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Classical sculptor who replaced medieval cathedral carvings and felt a deep empathy with the original craftsmen

A quiet, gentle man whose twin passions were religion and classical sculpture, John Roberts enjoyed three concurrent and interweaving careers.

In each of these his deep spirituality ensured remarkable results. As an original sculptor, he produced such serenely beautiful modern statues as his Twentieth Century Martyrs for Westminster Abbey and the statue of a stillborn baby for a memorial garden in Lichfield. As a replacement carver, brought in to recreate cathedrals' medieval carvings after they had become badly eroded, he put himself inside the original craftsmen's skin to create something as fresh and vibrant as the original. And finally, as a teacher, so clearly did he impress upon his students his sense of the place of art and craft within a spiritual culture that colleagues were able to recognise his own sensitivity within the work of some of his best pupils.

"He was," says his teaching colleague, the sculptor Dick Onians, "a man for whom the truth was probably the highest ideal, and not just moral truth, but the truths in himself, the truths in the world, that are very difficult to express." He expressed them in his work.

An only child and orphaned young, John Emmanuel Roberts took a diploma in art, design and sculpture at Gloucestershire College of Art in Cheltenham. He then won a place to study sculpture at the Royal Academy Schools in London, but, ill at ease in the hubbub of the capital, where noisy neighbours kept him awake at night, he decamped for the comparative peace of Wales before attending a single class: a spur-of-the-moment decision that he greatly regretted later.

But all started to come right for him when, at 30, he encountered the sculptor Arthur Ayres, then in his seventies, doing restoration work at Westminster Abbey. His future was sealed when he showed Ayres some ornamental drawings — always a great strength of his. The older man, a teacher at the City and Guilds of London Art School, encouraged him to apply for a scholarship there, and this time Roberts stayed the course, graduating in 1978 with a certificate in carving and gilding, and going on to carve at Westminster Abbey, Wells Cathedral and Chichester Market Cross before returning to the school in 1982 as a part-time teacher of carving.

The City and Guilds became so much part of his life that he even reported for duty at the beginning of the present term, when already suffering from the cancer that would kill him a few weeks later.

Students warmed to him, often becoming friends for life and joining him on trips out of school. His fellow sculptor Anthony Stones remembers Roberts and a handful of his pupils at work in the sculpture tent at the annual arts festival at

Waterperry, near Oxford: "They were such a happy lot. I shall never forget the sound of their chisels and mallets in unison. Chink, chink, chink. The kind of sound you might have heard in a British cathedral at any time over the past thousand years."

Some might have thought Roberts too quiet for a teacher, but his carving demonstrations galvanised students, teaching them what words could never do, and when he had a chisel in his hands the mood was almost one of worship.

When not teaching, Roberts was in demand as a replacement carver, taking on, without realising it, Arthur Ayres's mantle when the older man died in the 1980s. Indeed, so many were his replacement commissions that he had all too little time for his own abstract and imaginative work. This was a cause of some regret, however much he enjoyed emulating the work of medieval carvers at great churches such as Lincoln Cathedral.

At Lincoln, in 1989, he created an angel out of local limestone to replace a severely eroded 13th-century original on the southeast transept, an experiment so successful that he was invited to return between 1992 and 1996 to carve replacements for large, badly deteriorated and structurally unstable panels of a nationally important Romanesque frieze on the northern side of the western front, complete with graphic scenes of humans 3ft high being tormented in Hell for offences such as sodomy and avarice.

With one school of thought preferring to consolidate the rotten stone and leave it in situ, rather than commission an artist to make a free copy, this was a bold step for the cathedral authorities, but Roberts was more than equal to the challenge. Appropriately enough, since the original panels had obviously been produced by more than one medieval carver, he took on an assistant, the cathedral's then conservator Alan Micklethwaite, who reproduced three of the eight panels under Roberts's guidance.

The secret of Roberts's success lay in his refusal to copy slavishly with the aid of measuring tools. He preferred to make a free copy, based on observation of the original, a deep understanding of the culture of its time and a profound rapport with the medieval carver.

"He had great powers of focus, and he got himself as much as possible into the skin of the people who made these panels," says Micklethwaite. "One half-panel, which shows Dives, the rich man from the parable in St Luke's Gospel, being pitched into Hell by a demon, was a particular challenge because it is a very crude as well as a powerful piece. The test was to carve it in this primitive style but still keep the power, and I remember John saying he should maybe go to the pub for a while and come back to it after a few beers."

Roberts was scarcely better known than the anonymous medieval carvers whose work he replaced. He won admiration but no great publicity for his 1987 figure of St Bartholomew for the church at Failand, near Bristol, but there were awards from the Stone Federation and the Royal Institute of British Architects for his 1991 replacement tympanum in Portland stone at Woburn Abbey.

Similar recognition is overdue for the exquisite lifesize figures of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia and Manche Masemola, a young African girl, which were his contributions to the series of ten Twentieth Century Martyrs sculpted for Westminster Abbey in 1998. The African girl, considered by many to be the most beautiful sculpture of the ten, was possibly the

piece Roberts himself loved most, her arms and feet being based on those of his companion of 14 years, the sculptor Silvia MacRae Brown, who survives him.

In 1999 his 9ft abstract bronze sculpture, *Angel on the Green*, was erected on the site of a new development in Islington, and his heads of the playwright Samuel Beckett and a student, Frances Kells, were exhibited by the Society of Portrait Sculptors, which, the following year, gave pride of place in its annual exhibition to his stone head of Christ, inspired by the image on the Turin Shroud.

Also in 2000, Roberts produced a statue of a stillborn baby, carved from Portland stone, for the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society's garden at the National Memorial Arboretum in Lichfield. The society's director, Neal Long, remembers its impact: "There was a general gasp when it was unveiled, and you could see that parents present were identifying it with their own babies." Another commission from the society followed — for a sculpture of a baby nestling in a huge hand — and Roberts worked on this piece, in Sheen Cemetery, while already desperately ill.

John Roberts, sculptor, was born in Neath, Glamorgan, on March 18, 1946. He died of cancer at West Dean, East Sussex, on November 1, 2002, aged 56.