

# Obituary: John Roberts ; Unworldly Sculptor in a Classical and Medieval Tradition



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JOHN ROBERTS produced some of the finest modern carving on English ecclesiastical buildings, but died unknown to the general public. He was a self-effacing, unworldly man who declined to exploit superb abilities as a sculptor and draughtsman for personal gain. By the time of his early and unexpected death, Roberts had a magisterial knowledge of classical and medieval sculpture and decoration enabling him to match styles with uncanny insight.

He was born in Neath, Glamorgan, in 1946, the sole child of parents who both died young when he was about eight. He gained his diploma in art and design, sculpture, at Gloucestershire College of Art, Cheltenham, then was offered a place at the Royal Academy Schools under the distinguished, recently appointed sculpture master Willi Soukop.

Disturbed by loud music at night in his lodgings, Roberts chose to leave the schools. A stubborn streak made him refuse family help to continue full-time studying, and he supported himself for several years labouring on the railways and steelworks. During a 1976 visit to Westminster Abbey, he met the sculptor Arthur Ayres, doing restoration work. Ayres was so impressed by Roberts's drawings that he despatched him to the City and Guilds of London Art School. The Principal, Roger de Grey, accepted John as a student, said that he would find a scholarship for the hard-up Welshman and gave him a pound to buy lunch.

Roberts proved a distinguished student on the restoration course. In 1977, the school held an exhibition of students' work at Guildhall, in the City. The carver Dick Onians remembers:

There were superb ornament drawings but some "sang" even more than the others. It was years later, when I showed John a photograph I had taken, that I learnt that he had done these.

After leaving in 1978 with his certificate in carving and gilding, Roberts was employed for two years as a stone-carver at Westminster Abbey. He also did work at Wells Cathedral and Chichester market cross. In 1982, he was invited to City and

Guilds as a part-time teacher, in wood-carving as well as his beloved stone. He was equally at home in wood, limestone, marble and clay. He and Onians were colleagues for some 20 years, Onians gradually coming to know this private, self-contained man:

John was a voracious reader on his subject. He had a nose for rare books, which he bought and often lent to students. Wherever he went he photographed sculpture and ornament and, above all, drew. His knowledge was vast and, because it was informed by a mastery of technique, was probably unique. I remember once trying to identify a photograph of part of a little-known Greek statue. He recognised it immediately. One of his chief regrets was that he had never been to Greece.

He was an inspiring teacher:

You could always recognise the sensitivity and authority of his carving within a student's work. Although he often exasperated students by his disappearances, he could usually be tracked down in the library with his head in a book or found in the sculpture school where a large part of him longed to be . . . John didn't dismiss all conceptual art, but did deplore the way the art schools are neglecting the basic skills of drawing, modelling and understanding human form which he was so very good at, which he was able to transmit. His greatest gift was in his drawing, which was out of this world.

Shortsighted, Roberts never learned to drive, probably could not have afforded a car and had no interest in money. He was known for his absent-mindedness, and took an especial interest in religion and spirituality, particularly Buddhism and Christianity. He was a profoundly deep thinker. He had an enormous honesty in himself, and was constantly searching for the truth, not only in himself and in his material, but in a sort of external truth which he wanted to run through everything.

Although he only had one solo show, at the Casson Gallery, Eastbourne, in 1989, Roberts's reputation at the schools, appearances in mixed exhibitions and membership of the Royal Society of British Sculptors led to commissions. He was included in "Sculptors' Drawings", at the Sladmore Gallery, and had sculpture in "The Art of Embellishment", a City and Guilds group show at the Shad Thames Gallery, both in 1994; showed sculpture at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1995; contributed two striking heads, of the playwright Samuel Beckett and of a student, Frances Kells, in a Society of Portrait Sculptors exhibition in Cork Street in 1999 and a head of Christ, inspired by the Turin Shroud, the following year.

The commission for a figure of St Bartholomew at Failand Church, near Bristol, completed in 1987, was followed by a tympanum in Portland stone at Woburn Abbey in 1991. It replaced an original 32 feet by 7 feet and was awarded first prizes by both the Stone Federation and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Roberts began working at Lincoln Cathedral in 1989, completing an angel in local limestone to replace a 13th-century original. While staying in a grace-and-favour house in the close, he spent his spare time clambering around the roof taking photographs, adding to a huge collections of archival material that informed his expertise.

Between 1992 and 1996, he returned to the cathedral to face a tough challenge. Large Romanesque panels on the west front had deteriorated so badly that the authorities feared it was impossible to replace them. Various proposals, such as laser copying, were suggested. Then Roberts was invited to carve a sample, which worked. When he was asked, in amazement: "How did you do it?" he replied, quickly and dryly, "All you need is a blunt chisel and a glass of Guinness." He carved further panels and trained others to carry on the work.

Another important job, in 1998, was carving life-size statues for the west front of Westminster Abbey. Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia and Manche Masemola, a young African girl, were part of the 10 Twentieth Century Martyrs series. The African girl's arms and feet were based on those of Roberts's close companion of 14 years, the sculptor Silvia MacRae Brown. John completed fine sculptures of her, including a notable three-quarter-length seated in Portland stone.

Further commissions followed in 1999. There was an exquisite, sensitive marble Pieta for the church at Coleorton, Leicestershire; also the Angel on the Green, a stylised 9ft bronze for a development in Islington. "He was an old-fashioned academic sculptor if you like," says Onians, "but he knew how to develop forms so that they read well from a distance."

Two final commissions came from Sands, a charity concerned with the stillborn child, for which he took only a modest fee. The first was of a sleeping baby for the National Memorial Arboretum, Lichfield. As this summer Roberts carved the second Sands piece, a huge hand with a baby nestling in it, he struggled against failing strength. Unknowingly, he was desperately ill with cancer as daily he staggered off with a nine-inch angle grinder, a heavy machine with a huge kick, to work in Sheen Cemetery, where the sculpture stands.

Although Roberts made so much of lasting quality, "he was frustrated that he did not have enough time to focus more on his own abstract work", Silvia MacRae Brown says. He lamented to Onians that, when in the late 1980s he had found time to do his own original carving, he kept detecting medieval lines. It took him some time to find his style. A planned memorial show should display the breadth of his achievement.

John Emmanuel Roberts, sculptor and teacher: born Neath, Glamorgan 18 March 1946; died Friston Forest, East Sussex 1 November 2002.

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