3 - Walthamstow Civic Centre and Theatre, Forest Road, E17.

Date: 1937-42

Architect: F.D. Hepworth

Sculptors: Mr Cavanagh, Mr Armitage (Joseph)

Sculptures

There are three sets of sculptures on the building:

A - Five near-lifesize high relief figures on the centre wing of the north side (rear) of the building [W-Z, A1-C1].

B - Sixteen rectangular low relief panels on the sides of the pillars of the central front porticus [E-T].

C - Two small relief panels on the sides of the detached theatre to the East of the main building [U-V].

A. The five statues represent various attributes which it was probably thought appropriate for a civic centre to embody. Each attribute is described in a one-word inscription underneath the statue.

1. Work - a muscular workman holding a drill, with abstract building detail in front [B1].

2. Education - a young naked boy with arms outstretched, held by his draped mother [C1].

3. Fellowship - an old man in a robe, representing William Morris (see below) [not illust].

4. Motherhood - a naked boy holding onto his partly-draped mother [A1].

5. Recreation - a muscular semi-naked man holding a tennis racket [Z].

These are set on plinths within rectangular niches at first floor level. The design of
the sculptures fits with the sparse though significant architectural detailing of the building to give a sense of balanced composition. The central theme of 'fellowship' is in the guise of William Morris, whose saying "Fellowship is life and the lack of fellowship is death" is carved above the porticus of the theatre building to the east [A] (see further below).

B. The severely modernist porticus at the front of the building [A-D] is enlivened with 16 low relief panels on the sides of the 4 pillars, carved in an abstract geometrical style, showing different trades. These are: architect, excavator, concreter, bricklayer, stone carver, steel erector, carpenter, plasterer, joiner, heating engineer, slater, painter, smith, and gardener [E-T].

C. Two small but extraordinary semi-abstract relief carvings depicting 'Tragedy' and 'Comedy' above the ground floor windows on the sides of the theatre which is adjacent to the main building [U-V].

The building itself is in a modernist style, and built entirely of Portland stone. The theatre on its eastern side (now called the Assembly Hall) was designed as a whole with the civic centre. It does seem strange that the major sculptural statement of the building - the five large statues - should have been placed at the rear of the building overlooking allotments and playing fields, while the grand and imposing front has only small relief carvings on the sides of the pillars of the porticus. The fact that these panels are small, high up on the pillars, as well as being highly abstract and complex in design, means that they have little hope of being immediately understood and would have had relatively little immediate impact.

The sculptures were commissioned by the New Town Hall Committee of the Council in 1939. Three sculptors - Mr Cavanagh, Mr Armitage and Mr Parker - submitted estimates for subjects submitted by the architect. Those accepted were a) Mr Cavanagh's estimate for the 5 figures at the rear (£440), and b) Mr Armitage's estimates for the 16 panels at the front (£13.6s.8p each - a total of £213). Sketches were submitted to the Committee on
5th April 1939, and presumably executed soon after.

The 'Fellowship' theme celebrates the connection of the Morris family with the borough, in which William Morris was brought up. The motto 'Fellowship is Life and the lack of Fellowship is Death' was adopted as the borough's motto at the end of the last century, and appears for instance on all the material associated with the attempt to start the William Morris Gallery in 1934, which was only finally realised in 1950.

**Sources:** Phone conversation with Josephine Parker, Vestry House Museum. There is further documentation in the borough archives.


*Builder*, Nov 26 1943.