

ECCLESIASTICAL STONE  
SCULPTURE PAST AND PRESENT.  
RESTORATION, CONSERVATION  
AND NEW DIRECTIONS.

REPORT BY

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2008 CHURCHILL FELLOW

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## INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My fellowship provided me with the opportunity to study ecclesiastical stone sculpture on buildings past and present, and to experience visions for the future. I learned about the conservation, restoration and future directions of stone sculpture. The trip was undertaken between January and April 2010. I was able to study at a unique school of art in London and to visit buildings which provided me with examples of stone sculpture not available to me in Australia. The lessons that I learned and the experience I gained are difficult to capture in words, however, the experience has had a profound impact on both my personal and professional life.

I would like to thank the Churchill Trust who have made this trip possible; family and friends who encouraged me to apply in the first place; and the multitude of stone masons and stone sculptors who have left their mark on buildings world wide for me to read. Last, but not least, thanks to Mr Tom Hazel and Mr Arthur Andronis who were my referees; both men of great depth of understanding in things stone.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **ECCLESIASTICAL STONE SCULPTURE PAST AND PRESENT. RESTORATION, CONSERVATION AND NEW DIRECTIONS.**

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## HIGHLIGHTS

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I studied for one full term (11 weeks) at the City and Guilds of London Art School. My study was in stone carving/sculpture. This art school is the only one of its kind in England that teaches stone carving from a traditional background. Amongst the many projects it gives access to the Windsor Project for the Queen's private chapel at Windsor Castle.

Some highlights of my time in London were meeting Canon John White who is at Windsor Castle and is an expert in medieval iconography. Touring the non public areas of Canterbury cathedral. Exploring cities like Oxford and Cambridge, which are vast open air stone sculpture galleries. The two hundred or so students at the college who were passionately involved in different courses, not just stone carving.

After England I went to Paris for four days. Highlights here included touring St Denis, the birthplace of gothic architecture/sculpture and Notre Dame Cathedral. My main aim was to pick up on the subtleties of stylistic and technique change as the architecture transitioned from Romanesque to Gothic

Lastly I went to Barcelona in Spain, where I studied Antoni Gaudi's cathedral - Sagrada Familia. Highlights included meeting one of the architects, Mr Mark Bury; also picking up on the influence of styles preceding this building. My main aim was to study how a building dictates what kind of sculpture is put on it.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The major lessons learned over this trip were the advanced carving techniques learnt at London City and Guilds Art School; the power, importance and a working knowledge of iconography (the language of symbols); and the way that architectural styles influence what sculpture is added to the building.

## DISSEMINATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Simply put, there is an enormous vacuum of experience and knowledge in Australia regarding stone sculpture. I plan to disseminate what I have learned by teaching in a formal setting; implementing in a practical sense in buildings in Australia through my stone masonry business; and speaking to interested groups.

## FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

### **LONDON:**

11<sup>th</sup> January - 26<sup>th</sup> March 2010  
City and Guilds of London Art School.

Visited: Parliament House  
Canterbury Cathedral  
Salisbury Cathedral  
City of Oxford  
City of Cambridge  
Museums throughout London

### **PARIS:**

26<sup>th</sup> March – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2010

Visited: St Denis Cathedral  
Notre Dame Cathedral

### **BARCELONA:**

31<sup>st</sup> March – 6<sup>th</sup> April 2010

Visited: Segrada Familia  
Old gothic section of the city of Barcelona  
Various other Gaudi buildings.

## MY PROJECT

My fellowship provided me with the chance to undertake something I had wanted to do for many years but for various reasons was unable to do. Having lived in England for two years, twenty odd years ago, I knew what was on offer. In those two years I worked on numerous cathedrals and historic buildings. I learned skills that would be used in my business on returning to Australia. My fellowship enabled me to build on the skills of a stonemason I had learned in England and the skills I had developed on my own as a stone sculptor. I could not have learned what I did in Australia. My fellowship was to study ecclesiastical sculpture past and present; its conservation, restoration and new directions. In the process of learning I discovered many new fields of inter-related study such as iconography (the language of symbols), and the origins of man's creativity as evidenced by history and archeology, to name just a few.

Iconography is of particular importance as it enables a sculptor to tell a story, pose a question, or challenge the mainstream of life. The symbols the present day sculptor can use are by no means limited to medieval iconography. We use symbols all the time, for example, a modern symbol is the gold arches of McDonalds. The bulk of medieval symbols are not understood by most people today, however, the bulk of people know the meaning of the golden arches. The concept of a symbolic language that transcends cultures, is as understandable today as it was 500 years ago, and will be understood by future generations, captivates me because of its relevance to faith driven stone sculpture. The desire is for the piece to be always relevant; always accessible.

The fellowship plan was to visit London, Paris and then Barcelona. In London I studied at the City and Guilds of London Art School for their entire Spring term. In Paris I visited St Denis and Notre Dame Cathedrals; and in Barcelona I visited Segrada Familia, which is Antoni Gaudi's masterpiece of church architecture.

London is an amazing place. It pulses with energy. The arts, right across a broad spectrum, are integral to everyday life here. Exhibitions of various masters are continually running. In particular for me, as a stone sculptor, the industry of stone sculpture is vibrant and alive. The skills of the stone mason stretch from an unbroken line back down the ages. Sadly, centuries of tradition, techniques and artistic endeavour have largely dried up here in Australia.

My main focus in London was to study stone carving and sculpture at the City and Guilds of London Art School. This school teaches the arts from a traditional perspective. It is the only school of its type in England and there is nothing even remotely like it in Australia. Courses on offer ranged from fine art painting and sculpture to wood carving, gilding and stone carving.

The instructors at the art school were drawn from a wide field of disciplines such as free carving, or the exacting discipline of finding points of reference using calipers or a pointing mechanism. They work both as instructors and freelance carvers to the stone industry. The idea behind this is to allow the instructors to keep in touch with what is happening sculpture-wise in the present. The students were drawn from a wide background of work fields and age groups: graphic designers in their fifties, office workers in their forties, down to twenty year old stone masons. All were drawn to expressing their creativity in stone. The level of passion and commitment was highly contagious. Talking stone, and not much else than stone, contributed to spurring everyone on to greater heights. For me, being able to be in 'art brain' for nearly three months was, in itself, a tremendous journey of discovery.

My first task at the art school was to model a human skull in clay using calipers to locate a few key points and then completing it just by observation. This gave me an understanding of structure under the skin. The skull is what the muscles sit on, which is overlaid by the skin. In my mind's eye I can now construct and move around the skull, which had dramatically impacted on my ability to sculpt a head. After this came carving a replica of Michelangelo's Bruges Madonna (just the head) using measurements and triangulation with calipers to a certain extent, then free carving. To follow in the steps of a master stone carver such as Michelangelo was breath taking. The feeling of understanding and being part of the rhythm of her head scarf as it spilled down the side of her head was to understand and partake in the exact space as the master himself! The subtleties of plane and form were breathtaking as they were searched for and found. My Madonna appears in the photograph below.



After this I carved the head of a young boy; same methodology but this time exploring finishes and textures to add to the piece's expressability.

My previous experience with stone freed me from having to learn how to use all the different tools and allowed me to capitalise on my time here. The tool range available here was huge and was directly responsible for some assault and battery on my credit card.

One of the projects I became involved in was the Windsor Project. This project was to replace the sculptures on the exterior of the Queen's private chapel at Windsor Castle. Normally they would be replaced by faithful replicas of the old. However, in this case the committee in charge decided they wanted sculptures that were relevant to today but blended with the old medieval Gothic architecture of the chapel.

So my art brain started turning along the lines of a sculpture which reflected the church community and the community at large; that could be 'read' by people of all ages and in any century; and that left the viewer open to pursue their own direction. Its title is 'Community'. It was an attempt to bring past, present and future aspects of this fellowship together in one stone sculpture. The original clay model, which was only 150 x 150mm in size, was approved to be taken to a full size clay model, which appears in the photos below. A few minor adjustments were asked for and the final approval will hopefully follow soon, whereupon I will carve it in stone.



Weekends were largely free which enabled me to explore London and surrounding cities. The British Museum proved to be a major highlight; to 'do' it properly requires days. I spent one whole day just in the Egyptian and Assyrian sections. In particular the Assyrian Lion Hunt reliefs held me captive for hours. These reliefs were made around 640 BC and displayed a depth of mastery, the equal of any of the later masters. The reliefs moved with a fluidity which was astonishing. By studying these reliefs you can learn so much about the sculptor's technique, even feel that you have got to know this long dead master somewhat. You feel in your minds eye, in your 'art brain', how the long dead master sculptor would have felt as he carved the various elements.

Canterbury Cathedral was another highlight. I managed to get a tour into all of the non-public areas as a friend worked at the cathedral as a stone mason. Another aspect to sculpture on buildings is how the pieces were placed on and in the building. Some of these sculptures weigh several tones. Today we have massive cranes and electrical winching devices, however, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century they had none of these. Up in the tower over the crossing at the cathedral is the original 13<sup>th</sup> century wooden hoist complete and still in working order. It is a massive wheel somewhat like a water mill wheel powered by a man walking inside it (see photo below). It is simple and effective and quite capable of lifting heavy sculptures.



The restorations of the numerous sculptures on the building were a mixture of faithful copies and new takes on the Gothic theme. It was interesting to see the shift from exact copying of all sculptures to a blend of exact copying and new ideas in the Gothic style depending on the original sculpture's historical merit.

Conservation of those sculptures of great historical significance is an area of great debate. At best, attempts to conserve these pieces in an outdoor environment will slow but not stop the decay process. Eventually the piece must be either re-carved or taken inside out of the weather. The Assyrian reliefs, mentioned previously, are good examples of stone sculptures of enormous historical importance being conserved by simply bringing them inside into a stable environment.

Reluctantly I tore myself away from London and set off for Paris. Paris, the city of light; four days was simply not long enough. My mission here was to visit St Denis and Notre Dame Cathedrals. St Denis is reputedly where the Gothic style first found its expression. I wanted to see what form the sculpture took at the point of transition from Romanesque to Gothic; how the overall style of the building reflected its Romanesque roots. The sculpture on the outside of the building ranged from this transition period to much later, as the building went through several restorations and desecrations. The transition of the sculptures from Romanesque to Gothic seems to come in the form of fluidity. They take on an air of vitality, movement and suppleness. They transition from slightly stiff, flat and out of proportion to amazingly energetic sculptures that seem to burst out of their confining molded surrounds.

The building as a whole also transitions from the heavy Romanesque to the much lighter Gothic, mirroring the sculpture. This theme of transition occurs in all architectural styles and sculpture. New movements whether they are in architecture or sculpture always spring from something. They are a process; a reaction to the continuous creative drive to express that we humans have, a process we are all caught up in today.



The top photo is an example of 13<sup>th</sup> century Gothic sculpture. The bottom photo, from the same building at St Denis, is an example of the original Gothic sculpture from 12<sup>th</sup>

century. This early Gothic sculpture is quite stiff, disproportionate and flat, compared to the suppleness and the springing tension of the later work. Both pieces reflect the brilliance of their times.

Notre Dame was breathtaking, a place where the building shouts out the Christian message. Everything about it, sculpture and architecture, blend into a balanced whole. You would need days to unlock all the stories within the main Christian story. The sculptures convey a sense of movement. They fit perfectly on and in the building. Technically and compositionally they are brilliant. As at St Denis they spring out of the confines of the mouldings around them.

One night I attended a concert of Gregorian chanting at the cathedral. I have never experienced anything quite like this. The building was in full voice. It was functioning as it was designed to do. The music of the day (Gregorian chant) filled the building as it would have centuries ago. Everything blended into one - faith, music, sculpture, architecture and people. I found the veil between our normal existence and the eternal world of faith thinned and disappeared, taking not only me but others on a journey. Such is the power of the arts.

The primary lesson I drew out of this was that each sculpture I do should strive for an expressability which takes people on a journey and communicates that which is beyond the normal. As I left a full moon cast its light over the building, topping off one of the most amazing experiences I have had. There was so much more to Paris; the people, the language, the food and the French culture. I shall have to return.

Last stop before arriving home in Australia was Barcelona. In particular I had come to study Antoni Gaudi's masterpiece of architecture, Sagrada Familia. How the design impacted on the style of sculpture; did it limit the sculpture to one style or did it free the sculpture? Sagrada Familia was started in the late 1800's and was unique in its day. It still is. The building is loosely based on the Gothic style but the end result is in a category of its own. The sculptures dating from the initial period of building are realistic in style, set into a free form overall design. Whereas the sculptures belonging to the current phase of building are carved in a blocky style but are still highly expressive. The building's style allows different types of sculpture to be accommodated, as evidenced by the fact that both the realism of the early work and the blocky style of the later work harmonise with the underlying fabric of the building. The result is breathtaking. This visit helped me appreciate the interplay between the style of a building and its decorative elements.

## CONCLUSIONS

Iconography, the language of symbols, is the vehicle for expressing the intent of a sculptor. What use is a sculpture on an ecclesiastical building if no one can understand it? In this context, the symbolic language must be used by the stone sculptor to convey the message to people today and into the future. So much of contemporary sculpture is a mystery to the viewer. It almost needs to come with a detailed explanation of what it means. Sculpture in the ecclesiastical context needs to capture the viewer, invite them in and allow them to discover the meaning in the piece.

In Europe, the depth of knowledge of technique in stone sculpture is extensive and thorough. Knowing these techniques allows the sculptor to approach a particular piece in a number of ways to gain the maximum expressability. This applies to stand alone stone sculpture as well as sculptures placed on buildings. I have affirmed that new approaches to stone sculpture can co-exist with medieval buildings quite harmoniously (e.g. Windsor project); and that there is a place for stone sculpture on buildings being constructed today.

## IMPLEMENTATION

I have already begun to implement what I have learned into the general community. Of note, I was asked to give a talk to an arts oriented church which was highly successful and I have been asked to return for a second talk. I am also implementing the findings from my project directly into my stone masonry business. All this will be ongoing but still to come is the formal teaching which I plan to undertake with anybody – artists, tradesmen and the general public – who are interested in developing their skills in stone sculpture.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The gathering and teaching of all that I have talked about is essential to the maintenance and furthering of the capabilities of stone sculptors in Australia. I believe that the relevant bodies need to foster this learning with concrete initiatives. Both resources and financial support are required. These organisations range from art schools to industry bodies. Individuals also need to accept the challenge to push themselves to greater heights.