate the total range of the evidence.

Mention must also be made of several buildings which do not include sculptures with a figurative component, but whose architectonic form is enlivened - indeed complemented - by abstract decorative elements. These might include such buildings as the D H Evans store in Oxford Street [22B] and others, though there are rather fewer of these in London than there are in some cities in the USA such as Los Angeles or New York (see USA bibliography). There are hybrids which combine figurative and decorative elements, as for example the Daily Telegraph building in Fleet Street [16], the Adelphi [19] and Wandsworth Town Hall [4]. All of these have decorative elements which are an integral part of the designs of the facades, as well as having a figurative sculptural component. An interesting case is that of the Senate House of the University of London, Malet Street [22C], which was designed by Charles Holden in 1938 to incorporate eight relief panels by Henry Moore (Cork 1985: 293-4). These were to have been seated figures holding books, which Moore considered "an appropriate symbol for a University" (quoted in Cork, *ibid*: 293). These were however never started, owing to Moore's reluctance to proceed.

Symbolism, meaning and context

It should be clear, from comments made in Part II under each building, that there are a number of different levels of meaning, significance, intention and art-historical importance to these sculptures. Each of these levels of meaning could receive an extended analytical treatment, perhaps in the manner of Richard Cork's masterly analysis of the London Transport sculptures (1985). Lack of space, however, necessitates an abbreviated overview, ^{which will} ~~to~~ bring out some of the important questions which further research could elucidate (see section of 'Further Research', below), and to highlight those aspects which validate or invalidate the hypothesis put forward in Part I.

There are perhaps three general aspects of function and meaning to these sculptures. In analysing these one must always be aware that function is a particular aspect of a general sense of meaning (both intended and perceived), or, in other words, that a sculpture's meaning in an architectural context is part of its function. It is this duality of significance which constitutes a tension between architecture and sculpture, which has in the period in question been a fertile source of both creative dynamism as well as ^a negative antipathy between the two. It is this aspect which makes the subject both interesting and ^{significant} ~~meaningful~~ for a more general view of the history of sculpture. As Boeck has observed, speaking ^{from} ~~for~~ the perspective of more than three thousand years of history, "The actual creative work of the sculptor, the formal relations between architecture and sculpture and finally the gift of meaning to the whole, these are the three elements in all building sculpture. It is only from the combination of these components that the richness of its language results, and their analysis is a necessary preliminary to any understanding of the whole" (1961: viii).

The first of these functional aspects is the purely symbolic or signifying role of sculptures, as signals provided by the architect to announce the function or corporate identity of the client whose building he is erecting. In these instances it is clear that the sculptor must have been given little choice over the subject matter - though style was another matter entirely. There are many examples of these sculptures. For instance, the

long friezes on Wandsworth Town Hall **[4]** are illustrative of episodes in the history of each of the five parishes of the borough, laid out in an accessible linear narrative form, rather like the iconography of the stained glass or the sculpture in a medieval cathedral illustrating bible stories. One wonders however whether the average cathedral-goer in the medieval period would not have had more comprehension of the bible stories than the average Wandsworth man in the street would have had of the details of two thousand years of local history. But perhaps this is not the point: these sculptures are a statement by the Councillors of the largest Borough Council in London of their perception of their own importance, which is also stated by the lavish fittings within the building itself. Although few others sculptures are as overtly illustrative as these, several of the Town Halls have schemes of sculptural decoration which clearly signify the social functions of the borough, such as the figures at Walthamstow illustrating Education, Maternity, Sport, etc **[3W-Z, A1-C1]**. The small figures illustrating Housing and Child Welfare at Wandsworth **[4K, J-M]**, or the figures at the People's Palace at Mile End Road illustrating the various activities which were on offer there such as Drama, Music, and Sport **[5B-I]**, also fall into this category. A straightforward correspondence between subject matter and function can be seen at the Corporation of London Meat Inspectors' Office **[1]**, where its role is directly signified by the reliefs of cattle and sheep **[1A, B]**. It must be said that they are no less charming as sculptures for being so directly functional in intention.

A similar functional role of sculptures can be seen on some of the University buildings. In the case of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the function of the building was clearly signified by the small metal plaques of insects on the balconies **[6F-L]**, by the carved names of eminent doctors around the top of the building **[6B-C]**, and by the carving by Eric Kennington (although its interpretation is uncertain) above the library door **[6E]**. An early stage of the design showed a series of reliefs with medical instruments along the front of the building. More problematic in this connection is the significance of the large carving over the front door by Alan Howes showing a serpent around a group of horses and chariot.

Other examples of this type are the sculptures announcing the Abbey National

Building Society [13] - a lighthouse with the word "security" in large letters underneath it [13C] - or the sculpture over the doorway on the Halifax Building Society building [14B]. The Daily Telegraph building [16] - conspicuous by any standards - is also more or less directly indicated by the figure of Mercury astride the globe [16E], and perhaps the groups of flying birds [16B&D], a correspondence observed by a contemporary commentator who saw them as signifying "the innuence (sic) of the Daily Telegraph"¹. Barker's store [17] has a whole series of small sculptures, both on its main north front [17(A)] and as small panels in the window areas [17(C)], which directly illustrate items which can be bought in the store. It also has a series of reliefs which illustrate 'a la mode' activities of the well-to-do lady [17(B)] (not illustrated). All of these are powerful visual statements which validate to the interested onlooker the new 'shopping experience' of the 1930s. It is significant perhaps that Derry and Toms next door (not discussed here) has no such directly illustrative sculptures, but rather a series of relief panels illustrating workers' occupations. A similar signifying function for the shopping experience is shown by the low reliefs of the Habitat building [22A].

NOTE

1. (Builder, Jan 11 1929, p.106. The word 'innuence' is not in the Shorter OED, but is presumably a cognate form of 'innuendo', meaning "nodding at, pointing out, intimating, signifying").

The allegorical and architectonic functions

A second way in which a sculpture or series of sculptures can be overtly symbolic, in providing a signal or emblem for the building's function or raison D'etre, is the use of allegory, which is defined by the Shorter OED as "the description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance". These sculptures are therefore visual metaphors: they represent functional significance transposed into visual meaning. The figures in front of the RIBA building [9] are good examples of this tendency - the naked man amongst buildings at the top of the W front signifying "architectural aspiration" [9C], and the two naked male and female figures on pillars to either side [9D-E] signifying "the spirit of Man and Woman as the creative forces of architecture" (Richardson 1984: 18). The signing function of these was still overt - they were thought by most people at the time to give the Institute "the stylish and appropriate uniform of a learned and professional society" (ibid). The figures carved by Eric Gill for the BBC building down the road [12] are also metaphorical or allegorical in this sense, in that the choice of subject of Shakespeare's Prospero and Ariel from *The Tempest* signified the passage of the air waves through the ether, as well as the Governors' role in this (Collins 1992: 43). Similarly, Gill's carving of *The Sower* in the entrance foyer [12J-L] was a direct metaphor for the 'broadcasting' function of the BBC, as in all probability were the abstract wave and bird friezes on the side of the building [12C,M-P]. This allegorical system was clearly thought - by the Governors of the BBC rather than the architect - as being the most appropriate visual sign to the man passing in the street to the corporate identity of the BBC. It is of interest that another allegorical layer of meaning was added by Gill himself, in his addition of the stigmata to the hands of the boy in the sculpture of Prospero and Ariel at the front of the building [12D-F], which turned the group into God the Father and God the Son.

Also falling into this category are those sculptures - on a very diverse range of buildings - which show workmen (women are the exception) engaged in various types of manual labour, or architects or engineers going about their business. Such a scheme provides the sole component for instance on Poplar Town Hall [2], as well as a fascinating

series of semi-abstract panels on the pillars of the porch of Walthamstow Town Hall [3D-T], and the five large reliefs on the side of the RIBA building [9F-I]. There are similar series of reliefs on other buildings in London of the period which are not discussed here, such as the large panels on the Derry and Toms store in Kensington High Street, the Gas showrooms at Hornsey, or the Fire Station at Lambeth. The five semi-abstract panels of tools on Regency Lodge at Swiss Cottage [20C,F-J] also fall into this category. While some of these are perhaps metaphors for the socialist work ethic embodied by the Town Halls (or, as at Hornsey, extolling the public virtues of the gas industry), others, such as those on Derry and Toms store, show little connection between their subject matter and the building's function. Their significance and raison d'être as sculptures must therefore be sought more in the general iconographic fashions of the times. A similar role must be sought for the delightful depictions of mainly rural industries around the SE doorway of the Adelphi building [19X1-Z1,A2-I2]. Perhaps also falling into this category are the figures of male and female actors over the doorway of the RADA building [7]. The fact that they have masks on their faces introduces another layer of metaphor entirely, perhaps referring to the mask-like nature of the building itself which conceals the goings-on inside it. Other masks (without figures) can be found on the Walthamstow Theatre [3A,U-V], and on the facade of the contemporary Dominion Theatre in Tottenham Court Road (not illustrated). Other examples of allegorical figures are those on the central facade of the Bank of England, where the two central female figures with cornucopias [10D,G-H] represent "productiveness", and the four male figures [10D,E-F,I-J] are metaphors for the idea of security provided by the Bank. It is often found that allegory is employed for its own sake, without any discernible reference to the overt function of the building. Such is the case with the large and imposing figures on the corners of the Adelphi building [1001-V1] which 'represent' (in ways which are not entirely clear) "Dawn", "Night", "Contemplation" and "Inspiration". The eight figures of the four winds on the London Transport building again have no reference to the function of the building, rather referring to their position high up on the structure, exposed to the winds coming from all directions (Cork 1985: 256).

In this instance, as in many others, the allegorical function of the sculptures is also combined with a complementary architectonic function - ie as elements having roles as points of focus which give a visual strength and emphasis to aspects of the structure of the building. This duality of function is, as Boeck has pointed out (1961: vii), as old as architectural sculpture itself - for example the Greek column or frieze which was "at once both sculptural form and architectural member". Such is the case with the large sculptures on the Adelphi [1901-VI], the figures in front of the bank of England [10A-B,D], which are all placed on corners or important points of vertical emphasis. In fact all the sculptures discussed here are more or less successfully integrated into the design of the buildings, such that the total ensemble forms, in general, a unified composition. The facade of the Corporation of London Meat Inspectors' Office [1] is to my eye a beautifully balanced composition in which the sculptures form part of a 'Modernist' pediment over the building. Similarly the frieze of decidedly non-symbolic (see below) figures on the facade of the London School of Economics in Clare Market [8] form a well-balanced part of the overall composition. The two facades of the RIBA building are also masterpieces of design in which figures and architectural spaces are very successfully married.

It is clear from these examples that architects viewed the incorporation of sculptural elements, where they were included, as an essential part of their conception and design of the building as a whole. This is explicitly stated by Holden, whose choice of the Four Winds as horizontal 'flying' figures was, even though they were clearly late additions, at least in part determined by the fact that they emphasised "the point of intersection between the strongly marked vertical line of the staircase" in the centre of the building and the "equally strongly marked horizontal line at seventh floor level" (quoted in Cork 1985:256). He was generally convinced of the importance of architectural sculpture, in that it "serves its very real function of giving emphasis where emphasis is needed at certain points of the building" (ibid: 260).

The 'humanising' and 'expressive' functions

Another important role of architectural sculpture for Holden was its power of giving "the final touch of intimacy which a building so often lacks. The human element is a much more important factor in building than Gill allows" (quoted in Cork 1985: 260). It is this 'humanising' function of architectural sculpture, overtly expressed by one of the foremost Modernist architects in England, which I see as perhaps its most important characteristic. I believe that this function elevates it above the purely symbolic or allegorical. This was appreciated by a contemporary critic of Holden's London Transport building, who understood the Four Winds sculptures as "a crucial means of asserting that modern transport should be life-enhancing . . . and not merely efficient" (quoted in Cork 1985: 256), rather than falling into the trap of suggesting that they directly 'symbolised' for instance the rushing winds in the underground tunnels. For Eric Kennington, a practitioner, architectural sculpture "fulfils one of the great needs of man . . . who seeks a definite statement of his beliefs embodied in the soundly poised, enduring stone" (1939: 189). I believe that all of the sculptures in this study have this quality, whatever their more direct symbolic or architectonic functions or associations. I would argue that the existence of this expressive 'human element' on otherwise plain Modernist buildings directly validates the hypothesis I have advanced.

This humanising aspect is particularly emphasised by the presence on many buildings of sculptures which have no direct symbolic function. Consider, for instance, the semi-allegorical figures of workmen engaged in their occupations on many buildings, referred to above. Beyond their symbolic or metaphorical function they all have this quality of celebrating the human dimension of the buildings themselves and the organisations they were built to house. The various sculptures on the Adelphi building [19], in my opinion one of the most successful marriages of fine architecture and interesting sculpture of the period, have a quite extraordinary playful quality which is found in few others. There are seemingly endless series of panels of flowers, birds and animals all around the building [19E,I,M,O,C1,E1,O1]. And the figures around the side doorways of the little children playing with hoops or carrying objects such as pigs [eg

19L-M,P-X] can have no symbolic significance connected to the function of the building, which was a speculative office development. They are, rather, expressive exercises in pure sculpture for its own sake. The signs of the zodiac around the N entrance **[19B-D,H-J]** - which are also found in other buildings in this and later periods - fall into the same category.

There are also a number of representations of the general theme of transport and speed, which show little functional relationship with the particular buildings. The lorries and planes and ships found for instance on 7-9 Dean Bradley Street **[15]**, the Adelphi building **[19A2-B2]**, and - surprisingly - as encised reliefs on the front of Barker's store **[17]**, all perhaps relate to the wider preoccupations of the times in art with speed and transport, as well as work and mobility in general.

Further examples of the non-functional humanistic emblems are the figures and mask-like faces seen on many buildings. The prow-like female figure on Abbey House **[13D]** has no obvious reference to the Abbey National Building Society, neither do the faces on 51-4 Gracechurch Street **[18A-C]**, or the Epstein-like masks on the otherwise highly decorated front of the Daily Telegraph building **[16F-H]**, have any apparent relationship to the functions of these buildings. One of the finest series of figure sculptures on any building of the period (apart from the the London Transport building **[11]**) - that on the facade of the London School of Economics in Clare Market **[8]** - has no discernible symbolic or functional aspect at all. It is sculpture for its own sake, presenting in a unique and highly expressive way a human front to the building as it faces the public and humanly occupied street.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would suggest that between these categories which are analysed above, there are many instances of overlap and multiple levels of meaning and symbol, metaphor and allegory. It is clear, however, that the 'humanising' aspect of the sculptures on buildings of the period - a realm in which the sculptures can be expressive for their own sake - is an important and pervasive theme. It seems to be a significant reason behind their creation, both in the minds of the architects as well as of the sculptors themselves. Indeed, it could be argued that the underlying purpose behind most if not all of the most obviously referential sculptures, which are most clearly the signs or emblems of the corporate identity of a building's original inhabitants, have a deeper level of meaning, in that they also present a 'humanising' face to the street. They are signifying more directly than any other means that the corporation or organisation in the building, whatever its perceived identity, does in fact have a human aspect, and that it is aware of the human presence of its building within what is after all a public space.

The presence of these sculptures on many of the most functional and overtly Modernist buildings of the period merely serves to emphasise the importance of this expressive element in the culture of the times, and goes a long way towards validating the hypothesis advanced earlier.

Further research

There are a number of research avenues which could be explored more fully than has been possible here. These topics of course would receive much fuller treatment if this dissertation was a thesis for an MA or a PhD degree, or if I was writing a book. These include the following:

1. The role of the architect(s) as 'polymath' designers - not only of the buildings themselves, but also of the internal fixtures and fittings, and of particular art and craft works which were designed with the building to fully complement and fulfill its function. Any architect with these design capabilities and sensitivities is likely to have been more amenable to the idea of including a sculptural component on his building. To identify these and examine their output in detail would seem more likely to advance this particular avenue of research.

2. The question as to how frequently architectural sculpture was included as an integral component in designs for buildings which were not in fact built - eg. those entered for architectural competitions. In her discussion of the RIBA competition of 1932 for a design for its own headquarters building, Richardson gives (1984: 8-11) a tantalising glimpse of such possibilities. She illustrates several modernistic plans, some of which (including of course the winner) showed such sculpture as an integral part of the proposed designs. Research in architectural archives could go a long way to assessing the incidence and overall importance of this sculptural dimension in the minds of the architects of the period. Proposal drawings, or early designs for buildings subsequently modified, are also likely to provide important evidence - as in the case with the early drawings for the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine [6].

3. The incidence of buildings of the period which were built but have since been demolished, which did or did not include a sculptural component. It seems improbable that research into architectural or photographic archives would not bring to light many interesting examples.

4. The actual thinking processes of architects, as well as of the sculptors themselves,

as possibly revealed in their correspondence or other archive material, about the role of art and craft in general, and sculpture in particular, in their sculpture or buildings and in their other designs. That this is a fertile research field has been shown in Richard Cork's detailed study of the London Transport building at St James' Park [11] (Cork 1985). In a general sense this thinking can be read from the buildings themselves, but such written material might well expand or revise - and would certainly complement - this rather inferential way of analysing the subject. An interesting paper could be written about the tension felt by sculptors concerning their need for freedom of expression as measured against the constraints of the architectural context.

5. Further investigation into the precise meaning and symbolism of these sculptures, which in a number of cases is uncertain. This is the province of art history, and as such is a research topic with well-defined methods and objectives. My own hypothesis that architectural sculptures comprise an important and valid class of sculptural expression (which I have not had the space to elaborate more fully) rests on the overall feeling, which I am sure could be substantiated more fully, that while they share many of the artistic and social concerns of the early 20th century (eg. speed and movement, transport, and a socialistic concern to represent for instance the worker and his occupations and tools), they have developed a specific sculptural language which is appropriate to their presence on buildings rather than in a gallery. The exploration of such symbolic and other art-historical references would go a long way to defining these sculptures as an independent class of visual expression with its own social and aesthetic parameters and determinants. It could on the other hand invalidate this hypothesis by emphasising the aspect of its organic unity with other forms of aesthetic expression.

6. The prevalence of figurative sculpture - and some similar assessment of the above factors - on Modernist buildings of the period in other parts of Europe and the USA (not to mention other places in Britain). The many publications dealing with buildings in American cities (see bibliography) give copious illustrations and discussion on the 'Art Deco' theme. There does not however appear to be any overall assessment of the importance of the figurative - as contrasted with the abstract, the geometrical and the

decorative - element of such schemes, nor any analysis of the symbolic or metaphorical significance of these sculptures in relation to the function of the building. Europe is, as far as I am aware, virtually uncharted territory (I stand here to be corrected - see the highly selective and un-ordered photographs of examples from several countries in Europe and the USA, in Aumonier 1930). My own familiarity with for instance Paris and Prague convinces me that the architectural sculpture of these and other places is a fertile field for further research.

7. Lastly - and arising to some extent out of the factors outlined in 5) above - it would be interesting to examine some of the antecedents of the architectural sculpture of the inter-war years to explore aspects such as tradition and innovation. While I have deliberately focussed on only a small and finite period in this dissertation, I am aware that there is a greater historical dimension whose analysis would greatly illuminate the subject. Similarly, it would be instructive to explore the development of these pre-war sculptures in the late 1940s and into the 1960s (and perhaps beyond). There are many examples, especially on London buildings, which show interesting aspects of both continuity and innovation, and which in my view strengthen my hypothesis about the validity of these sculptures as an independent and important class of sculptural expression.

American architecture - a selection:

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C Breeze (1991), Los Angeles Deco (New York).

C Breeze (1993), New York Deco (New York).

R J Clark & T S Hines (1983), Los Angeles Transfer: architecture in southern California, 1880-1980 (UCLA).

B B Capitan (1988), Deco Delights [Miami] (New York).

M F Grove (1995), Deco by the Bay [San Francisco] (New York).

M Kmerk & D W Wilhelm (1994) Rediscovering Art Deco USA (New York).

R Koolhaas (1992), Delerious New York (New York).

A Piladas (1977) Art Deco: Los Angeles (Los Angeles).

R A M Stern, G Gilmartin & T Mellins (1987), New York 1930 - architecture and urbanism between the two world wars (New York).

C Robinson & R H Bletter (1975), Skyscraper style - Art Deco New York (OUP New York).

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