

University of Dundee

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Published in:
Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History

Publication date:
2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Jarron, M. (2019). 'The immortality of stone, and the immortality of art': A brief history of Public Sculpture in Dundee. *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, 24, 20-26.

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"The immortality of stone, and the immortality of art" – A brief history of Public Sculpture in Dundee

Matthew Jarron

Where to start in considering the history of public sculpture? Dundee is unusual in having a prehistoric stone circle, the Balgarnho stones (c.5000BP), inside the modern city boundaries, so arguably this could count as the city's first piece of public art.¹ Jumping ahead to more recent times, several 15th- and 16th-century sculpted coats of arms and other carvings were recorded by antiquarian A C Lamb, but none survives in situ today.² A substantial sundial was erected at the harbour in 1650 but it disappeared some time in the mid-20th century. Presumably more impressive but oddly little recorded was a large statue of Apollo located on Castlehill (where St Paul's Cathedral now stands), "long regarded as a landmark," according to Lamb. It is shown on the 1776 and 1793 maps of Dundee and appears in the background of a painting and engraving of the harbour c.1780, but otherwise little is known about it.³

The fashion for decorative relief carving on buildings began early in the 19th century, and numerous examples survive today – for example the Theatre Royal (1810), the Customs House (1843, restored in 1992), the Sheriff Court (1863), the Curr Night Refuge (1881) and the new Post Office (1898).⁴ In almost every case, unfortunately, while we know the architects involved, the name of the sculptor is unknown. There are just a few exceptions – for example the Muses on the Albert Institute (now The McManus) from 1867 are attributed to James Frank Redfern; the statues of Britannia, Commerce and Justice on the Clydesdale Bank were carved by James Charles Young in 1876; while the carvings on the City Gymnasium from 1891 were designed by James Eadie Reid and executed by James Bremner. There are also some interesting oddities from this period, like the tenement block in North Ellen Street known as 'Faces Land' built by John Bruce in 1871 and covered with grotesque human and animal heads.

Dundee has relatively few of the traditional statues of worthy gentlemen which we associate with Victorian civic pride. The first was the statue of linen and jute magnate David Baxter, unveiled in 1863 at the opening of the public park which Baxter had gifted to the people of Dundee. It was made by the celebrated sculptor John Steell, who had spent much of his childhood in Dundee and felt a strong association with the place (which was important as it meant he could be relied upon to knock a bit off his usual fee). At the initial meeting held to work out how best to procure the statue, local orator Rev George Gilfillan gave a lengthy speech expressing what he saw as the role of this particular form of art:

No trophy of merit – no gift of gratitude – can be in better taste than a statue. Pictures are excellent things, but they suit ladies better [... A] statue is of manlier and severer type. It, so to speak, condenses thankfulness into the most solid, compact, and enduring form. It unites the immortality of stone, and the immortality of art into one fine indissoluble whole. [...] Cold, a statue may seem, but it is monumental and everlasting. Cold it may seem, but the sun shall smite the column and warm it and the inscriptions on it into fresh perennial glory.⁵

It was decided that Baxter's statue be funded by public subscription, and indeed the first contribution was received before the request was even made, along with a letter which was read out at the meeting:

DEAR SUR, – I am a poor woomen but am a grate admerer off Muster
Baxter and wood Lik to giv my mitte. i enclouse It. Vig, tuppence in
heds.

BETTY A MILL GIRL⁶

This form of fundraising would be the model for subsequent statues in Albert Square of Radical MP George Kinloch (also by John Steell, 1872), engineer James Carmichael (by John Hutchison, 1876) and the ubiquitous Robert Burns (by Steell again, 1880). What's also notable is that these were not commissioned by the Town Council or the wealthy elite, but were all working class movements organised by committees of local tradesmen. Following the erection of Harry Bates's controversial statue of Queen Victoria in 1899, however, the fashion for statues came to a sudden end.⁷ Decorative carving on buildings continued until the First World War (including some fine examples by Albert Hodge on DC Thomson's headquarters in Meadowside and several Carnegie-funded libraries) but after that, public art of any sort largely disappeared for another 60 years.

Apart from some art-deco carvings in the new City Square laid out in 1933, the few exceptions that followed were mostly the work of staff at the city's Art College (now Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design) – William Armstrong Davidson (Head of Modelling & Metalwork 1919-47) created a bronze relief plaque of the demolished Strathmartine's Lodgings in 1937, Scott Sutherland (Head of Sculpture 1947-75) made the Black Watch Memorial at Powrie Brae in 1959 and Ian Eadie (better known as a painter) made concrete sculptures for the new Overgate shopping centre around 1965 (now demolished). But these were all one-off exceptions – while Scotland's new towns (as other papers in this volume have shown) were pioneering a new form of public art in the 1960s and 70s, Dundee was doing almost nothing.

Things started to change in 1975 with the formation of the Dundee Group (Artists) Ltd by a group of Duncan of Jordanstone graduates who took over an old school building to become Forebank Studios, the first artist-run studio and exhibition complex in Scotland, which subsequently became the model for WASPS studios throughout the country. In 1976, one of the group's founders, Robert McGilvray, was awarded funding from the Scottish Arts Council to paint two gable-end murals in the Stobswell area not far from Forebank Studios, entitled *Intro* and *Outro*. Although the murals did not survive long, they showed the potential role of art in urban renewal, and thus helped pave the way for the pioneering Blackness Public Art Programme a few years later.

The catalyst for this was Liz Kemp, who from 1977-78 had worked in Edinburgh as a community artist for the Craigmillar Festival Society founded by local resident Helen Crummy. Kemp claims that her time in Craigmillar "has since proved to be the most influential experience in my work as a public artist - it was a huge challenge after the elitism of art school and university [...] but the idea of making visual art meaningful to anyone and everyone was important to me".⁸ In 1979 she became a Community Arts Officer for Fife Regional Council, and followed this with time in New York and Nashville, USA, working on community mosaic projects. In 1981, Kemp came to Dundee as Assistant Curator of Art at the City Museum & Art Gallery (now The McManus). She recalls the museum as "a mausoleum of dead objects and Hie'lan Coo paintings at that time. Curators would hide at the sight of any members of the public who tentatively wandered in".⁹

Kemp was keen to subvert her role and looked for opportunities to commission art in the community. She began discussions with Alan Lodge of the Planning department concerning the potential role of artists in a new programme of environmental improvements that had just been approved for the Blackness area of Dundee. As one of the densest areas of industrial activity a century before, Blackness was now left with dozens of empty, derelict buildings as the jute industry went into terminal decline. The Blackness Business Development Area scheme was initiated as Scotland's first Industrial Improvement Area under the Inner Urban Act, with £6 million earmarked to spend on the area over three years, a total which would ultimately rise to over £8 million.¹⁰ The project was led by the Scottish Development Agency (SDA) which had been set up in 1975 and whose first major initiative was the pioneering GEAR (Glasgow Eastern Area Renewal) project from 1976. This had included the establishment of a community art fund which led, among others, to *The Community* (1979-80), a sculptural group by Duncan of Jordanstone graduate Stan Bonnar.

With the support of the council planning and engineering departments, Kemp commissioned Artists Collective (an Edinburgh-based group comprising Tim Chalk, Paul Grime and David Wilkinson) to produce a feasibility study, which identified potential sites and approaches. This was submitted to the SDA and led to the establishment of the Blackness Public Art Programme, a three-year, £90,000-project funded by the District Council, the SDA and the Scottish Arts Council (SAC). The programme was revolutionary – artists, architects, planners and engineers worked together to create a unified approach to the visual transformation of the area. Robert McGilvray, who took over as co-ordinator of the programme from Kemp, described how this worked:

A pioneering, consultative design process was developed whereby artists weren't simply given a brief and sent away; on the contrary, each project was carefully monitored with several interim progress meetings attended by the management group and the client. The most important stage was the design period, which involved full consultation among all the parties at all meetings. Artists were seen as conduits to the community, public and private, ensuring their full consultation and inclusion in the design-making process, from concept to completion. This approach avoided the all-too-common practice of 'parachuting-in' [the artwork] to great fanfare and subsequent local derision and political panic. The artwork instead came in with the bricks and mortar, the trees, the shrubs, and the benches.¹¹

Each year, three or four artists would be commissioned to create significant pieces of site-specific work. Many of these were recent graduates of Duncan of Jordanstone who had also gained experience working for David Harding in Glenrothes, including Stan Bonnar and J Keith Donnelly. This caused problems with the SAC who felt that commissions should instead be awarded to more established sculptors like Jake Kempself, Alastair Smart and Alastair Ross (all tutors at the Art College) despite the fact that they had less experience of creating this kind of site-specific work (ultimately these artists were brought in for the second half of the project).

Running in tandem with these one-off commissions, a separate group was set up (again thanks to the initiative of Liz Kemp) called BEAT – the Blackness Environmental Arts Team – which employed several artists through the Manpower

Services Commission to work on landscaping projects on the peripheries of the area. Led by John Gray (another Glenrothes alumnus) their projects included sculptural features for schools and playparks. From the start of the project, the co-creation of artworks through workshops with schools and community groups was recognised as a key way of ensuring public engagement and acceptance of the new works. McGilvray was also quick to develop a good relationship with the local press, ensuring that people knew about artworks in advance so that nothing appeared unexpectedly. Above all, he was keen to avoid the so-called “turd in the plaza” label which had blighted public art in American cities.¹²

As an industrial area, Blackness attracted far less public attention than city centre or residential areas, and hence more experimental forms of art could be created with little opposition.¹³ Artists were encouraged to be site-specific but could create very personal responses. J Keith Donnelly’s Saltire Award-winning ceramic panels on Bellfield Street are perhaps the most notable example. The building was used by Alexander Removals as a storage warehouse, and Donnelly conceived five panels for the blocked-up windows, each of which involves a male and female figure in the act of holding or gifting to the other a personal possession, his intention being “to create a narrative for how one might exemplify and picture human acts of putting one’s memories and belongings into store.”¹⁴ The window frame itself acts as a form of containment for each of these narratives, further symbolising the building’s use. Donnelly worked purely intuitively, creating the compositions and their narratives through the process of modelling each figure. In developing the various textures and colour glazes he worked closely with Donald Logie, head of the ceramics department at the Art College, where the pieces were fired. It was Donnelly’s first independent public art commission, and was instrumental in preparing him for his later role as Town Artist for East Kilbride.

In total, around 25 artworks were completed in 12 locations during the three-year period of the programme, other sculptural pieces including Ron Martin’s *The Bridge* on Hunter Street (1984) and Stan Bonnar’s pyramid and canopies over a restored underground public toilet at the West Port (1985-6). Overall the Blackness project was a tremendous success, with 60 new businesses moving to the area. Ironically, the art sometimes became a victim of its own success, as the needs of these new companies led to demolition of some of the buildings on which works were sited.

The programme was now recognised as a model of innovative practice attracting considerable critical attention, and McGilvray and colleagues would be invited to speak at several international conferences.¹⁵ This success encouraged the local authority to continue the project, expanding it in 1985 to become the city-wide Dundee Public Art Programme.

That same year, recognising the potential for developing new talent in this field, the Head of Design at Duncan of Jordanstone College, Atholl Hill, initiated the UK’s first postgraduate MA course in Public Art & Design. It was run for many years by painter Ronald Forbes, who also served along with Hill on the management group of the Dundee Public Art Programme. The Art College had taken an active interest in the programme from the start, with sculptor and tutor Gareth Fisher chairing the organisation during its initial period of city-wide expansion. The MA course gave its students unique opportunities to create site-specific artworks in the public realm, not just in Dundee but also further afield (for example Glasgow Garden Festival and Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre). Early projects in Dundee included two large-scale mosaics for Hilltown Park and Ferguson Street and a series of works for Upper Dens Mill, which was converted to flats. Several of the course’s graduates would go on to

create further public art for Dundee and elsewhere, including David F Wilson, Chris Biddlecombe and Chris Kelly.

Having commenced work in 1985, the Dundee Public Art Programme was formally established as a limited company three years later. It was the first city-wide programme of public art in the country and would remain the largest programme in Scotland throughout its existence. It received annual funding from the SAC and project funding from the SDA (which became Scottish Enterprise in 1991) and individual clients, principally the local council. It was a model that would be widely imitated across the country – as co-ordinator of the Dundee programme, McGilvray was invited to carry out feasibility studies for public art initiatives in Inverness, Nairn, Ullapool, Coatbridge, East Kilbride and Inverclyde among others.

As with the Blackness project, the Dundee programme was characterised by its holistic approach, fully integrated into wider environmental improvements. An early example of this was the Whitfield area, which was targeted with a significant aid package in 1988 as part of the government's New Life for Urban Scotland initiative to improve run-down housing schemes. The Public Art Programme was involved from the start, joining a team of architects, engineers, planners and community workers. However it was the artists who (according to McGilivray) "ended up as unofficial lead consultants" because local residents were far more willing to speak to them than anyone from the council, whom they automatically viewed with suspicion.¹⁶ Although ostensibly there to discuss potential artworks, the artists came away with a mass of additional information which they would then pass to their council colleagues. Among the artworks created during this project was Martha Macdonald's *Butterfly* in Dunbar Park (1990). Its design was developed with children from the local youth club. Two years later, Chris Biddlecombe and Chris Kelly ran school workshops to design sculptural features for the Whitfield Green development, the resulting features following as closely as possible the children's designs.

A similarly integrated approach was taken for the city centre, where new artworks accompanied the pedestrianisation of Murraygate and the High Street in the 1990s. As well as landmark sculptural pieces such as the Dragon by Alastair Smart and Tony Morrow (1992-4), based on a local legend, the programme also commissioned a range of street furniture (bollards, benches and railings) from David F Wilson (1992-6) based around two principal motifs – lily buds from the city's coat of arms, and twists of jute to symbolise the city's industrial past. As part of a separate Façade Enhancement Scheme, a series of bespoke gates were installed outside businesses around the city centre, designed and made by P Johnson & Co at Ratho Forge (1998-2006).

One benefit of an on-going programme was the ability to build long-term relationships with particular artists, and the programme was instrumental in the professional development of several Dundee-trained artists. David Annand, for example, had been working as a teacher since graduating from the Art College. In 1987 he won his first public commission, *Deer Leap*, at the entrance to the new Technology Park on Riverside Drive. The Royal Society of British Sculptors named it the best sculpture of the year outside London, and its success led to further commissions, enabling him to give up teaching and become a full-time sculptor. His later Dundee creations include *Flight* (also in the Technology Park, 1992) and *Tumbler Falls* (at Kingsway West Retail Park, 2003) – all of them exploring his on-going interest in creating sculptural forms that seem to defy gravity.

David F Wilson also became a full-time sculptor thanks to his early success with the Dundee programme. *Wave Wall* (1989) allowed him to work in stone for the

first time (now his principal medium) while the *Overgate Bronzes* (2000) were the largest public sculpture commission ever undertaken in the city – 25 large-scale bronze sculptures for the outer walls of the new Overgate shopping centre. Wilson claims that the only brief he was given by the client, Lease Lend, was “go away and have fun”, but he was given just six months to create the pieces.¹⁷

At the same time as the Dundee Public Art Programme was in operation, other initiatives were also being run by Dundee District Council. When the Blackness Environmental Arts Team was disbanded in 1985, its director John Gray was taken on by the City Engineer’s department (later moving to the Planning department) to work on further environmental improvements, which included gable murals, railings and landscaping projects. Community arts and environmental arts projects also started being funded by the council, and while many of these resulted in murals and mosaics, some notable sculptural pieces were created including various community projects led by Neil Paterson in Templeton Woods (c.2006-2010).

Sculpture remained the principal focus of the Dundee Public Art Programme – notable examples included Alister White’s kinetic sculpture *Strange Attractor II* near the railway station (1992); Diane Maclean’s *On the Wing* outside Dundee Airport (1995); and Tony Morrow and Susie Paterson’s *Desperate Dan* and *Minnie the Minx* statues in the High Street (2001). The programme also took on commissions for the development of important sculptural pieces elsewhere – for example David Annand’s *Nae Sae Dark* in Perth High Street (1988), David F Wilson’s wall sculptures at Edinburgh Airport Interchange (1993) and *The Declaration of Arbroath*, also by David Annand, in Arbroath (2001).

The programme also began to try out temporary artworks, like Adrian Mowkes’ *Reckless Pedestrian*, installed in Murraygate on April Fool’s Day in 1988. New media art was also explored by the programme, for example by commissioning Stephen Hurrell’s *Sample*, a projection outside Dundee Rep Theatre in 1999. But in 2003 the programme came to an end after its core funding from the Scottish Arts Council was withdrawn.

Thankfully this was not the end of public art for the city. John Gray was still employed in the City Council Planning department and was given the unofficial role of public art officer. In 2002 he helped to persuade the council formally to adopt a Percent for Art Policy, whereby at least 1% of the construction costs of any major new building development would be spent on public art. This has led to numerous significant pieces for the city, including Dalziel + Scullion’s *Catalyst* outside the car park at Greenmarket (2008), Marion Smith’s *Panmure Passage* on the site of the shipyard that built the RRS *Discovery* (2009) and Malcolm Robertson’s *Jute Women* in Lochee High Street (2014).

But under Gray’s direction, the principal focus of the city’s public art programme has been on small-scale interventions, often deliberately hidden from view. Angela Hunter’s trio of animal sculptures in the city centre (2005-7) is a perfect example – a monkey is perched on top of an existing information board designed by David F Wilson, playfully rearranging the letters; a red squirrel clings to the side of railings around a tree, and was deliberately placed at child height, such that most passing adults never notice it; a row of penguins waddle along a low wall next to the city churches, heading towards the *Discovery*. Gray originally wanted these to be completely hidden underneath a bench so that only inquisitive children would ever see them, but this was thought to be a step too far by the funders!¹⁸ The penguins have quickly become the city’s best-loved piece of public art – they are regularly dressed up at different times of the year, and even have their own unofficial Facebook page.¹⁹

In the last few years, the city has seen an explosion of new public artworks created by local community groups, for example the Dighty Connect Mosaic Project which has created numerous installations along the path of the Dighty Burn (2012-present). There have also been several new mural projects, most notably the Open / Close initiative which commissions artists to paint doorways in various parts of the city (2017-present).

Amid all these initiatives, the role of permanently sited sculpture seems to have taken a back seat, but the city has also had huge success with temporary sculpture installations, from one-off projects like *The People's Tower* by Claire Dow and Oliver Grossetete (2016) to the city-wide *Oor Wullie's Bucket Trail* (2016) and *Maggie's Penguin Parade* (2018), both designed to raise money for local healthcare charities. The Oor Wullie trail was so popular that in 2019 it is being rolled out across Scotland. Such temporary projects are far removed from Gilfillan's idea of sculpture as "the immortality of stone, and the immortality of art", but new permanent commissions are still being created. Jeremy Cunningham's *Seeds* was unveiled in autumn 2018 at the new Dykes of Gray housing development, and at the time of writing there are several other sculptural works currently at various stages of development, including pieces by David F Wilson and Marion Smith in the Hilltown and by Diane Maclean in Whitfield. It is hoped, therefore, that the city's success with public sculpture will continue well into the future.

Images:

1. James Eadie Reid and James Bremner, Tympanum for City Gymnasium, Ward Road, Dundee, 1891, stone. *Photograph by David Oudney, 2018.*
2. Scott Sutherland, Black Watch Memorial, Powrie Brae, Dundee, 1959, bronze. *Photograph by Matthew Jarron, 2018.*
3. J Keith Donnelly, One of five panels, Bellfield Street, Dundee, 1983, ceramic. *Photograph by Karen Mitchell, 2018.*
4. David Annand, *Deer Leap*, Technology Park, Dundee, 1987, GRP. *Photograph by Ken Peters, 2011.*
5. David F Wilson, Street Furniture, Panmure Street, Dundee, c.1995, bronze. *Photograph by Matthew Jarron, 2019.*
6. Claire Dow and Oliver Grossetete, *The People's Tower*, Slessor Gardens, Dundee, 2016, cardboard. *Photograph by Matthew Jarron, 2016.*

¹ There is also a stone with cup and ring carvings that was later built into a cottage on the Earl of Camperdown's estate (now Camperdown Country Park), which may date from an earlier period.

² A.C. Lamb, *Dundee: Its Quaint and Historic Buildings*, Dundee, 1895. Some stones (including a 16th century carving of Adam and Eve) were removed from their original locations when the buildings they were part of were demolished and are now held in the Old Steeple collection.

³ Sasines of 1766 and 1795 record the location of the statue, according to Lamb (*Ibid*, ch.7). A revised reprint of the 1793 map a few years later does not have the statue marked, suggesting it had been removed by then. Some secondary sources give the statue as being of Poseidon, but the evidence for this is unclear.

⁴ Photographs of these and all the other extant sculptures referred to in this paper can be seen on the Public Art Dundee Facebook site maintained by the author at www.facebook.com/publicartdundee

⁵ *Dundee Advertiser* 25/7/1862.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The detailed story of these commissions is told in chapter two of M. Jarron, *Independent & Individualist – Art in Dundee 1867-1924*, Dundee, 2015.

⁸ Email from Kemp to the author, 2019.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Dundee Courier* 31/1/1984.

¹¹ R. McGilvray, 'From industrial wasteland to cultural quarter', *Arras*, Vol.18, 2007, p.31.

¹² The phrase was coined by James Wines in 1970 and later popularised by Tom Wolfe.

¹³ By contrast, an attempt at the same time to site a sculpture at the Sinderins, a major junction in the West End, proved far more controversial. Organised in 1984 by the Scottish Sculpture Trust (chaired at the time by Duncan of Jordanstone tutor Timothy Neat), it was vigorously opposed by the West End Community Council and ultimately abandoned.

¹⁴ Quoted from the artist's website at <https://www.jkeithdonnelly.com/saltire-award.html>.

¹⁵ It was also the subject of numerous press articles and was citations in publications such as M. Miles, *Art for Public Places*, Winchester, 1989, and M. Fisher & U. Owen (eds), *Whose Cities?*, London, 1991.

¹⁶ Interview with the author, 2008.

¹⁷ Interview with the author, 2018.

¹⁸ Interview with the author, 2018.

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/dundeepeguins/>