

SYMBOLISM, MEANING AND FUNCTION IN  
ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE - A CASE STUDY:  
LONDON 1920-1940

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## PREFACE

The bibliographical mode which I have adopted for this dissertation (a modified version of the Harvard system) is that preferred for most academic archaeological journals, to not a few of which I have contributed. Historical journals (in which I have also published articles) adopt the practice of putting references in footnotes at the bottom of each published page, repeating each reference in an abbreviated form, and having no references in the text. This latter way of doing things I consider to be unnecessarily cumbersome and long-winded, in some cases generating more mental heat than illumination. For these reasons I have eschewed the use of footnotes altogether (with one exception). I do not therefore agree with the writer of the Guidelines for Dissertation Presentation that references in the text (the Harvard system) is a "less academic means of acknowledging sources". It depends on the academic tradition one is familiar with - a glance through any scientific Journal will find ~~by~~ few if any footnotes.

The sources examined for information about particular buildings are quoted fully at the end of the sub-section on each building, and are not repeated in the general bibliography except where referred to elsewhere. These sources are based on the cataloguing system of the RIBA Library, which is indexed under architects (and only those who are or were members of the RIBA), not under buildings. Where I have been unable to find the name of the architect of a particular building (usually from Pevsner's volumes on London) I have drawn a blank for any contemporary source. Doubtless this information exists somewhere - but this is not a PhD thesis.

The photographs which, as explained in the introduction to Part II, form an integral part of the presentation, are referred to in all parts of the text under the number for each building, with a letter for each photograph. The photographs for Barker's Store, Kensington High Street [17], are not unfortunately available (they were damaged in the processing).

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### **REFERENCES IN THE TEXT**

## INTRODUCTION

### **The objectives**

The object of this dissertation is to analyse and discuss some examples of buildings of the period 1920-40 in the 32 inner and outer London boroughs which are embellished with figurative (non-abstract) sculpture, with a view to asking questions and posing hypotheses about the function or role of these sculptures as architectonic, symbolic and/or aesthetic statements. They are also considered as a paradigmatic example which seems to validate a more general hypothesis concerning the need for expressive as well as formal design solutions within the history of design in general.

These are almost invariably relief sculptures, and generally form a physically integral part of the building as designed and built. Both major and minor buildings are discussed, but for the present purpose this group can only be a sample of some of the fifty or so buildings of the period which have a sculptural component. There are of course some significant buildings of the period which have no sculptures, and others whose sculptural decorative elements are entirely abstract in character. Since this is a study of sculpture rather than of architecture, these buildings tell another (but not irrelevant) story. Their existence is however a significant aspect of the range of evidence from which questions and hypotheses about the function of such sculptures in buildings of the period must be generated.

This dissertation consists essentially of three parts. In the first, the boundaries of the subject are defined and hypotheses posed. In the second, the description is given of the sculptures on twenty one buildings which are representative both of different building types, and of different types of sculpture. To these are added short comments about the buildings, the relationship of the sculptures to them, and the possible role the sculptures play as both architectonic and symbolic elements. This section could have been extended to twice its length with ease, but the restriction on length has necessitated such a curtailment. I believe, however, that enough material has been included to enable valid

questions to be posed and problems identified, and to provide the necessary descriptive material to validate the particular hypotheses about the expression and articulation of design strategies in various 'design cultures' which I have postulated below.

This section is complemented by photographs of each building and their sculptures, taken by myself for the purpose of this dissertation, to which are added a few from other sources. It must be emphasised that these are an essential part of the description of the buildings and sculptures, for the simple reason that they both demonstrate in an immediate visual way the relationship of the sculpture to the building, and of the building to the general townscape, and give important information about their character and style of the sculptures as designed objects.

The third part is an analysis of these sculptures in terms of their function, their symbolic or other meaning or lack of it, their styles as works of art, and their general relationship to the buildings which are the cause of their genesis. It must be emphasised that this dissertation is only incidentally about architecture, or the history of architecture, or the development in the period between the wars of the Modernist style or ethic in architecture. It is rather about sculpture, about the relationship of sculpture to architecture, the symbolism and meaning of this sculpture, and its stylistic development during the period in question. Above all, this sculpture is considered as an extra 'humanising' dimension to the purely architectonic statements of the buildings themselves, which goes beyond function and symbolic meaning, and which provides in my view a paradigm for the validation of the particular hypothesis which I am advancing about the necessity for 'expressiveness' in any high-profile design culture, at whatever period in human history.

I have therefore limited my comments about the development of Modernism in architecture in the 1920s and 1930s - a fascinating and complex subject - to brief descriptive statements about the buildings which provide the physical contexts for the sculptures. If this is one-sided, then it is consciously so. Furthermore, I am also acutely aware that it might well be felt that the selection of the 'sample' of the evidence has been

made - whether consciously or unconsciously - to prove the hypothesis, rather than to validate or invalidate it. But to undertake a complete examination of the subject in this hypothetico-deductive way (which is required for this dissertation - but see further remarks below) would necessitate an examination not only of all surviving buildings with sculpture, but also all those of the period - Modernist or otherwise - which do not have any sculptural or decorative component. In this way an objective view could be gained about the incidence of such sculpures on buildings, and whether they are the rule or the exception in architecture of the period. Such would be a very valid and interesting exercise, but it goes beyond what is possible to say in the space available.

## Earlier work

There has been little work to date specifically on architectural sculpture. Architectural sculpture in general is the subject of a book by W. Aumonier (1930), in which he makes some interesting period comments, and includes a selection of photographs of architectural and studio sculpture in Europe and the USA. These are however quite unsystematically arranged, are given no dates or contexts, and make arbitrary choices which are clearly not based on any aspects of quality, significance, function or symbolic content. Other smaller scale discussions include those by Eric Kennington (1939) who makes some important observations as a practitioner, and Laurie (1939) who discusses some examples in the USA. There are several studies of individual sculptors, such as that on Gilbert Bayes (Irvine 1954), and the work of other more well-known individuals such as Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore and Eric Gill can be approached through the copious catalogues, books and biographies on them and their works. However, perhaps the most important work to date on the subject is that by Richard Cork (1985), whose book has chapters on (amongst others) Epstein's sculptures on Holden's Strand building of 1907 (outside the period of this study), and of the same architect's London Transport building at St James' Park. These are both significant studies, and go into some detail about the genesis of both the building and the sculptures, the relationships between architect and sculptors, and their stylistic or art-historical contexts and background. These are however individual studies only, and lack a general overview of the practice of architectural sculpture in the periods of the particular buildings he has chosen. However, these studies together make - perhaps for the first time - the important premise of the general importance of art works commissioned for particular situations, places and spaces. Another study of a London building with sculptures, that of the RIBA in Great Portland Street, has been made by Richardson (1984), but this again has no references to the wider practice of architectural sculpture. Similar comments apply to the study of the sculptures at Hornsey (Cherry 1989). It is this gap which the present study is in part designed to fill. A more general survey of the history of architectural sculpture (Boeck 1961) has a useful discussion about the general relationship of sculpture to architecture

based on the whole history of sculpture from the Mycenaean period onwards, although his coverage of the 20th century is meagre.

There are furthermore several general surveys of London sculptures which perhaps fall into a class of their own. That by White and Gloucester (1971) deals with only a small selection of free-standing statues. Byron (1981) is the most useful, describing 206 sculptures in London between 1910 and the present day (ie 1980), although it hardly covers architectural sculpture. It does however have useful lists of some sculptures and short biographies of sculptors. Strachan (1984) covers the whole country with some useful descriptions of individual outdoor sculptures, but is highly selective - it lists only 98 from London (as against my own list of over 750) - with only five sculptures dating to the period before 1940. In contrast, there is an extensive literature on buildings and sculpture of the period in the various cities of the USA such as New York and Los Angeles (see USA bibliography). Most of the buildings discussed in this study were however described in some detail in contemporary architectural journals. These are generally mines of information, but are descriptive of individual buildings only, and rarely refer to more general topics such as iconography, symbolism, meaning or function.

## **A Hypothesis, and the value or relevance of a hypothetico-deductive methodology**

I have proposed in a former CTS essay the hypothesis that there are some general rules which govern the production of designed objects (from buildings to jewelry) throughout the history of culture, and the history of design in general. This hypothesis can be articulated in three parts:

1. That there has been throughout cultural history an infinite variety of formal and aesthetic solutions to the design and construction of cultural artefacts which fulfil a finite number of human functions.
2. That the greatest variety of design solutions will be generated for cultural artefacts which meet the most general and most culturally visible of these human functions.
3. That the higher and more universal is the order of function, and the greater cultural 'visibility', the greater will be the tendency on the part of designers to generate essentially non-functional sculptural evocations which embody visual and formal abstractions of the object, rather than create ideal ergonomically functional items per se.

These are detailed applications of the perhaps more general hypothesis that the capacity of expressiveness in those responsible for the production of cultural artefacts (from medieval peasant potters to sophisticated modern designers), will always find an almost infinite multiplicity of design solutions to the production of cultural artefacts, in spite of purely functional requirements of those objects. This is perhaps postulating the opposite of the Modernist dictum that 'Form Follows Function' - ie, 'Function will never be expressed in an ideal form'. The present study is therefore an analysis of the evidence from a small window in cultural history which, by pointing out some of the contradictory forces operating within it, seems to validate this hypothesis.

It can be argued that buildings are perhaps the most visible and universal of all cultural artefacts, in all societies, and at all periods in the past. The proposition that the development of the Modernist style in buildings in the 1920s and 1930s is but one of many possible solutions to the design of buildings on a historical timescale - which of course

includes later developments - hardly needs to be argued. The abstraction of design in buildings, the elimination of non-decorative elements, the concentration and simplification of formal qualities as an expression of the function of the building, were the hallmarks of the modernist movement in architecture in its purest form, which was perhaps seen most clearly in Germany.

If this particular design solution or ethic had been taken to its logical conclusion there would have been no sculpture or any other decoration on buildings. Yet the very period in which the Modernist aesthetic took hold was also one which saw the development of a whole range of abstract, formal and repetitive decorative devices on buildings, which is the Art Deco style. This style reached its peak of exuberance in the USA in the 1930s, and Deco buildings, many with figurative sculptures, can be seen in most of its major cities (see USA bibliography at end). The period also saw the development in England - as elsewhere in Europe and the USA - of a particular class of figurative sculpture on buildings, usually in the form of reliefs. These sometimes performed architectonic functions in articulating spaces and emphasising particular features of the buildings such as doorways. They also sometimes had symbolic functions, in announcing the purpose of the building and thus defining the corporate identity of the organisation which built it. But, as will be seen, these functions are not always obvious, and may be considered to be either subsidiary to an overall or more general aesthetic or expressive function. In several cases it can be seen that the expressive tendency has entirely subsumed these symbolic functions. In explanation for this apparent paradox it is suggested as a hypothesis that these sculptures on otherwise functional Modernist buildings must be considered as epitomising this universal human tendency towards expressiveness. They appear to be the result of the adoption of expressive design solutions for their own sake in situations where all other avenues for expressiveness in the design of buildings themselves had been eliminated.

As will be shown, these sculptures were not placed on every building of the period, and vary enormously in character and scale. There was always a tension between architects and sculptors, and between sculptors and the idea of architectural sculpture.

But this was a dynamic tension which allowed the interplay of varied forces (Boeck 1961), and which generated a variety of different solutions. But the fact that many of the sculptures were not themselves functional in a direct and literal way, in announcing or defining or symbolising the immediate function of the building or its occupants, and that they can be seen as 'humanising' and expressive elements on an otherwise functional building, can be seen as providing some validation for the hypothesis advanced above.

The detailed case studies described in part II also give rise to a whole series of questions and issues concerning the significance of this group of sculptures within the broader field of the history of sculpture - even though this is straying into 'art history', which is not the central theme of this dissertation. It seems quite extraordinary that because these works are in the open air, and originated as commissions tied to to particular circumstances and particular buildings which were placed in particular settings, they have been virtually disregarded in any broad survey of sculpture of the period, with only a few exceptions. It is as though Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were denied any place in the development of art because they were tied to a building. While <sup>15</sup> ~~those~~ theme has been taken up by Richard Cork (1985), he only addresses certain buildings and particular sculptures and sculptors as extended case studies, rather than analysing these sculptures as a group. There are aspects in many of the sculptures discussed which find echoes in other contemporary work. Some show clear cubist, vorticist, futuristic or abstract tendencies, and share much of the Modernist imagery (such as the themes of transport and speed) with other forms of sculpture, painting and the other arts, while still reflecting the functional and symbolic role which brought them into being. A strong case can I believe be made for arguing that this group of sculptures is as valid and as significant a category of sculptural expression as those mentioned above. I therefore put forward the subsidiary hypotheses that this group of sculptures should be considered, from both a functional and a stylistic point of view, as a recognisably distinct form in the history of sculpture, with its own vocabulary and some semblance of stylistic unity. In short, there is no reason for assuming that because they are tied to a particular building they are any less important in the history of sculpture than those moveable items

in the round which are shown in museums or in galleries, or dedicated sculpture parks or urban open-air sites. This consideration raises issues about the validity or importance of commissioned works as art, and about the necessity of recognising and accepting boundaries - of both time and place, as well as of material - as a component both of the genesis of a work of art, and of the way we value (or should value) sculpture as art. *There is, however, no space to argue this art-historical theme further.*

It is pertinent to say something here, necessarily briefly, concerning the conceptual methodology espoused here, especially in view of the introductory remarks made at the beginning of the module about the importance of formulating and testing hypotheses. In some important ways this is not I believe the most appropriate methodology for the analysis of the material at hand. A completely hypothetico-deductive (as opposed to a descriptive or inductive) methodology will proceed by the construction of conceptual hypotheses which are then tested in a deductive way against evidence derived from experiments generated by these hypotheses. This is appropriate to scientific enquiry, in which the phenomena under scrutiny and the laws under which they operate behave, and go on behaving, in ways which show regularities or irregularities which are the object of study. However, when the object of enquiry is cultural history - by definition the study of human cultural activity in the past - (or indeed any other type of history) this methodology is not appropriate, for the 'evidence' is for situations which have already happened in real time, which are essentially unique and unrepeatable, and the evidence for which is necessarily more or less incomplete. Its distinctive characteristic is that there is no more of it, so it cannot be the subject of experimental enquiry. There are only more and more refined or appropriate ways of recovering and interpreting this evidence, which by definition again is only an incomplete reflection of the way past activity took place. In conducting any historical enquiry therefore, it is necessary to work out a methodology which is appropriate to the finiteness and fragmentariness and uniqueness of historical evidence. Much written history, including cultural history, has been of a more or less implicitly inductive kind: the 'evidence' is described as it is available, patterns of

development, or past connections or regularities or irregularities, 'emerge' through research or enquiry, to be discussed and perhaps compared with other types of evidence, and to be contemplated as an adequate 'description' of what happened in the past. The problem with this methodology is that no valid historical statement can be made which is not unequivocally demonstrated by the available evidence. Furthermore, all such evidence is considered as being equally valid, without a hierarchy of importance or significance. If evidence is not available, there can be no historical problem, and no meaningful historical statements about the matter can be made. Furthermore, this does not generate any research strategies to recover new evidence, or to ask new questions.

While this may be a caricature, it serves to point out that this must give way to a third distinctive methodology which utilises some aspects of the hypothetico-deductive processes of scientific enquiry, but modifies it to take account of the unrepeatability and incompleteness of historical evidence. To do this it is necessary to propose developmental models which set up scenarios which combine elements of both temporal and functional explanation, in such a way that processes in the past - or rather the tangible evidence of these processes in the form of written material or cultural artefacts - can be interrogated, essentially by refining inferences about processes in relation to other known processes which can be identified as having operated in the past. These models cannot be tested in a meaningful deductive way, because these processes cannot be repeated. As descriptions of what happened in the past they are always more or less inferential. The value of these models is not therefore predictive - as with the case with a scientific hypothesis - but rather in their ability to posit regularities on a wider and wider scale of reference, or which are explanatory of a wider and wider set of functional relationships or interconnections.

Such is the case with the 'hypothesis' I have put forward here. It must be quite clear that these (and any others dealing with human activity in the past) can never have the same status as verifiable scientific hypotheses which can be tested against repeatable phenomena. As conceptual models, however, they can have an important explanatory power in a) - posing questions and finding meaning in disparate observations or neglected areas

of activity, b) - seeking regular patterns in events or situations which happened in the past, and c) - generating inferences about function and intention in human behaviour in the past. This methodology applies as much to recent cultural history as it does, say, to the study of Anglo-Saxon urban morphology and origins (in which field I have published quite a few academic papers and books).