

John Roberts

Gifted sculptor keeping alive the traditions of his calling in wood, stone and clay

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The modern art world tends to dismiss as craft the kind of sculpture that harks back to an earlier time. However, John Roberts, who has died aged 56, not only kept the old skills alive but imparted life and feeling to wood, stone and clay to a rare degree. His figure and architectural ornament carvings appear on many ecclesiastical and secular buildings, and he was also a brilliant draughtsman and an inspiring teacher.

Born in Neath, Glamorgan, Roberts was orphaned as a child, and brought up by a family who remember that, at the age of four, he accurately modelled a dragon in plasticine - complete with scales. After taking an art and design diploma at Gloucestershire School of Art in 1968, he was awarded a place at the Royal Academy. However, his sensitive nature could not take the loud music near his first-night lodgings, and he returned to Wales, where he worked for eight years as a labourer.

By chance, while visiting Westminster Abbey in 1976, Roberts encountered Arthur Ayres, who was involved in carving replacement sculpture and ornaments for the building. Roberts's portfolio so impressed Ayres that he recommended the young man for the restoration, carving and gilding course at the City & Guilds of London Art School. On leaving, in 1978, Roberts worked with Ayres at Westminster and other cathedrals, and on Chichester market cross. In 1982, he returned to the City & Guilds Art School to teach.

Roberts's drawings, both of historical details and of ideas for figure and abstract sculpture, are particularly fine. His whole being went into them, and into the search for truth. Wherever he went, he drew sculpture and ornaments, and took innumerable photographs. He read voraciously around the history of sculpture and architecture, and was steeped in the study of Christian and eastern spirituality. Consequently, he was familiar with a wide range of styles, not just from looking at them but because he knew how they had been carved.

When he was invited to carve a replacement panel for the crumbling Romanesque frieze

on the west front of Lincoln cathedral, few believed that a convincing version could be achieved. The doubters were amazed; when they asked how he had done it, Roberts replied, "All you need is a blunt chisel and a glass of Guinness." He also used, of course, his deep understanding of the style, and his consummate carving skills. Between 1992 and 1996, he carved eight more panels.

Earlier, Roberts had carved a figure of St Bartholomew for Failand church, near Bristol, and, using local limestone, an angel for Lincoln cathedral, based on - and replacing - a 13th-century original. In 1991, he was commissioned by John Bysouth Ltd to carve, in Portland stone, the tympanum detail for the replacement pediment at Woburn Abbey. For this piece, which was 32ft x 7ft, Roberts won first prizes from the Stone Federation and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

In 1998, he carved three of the 20th-century martyrs whose statues now adorn the west front of Westminster Abbey: Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed in his church in El Salvador; the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia, who was murdered after the 1917 revolution; and Manche Masemola, a teenage girl beaten to death by her mother after converting to Christianity in the Transvaal. Roberts modelled the girl's arms and feet on those of his companion, the sculptor Silvia MacRae-Brown, and his sculpture is recognised as the most impressive of the group of 10.

In 1999, he was commissioned to make the 9ft bronze Angel On The Green for a development in Islington, and also carved a marble pietà of great sensitivity for the church at Coleorton, in Leicestershire. More recently, he carved two sculptures for Sands, a charity for the stillborn child; the first was a sleeping baby, done in Portland stone, for the national memorial arboretum in Staffordshire; the second, which he struggled against his cancer to complete, was of a baby nestling in a hand, for East Sheen cemetery.

Before his death, Roberts was beginning to be recognised for his portrait heads of Samuel Beckett, of a student, Frances Kells, and for his three-quarters life-size figure of Silvia MacRae-Brown.

His greatest regret was that the necessity of earning a living had prevented him from developing his abstract sculpture; it was only in recent years that he was able to draw away from the influence of historical styles. He took part in few mixed exhibitions, but was shown at the Royal Academy in 1995. He had only one solo show, at the Casson Gallery, Eastbourne, in 1989.

As a teacher, Roberts had exacting standards, was fair in his judgment and loved his students. He did not volunteer information easily but, when asked, was generous of his knowledge. He taught all styles of ornament and figure work with great authority, mostly by demonstration, and inspired students and colleagues to keep alive these

increasingly neglected skills. His monument will be not only his sculptures, but also his legacy in his students' minds and hands.

- John Emmanuel Roberts, sculptor and teacher, born March 18 1946; died November 1 2002

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