Date: 1932-4

Architect: G Grey Wornum

Sculptors: James Woodford and Bainbridge Copnall

Sculptures

West frontage, Portland Place:

1. Figure of naked man on tall column to right of entrance [E].

2. Figure of naked woman on tall column to left of entrance [D]. Both figures look upwards. Sculptor of both: James Woodford.

3. At upper level, high relief of naked man, surrounded by buildings in low relief, centrally placed above entrance[C]. Sculptor Bainbridge Copnall (these are in the same style as the reliefs on the S. facade).


South (Weymouth St) frontage

5. Five male figures in high relief, placed quite high up on the facade. These depict: Sir Christopher Wren, flanked by Painter, Sculptor, and (at the ends) Artisan (with crossed arms) and Mechanic [F-I, the fifth hidden by scaffolding]: Sculptor: Bainbridge Copnall.

The design of the building was the subject of a competition held in 1932 by the RIBA, which was won by G. Grey Wornum. The circumstances and background of the competition, as well as the building itself, are described in Robinson 1984. The design of the exterior was influenced by the Scandinavian neo-classicism of Gunnar Asplund's City Library in Stockholm (1920-8), while the design of the interior was for the time a radical and very 'modernistic' use of space. It was described at the time as "a perfect compromise between
classicism and the prevailing modernism" (ibid: 4).

Although lack of funds meant that the full expression of the original competition intentions relating to the ornament and interior crafts were not carried out, most of the sculptural decoration was kept. Both Woodford and Copnall designed and executed other relief panels (variously in stone, plaster and wood) for the interior spaces (see RIBA Journal, Dec. 1934). Although Pevsner describes the pillars on the Portland Place front as "aspiring but otherwise obscure" (1973: 335), they were understood at the time to symbolise "the spirit of Man and Woman as the creative forces of architecture" (Robinson 1984: 18). The central relief figure, surrounded by buildings, symbolises 'architectural aspiration'. Those on the southern facade were doubtless designed to symbolise the trades appropriate to architectural practice.

Contemporary opinions varied as to whether the symbolic element in the elevations did in fact express the function of the building. Most commentators were however apparently satisfied that it did, and that the exterior gave the Institute "the stylish and appropriate uniform of a learned and professional society" (ibid). The design did have its opponents, however, and in 1970 a letter to the RIBA Journal referred to the "pretentious archaic symbolism" of the sculptures. (Compare the comment by Gill's biographer on the BBC building down the road in 1984 as "pretentious").

To the modern eye (ie my own) the design as a whole is a masterpiece of careful composition, quite stunning in its simplicity. It seems, furthermore, to be a successful marriage of stylistic and figurative or symbolic elements. It is important to note that the sculptures are all well-placed for maximum visibility, such that they make an equal impact with the design of the building itself. They make a powerful statement about the higher unity of form, design and function in a way which in my opinion few other buildings in London - of any period - succeed in achieving.

Sources


M. Richardson, 66 Portland Place (RIBA Publications). (1984-.)