Date: 1926-8

Architect: Verner O.Rees, of Morley, Horder and Rees.

Sculptor: Alan Howes, Eric Kennington (internal).

Sculptures - There are three groups of sculptures:

1. Insects and other animals designed as part of the balcony railings to first floor windows (Gower St and Keppel St facades) [A-D], in the form of gilded cast metal plaques. These depict: rat, snake, mosquito (2 types), fly (2 types), flea, and tick (2 types) [F-L].

2. High relief over front entrance, depicting an ancient chariot with archers, pulled by horses in low relief, surrounded by heraldic serpent in high relief. The whole is very dominant, but integral in design with the frame around the door [D].

3. Low relief over internal doorway to the Library on the first floor - sculptor Eric Kennington. Material: cast cement, subsequently painted over with gloss paint. This depicts a native 'family' group - a man wrestling with or strangling a snake on the right, and a pregnant woman holding a child on the left, against a background of semi-abstract tropical vegetation [E].

The whole building, though in a rather severe modernist style, includes many stone and metal features (eg. railings around the building at street level, balconies, and the carved stone names higher up the building) [A-C] which clearly play a part in the overall design. These details give the building a marked unity of design.

The iconography of the reliefs, both above the main entrance and above the library door, is somewhat puzzling. The latter [E] has been interpreted as 'man strangling the snake of desire, with the bird of happiness flying away' (information from Mary Gibson, Library) - an interpretation based on the emphasis at the school of family planning. But,
it may be asked, why should man want to be 'strangling the snake of desire' (how about the woman's desires for the man?). It could as easily represent merely a native family group in the environment with which the students at the school were to be trained to deal.

The effect of the external sculptures, including the large carved names around all sides of the building on its upper level, the gilded metal plaques showing various tropical insects on the balconies, and the stone relief on the imposing entrance, combine to make a particularly emphatic statement about the function of the building and its presence within its immediate built environment. The puzzling element is the specific reference of the stone relief of the chariot and horses [D] to the role of a school of medicine. Here again is a neat subject for further research.

The existence of several drawn versions of the facade is of interest for the light throw on the development of the sculptural schemes. Approximately the present elevation is shown in the proposal drawing in the Architects' Journal (July 14 1926), which is different to an architect's drawing preserved in the LSTHM. The latter, presumably earlier in date, shows a different sculpture over the main entrance, no balconies to the windows (and therefore no plaques showing the insects), and the presence of a row of nine hexagonal cartouches above first floor level with carved reliefs of medical instruments and equipment. These were clearly intended to be directly symbolic of the School's function.

Sources:


Builder, Aug 1929.

Conversation with Mary Gibson, Librarian.