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Statues in modern cities

Professor Alexander Stoddart

Report by Peter Barr

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Larger (and smaller) than life

Alexander Stoddart is well known for his classical sculptures, including statues of David Hume and Adam Smith, and will soon unveil his latest public monument in Edinburgh's George Street – a statue of James Clerk Maxwell, commissioned by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. But judging by his recent performance at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, he would also be a big hit at the Comedy Festival...

Scottish sculptor Alexander Stoddart has something in common with the work he creates – like many of his statues, he is larger than life.

In the course of his lecture, Stoddart covered everything from *Triumph of the will* to *Oor Wullie*, the ancient Greeks to modern Philistines, in the process deconstructing beards, genitalia, tea cosies, shellsuits and togas. But even though he knocked our modern “laugh-a-minute culture,” his audience never stopped smiling.

Stoddart set the tone at the start of his lecture, when he posed the question: “Why do statues have small penises?” And as many people giggled, he launched into a serious discussion of perspective and cultural values, analysing the impact of statues in public and why they command our attention (and make people giggle).

Classicism, Stoddart said, has certain laws and principles which all of us can recognise. For example, most classical statues have eyes without pupils, and are covered in drapery rather than wearing contemporary costumes. And the nude males have penises smaller than life-size to conform to the classical “rules.”

Even though they are otherwise larger than life, monumental classical statues are often positioned in places which make it hard to see such modest details, unless we use opera glasses – for example, the statue of Henry Dundas, which stands on the top of a column which presides over St Andrew's Square in Edinburgh. People may protest they cannot see them, but such statues are designed to transcend history and “outlive our species,” said Stoddart. “No touching allowed!”

Contrast this, said Stoddart, with *The Fair Maid of Perth*, a contemporary life-size bronze figure which sits on a bench in the High Street in Perth – “an awful thing with chewing gum stuck on its nose.” Instead of making people stand in awe before it, this statue represents for Stoddart the worst of our “democratic, box-ticking culture.” And ironically, even though the public are being invited to sit down beside it, most people seem too embarrassed to do so.

Drapery, for Stoddart, is also a critical factor in classical statues – and even has a metaphysical significance. Statues tell serious stories which will always survive, and drapery is timeless, lending gravity even in the way that it hangs from the figure. When Stoddart sculpted David Hume wearing a toga, rather than wearing his contemporary 18th century costume, some critics were appalled, but Stoddart says you may as well have Cicero wearing a shell suit – fashions come and go but drapery reminds us of eternity.

“Civilised people seek the transcendental to get away from carnality, but the landlubbers are obsessed with the now,” Stoddart declared. “Drapery signifies nobility and immortality.”

In his sculpture of Adam Smith, which stands on Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, one side of the figure shows the Scottish economist’s buttons, to represent his worldliness, while the other side has drapery to remind us of his spirituality. Some works, like the “heroic realist” statues in Stoddart’s monument to Robert Louis Stevenson, do suit contemporary costume, but Stoddart tends to lean towards the purity and timelessness of classical forms.

Like the unseeing eyes of the statue without any pupils, a classical sculpture also obliterates the world of the viewer, said Stoddart, speaking to the dead and people still to be born, rather than those who inhabit the world that we live in today.

Sculpture also has a transcendental quality that goes far beyond other art forms like painting, he added. “The statue ignores you,” he said, “while the painting says ‘hi’ and the eyes follow you all round the room.”

When Stoddart moved on to discuss philosophy, his ‘realistic’ approach to sculpture started to make even more sense. Even though he joked about his statue of the great Emmanuel Kant, describing it as “the ultimate garden gnome,” he regards the statue as one of his most important works – and admires Kant as a serious thinker who believed that “words are not enough” to communicate truth.

“Pessimism leads to compassion,” he said, adding with a smile that he has spent his own life “in contemplation of misery.”

Another great thinker, Arthur Schopenhauer, has also greatly influenced Stoddart, especially his book *The World as Will and Representation*, in which he says that will is the cause of all problems. For Stoddart, his chief aim in life is to “conquer the will,” with the help of his art.

Developing this theme, Stoddart then declared that “the classical drains the will,” and that during times when “the will” is strong, classicism goes out of fashion. “While modern art tends to stimulate people, classical art tends to calm,” he said.

Explaining this later, Stoddart said that even though “the arts of peace have sometimes been associated with some of the cruellest regimes in history,” this was because those regimes – ironically – projected a public image of peace (e.g. the swastika), while seeking to impose their will, behind the scenes.

Unfortunately, Stoddart added, Modernism is sometimes portrayed as a rejection of the art of the Nazis, even though the Modernists owe much more to the “true, brutalist, ugly and despotic image” of the Nazis than they’d care to admit.

Another of Stoddart's targets is conceptual art which "depends on the power of words" – for example, the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay and other "word-borne Philistines" like Tracey Emin.

Rather than contemporary, ephemeral impact, Stoddart is attracted to immortal aspirations. "Statues are mysterious," he added. "They also tell the truth – grim reality not entertainment."

But even though Stoddart may frown upon some of the "jokes" of contemporary art, he certainly knows how to tell them – and never shies away from taking on the Philistines.