

**Alexander Stoddart is a Scottish sculptor who, since 2008, has been Her Majesty's Sculptor in Ordinary in Scotland. Born in Edinburgh in 1959, he trained in fine art at the Glasgow School of Art (1976–1980) and studied the History of Art at the University of Glasgow. He sculpts in the Neoclassical style and draws inspiration from ancient Greek art, as well as from the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sculptors such as H. E. Freund and Bertel Thorvaldsen. Many of his statues commemorate great historical figures (his statues of David Hume and Adam Smith stand in the Royal Mile in Edinburgh), but he also frequently depicts subjects from classical culture and mythology. His statues of Italia and Mercury stand in Glasgow's Merchant City quarter, while his 70ft marble frieze representing subjects from the Homeric epics is displayed in the entrance hall in the Queen's Gallery in Buckingham Palace. Another bronze frieze made for the Sackler Library in Oxford depicts the poets Homer and Archilochus within a complex allegorical representation of traditional and modernist values, and many of his smaller three-dimensional works also represent classical figures, ranging from Hypnos and Thanatos to Silenus and Eros. He is now Honorary Professor at the University of the West of Scotland, and his studio is located on the University's Paisley campus. This interview with Jessica Hughes took place at Alexander ('Sandy') Stoddart's home in Paisley on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2015.**

**An illustrated version of this interview is online at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2015/stoddart>**

**JH.** May we begin by talking about your earliest contacts with the classical world? Did you learn Greek and Latin at school?

**AS.** No, I was bad at science, maths and sport, and the school channelled people that were good at these things into the classics. We had one term where we got taught classical culture, and I loved it. But I was channelled into technical drawing, because I was thought to be 'unacademic'.

**JH.** Did you read any classical texts in translation?

**AS.** I had a picture book version of the myths of Greece and Rome with paintings by Frederick Lord Leighton and G. F. Watts, Poynter – the great High Parnassian Victorians. These were the stories of Perseus, and Jason and the Golden Fleece, and they were absolutely fundamental to me. But the myths and legends of Scotland were very important to me as well, hence the Ossianic interest which bloomed towards the end of art school and the beginning of university.

**JH.** And what about your earliest contact with ancient art? Can you remember when that happened?

**AS.** That came from a book that my father was given as a young man. It was a book of engravings of sculptures from the collections of the National Archaeological Museum of

Naples, including the Farnese Hercules and Farnese Bull. These were beautiful engravings from the eighteenth century, and these were particularly compelling works to me as a child. So I looked at them at great length, and I thought that there was something big in it - something *unheimlich*, as the Germans would call it, something uncanny and mythological. For me, the myth is the distillation of the Truth. We should pay great attention to myths.

**JH.** I suppose you've been to the Archaeological Museum in Naples now? How did it feel to look at these statues in real life?

**AS.** It was like seeing old friends. I saw them rather late in life – maybe about ten years ago – and I got there and thought 'Yes, I know them all from very, very early childhood, from my visual excursions through this old book'. And I knew the stories as well, of course. Max Weber said that Modernism could be defined in one word as disenchantment. Yet I was always someone who was terribly enchantable. Very susceptible to standing with my mouth slightly open, looking up at things and feeling solid-gone on them.

**JH.** When did you start making classical or mythological sculpture?

**AS.** Let's think. The first piece of sculpture I ever made that was Greek in any sense was a terracotta head at school – a terrible little thing - of Herodotus, the historian.

**JH.** Were you reading Herodotus at the time?

**AS.** Not really. I just heard his name, and heard him referred to as the Father of History. I thought - that sounds good to me! So it was really a very tenuous thing. It was the word, the sound of the word and the idea of the Father of History that was just attractive to me. But making mythological subject matter...well, it was only a matter of time before it cropped up. And it really happened at art school in Glasgow. I had a kind of epiphany when in my second year I was doing a pot riveted metal piece – just an abstract thing. And I remember getting a really good review for it from my tutors, and coming away feeling really great. And then going out of the Art School after it, the Apollo Belvedere cast was there, and I suddenly thought 'He's not very impressed with me – the god. In fact, what he's really saying to me is: 'Your momentary triumph in pleasing your tutors is just pleasing your tutors. What about me? I am the God of Art, and you should be trying to do me instead of your own thing for your petty degree, for your good marks.'

So it was a kind of crashing injunction, a finger-wag in my direction. And from then on I thought 'Well these sculptures, they really are tremendous. And it's easy to do this pot riveting nonsense, but some people did this thousands of years ago, without a telephone, riddled with internal parasites, with appalling toothache, in wars, in poverty. And yet they managed these things. What are we doing? It's pathetic in comparison!'

**JH.** Was anyone else sculpting neoclassical figures at the time?

**AS.** No, it was completely unknown at art school. I didn't receive very much opposition from the authorities, in fact I must say my tutors were helpful, as best as they could be.

But of course, none of them had read Herodotus, as far as I know (I think by that time I had read some Herodotus), and Virgil was a closed book to them, and Homer was never mentioned. And the great philosophers of art – Nietzsche was one of them, and latterly I discovered Schopenhauer who is the great stalwart of my career, really. This was just unknown. I mean, I tried to get a copy of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and I had to send away to America for it, and it took about eight weeks to arrive! That kind of philosophy was not available in shops, way back in the 1970s. Nowadays you'll see a whole rack devoted to Nietzsche. It was hard get hold of this material, but I wolfed it down. And the constant reference to the cult of Dionysus in Nietzsche was really the inauguration of my work as a mythographic artist. I think this started because of Nietzsche's constant harping on about the paradigms established in antiquity by the presence of these deities, Apollo and Dionysus. That's the most primitive one of all, but it actually set up quite a good foundation for more sophisticated excursions.

**JH.** You've mentioned Schopenhauer, and I know from reading other things you've you've written that Schopenhauer's notion of 'the will to live' is very important to you. Can you explain how you envisage the relationship between art and the will to live?

**AS.** Well, it all comes from this idea that the 'high arts' are fundamentally representative of a denial of the will to live – that constant striving to survive and procreate. I'm giving you concentrated Schopenhauer here! The more civilised and more cultured a people is, the more inclined it is to deny the will to live. The more barbarous, clamorous, cruel, greedy, and selfish a people is, the more undignified a people is, the more inclined it is to valorise the will to live.

This means that people in my position associate 'life affirmation' with the denial or desertion of artistic and moral standards. Whereas those people who deny the will to live – culturally and indeed personally – are the ones that we should be looking up to. And if you think about it culturally, who are the deniers of the will to live? Well, all the great cultures of the East, the great wisdom of the East - the Buddhist culture is the greatest one of all. And Christianity, of course, is another great pessimistic religion, like Buddhism, which believes that the state of existence is Samsara – fault, error, transgression – and that we must do everything in our lives to disavow this state of existence, and reduce our needs and our wants and our actions, and our thrustings, our strivings, our connections, and all these dreadful and heartbreaking things to an absolute minimum. That we should in fact attain to a state of death in life, and in this way we shall be much nicer people with compassion at the core of our view.

**JH.** Have you ever been drawn to the artistic traditions of those Eastern religions?

**AS.** Yes, I love to look at them, but I can't possibly imitate them. I look at them as great traditions, and Buddhist and Hindu philosophy is something I have recourse to all the time, but artistically I'm an absolutely dyed-in-the-wool Occidentalist.

**JH.** That brings me to my next question, which is about the importance of the Western artistic tradition to your work. You've often spoken about your debt to neoclassical sculptors like Thorvaldsen, Freund and Canova. What have you taken from these artists, and what distinguishes your work from theirs?

**AS.** Well, the first influence as a sculptor of mythological subject matter was really Auguste Rodin. And at art school he was the one that I looked at. I'd had the Apollo Belvedere experience, but there was no way that I could possibly go ahead and make a thing like that. It's not easy to do – it's extraordinarily difficult. So I had to look for a 'halfway house', which would keep my nose clean with the authorities as well, and Rodin seemed to be the one. Because his work was referential to the great tradition, particularly through Michelangelo, and also he was constantly lauded as being the father of modern sculpture. So this seemed to be a liminal territory between the two evidently opposing things. Rodin is also very easy to imitate. If you found that you couldn't work out how to model an arm on the figure – well, you just truncated it! And by truncating it of course you gain brownie points, because we like a broken sculpture, don't we? The instinct to iconoclasm – to break things – is very strong in a young man's heart. He's a destroyer. The will in him is so strong, he wants to kill things. If he breaks a sculpture or takes a head off it, he's essentially dominated the work. If the work of sculpture is made intact, then it is in danger of dominating him, so he takes an arm off it, or takes the head off, so that he feels on top of the sculpture.

**JH.** But some of your work is fragmentary – I remember seeing a *bozzetto* of the Hermaphrodite which didn't have a head [1]. Is that symptomatic of the same instinct, or is there another reason why you keep some of your figures fragmentary?

**AS.** Well, remember that that exhibition was revisiting subjects from the artist's youth! So that was a small, current excursion back into that 'truncative' approach that I'd used back then. It was a deliberate gesture. Of course, there is an aspect of the torso that we love, when the head is missing in particular, because this allows us to put in its place the perfect face that we have in our heads. It's Kant's notion of perfection that we've never seen. When the head is absent, we can put in our minds the perfect head in, which the actual head might fall short of. That's why G. F. Watts, the great Victorian painter, latterly did a lot of figure works where the faces don't exist. They're just rubbed flat areas. And I think he's doing the same thing – he's making a kind of painted torso, by making the face nearly entirely unpainted in some of these studies.

So it was Rodin first, and then I started to look at Adolf von Hildebrand, the German sculptor. And it was at that point I began to realise the imperative of design – the idea that you could have outline in sculpture, and that outline is the great informative aspect to any work of sculpture. In Rodin, the question of outline is nowhere to be seen. That's why we don't think of Rodin as a relief sculptor. He doesn't do any reliefs. Even *The Gates of Hell*, it's not relief – it's just three-dimensional objects stuck onto a background. Whereas when you get to Thorvaldsen, you find *il Maestro dello bassorilievo* – the Master of the bas-relief. And this, for me, was a distinction between Canova and Thorvaldsen. Canova's command of the bas-relief is very poor, whereas Thorvaldsen's is absolutely magisterial. There is not a line that is out of harmony. And it was with Thorvaldsen's relief sculpture that I began to see that there are matters of taste and sensibility coming into play, and a certain growth of the notion of chastity, which is a central component in my sculpture. Chastity. That's secured through outline.

**JH.** There are a lot of sensual bodies in your sculpture, though.

**AS.** Like the ithyphallic Priapus? Well, it happens periodically, but the design imperium hopefully casts a big cup of bromide down that tendency, so that everything is constrained within that formal structure. This is what we find in the erotic Indian works. So they are extremely explicit in all their actions, in some of those temples. But all of these interior details are housed within such gruelling, grid-iron design structures that this really takes the sex out of them.

**JH.** And is the chastity somehow connected to the whiteness of the sculptures too, in your case?

**AS.** This is a very interesting question, the question of colour in sculpture. You'll find often that people who are instinctually opposed to the kind of sculpture that's done by Canova, by Thorvaldsen, by John Gibson, by Christian Rauch, by Freund... these are all works characterised by whiteness, and many people who hate all that work take instant, blithe objection to that whiteness. You often find that people will accuse the work of being 'cold and white'. I remember going to Copenhagen with a friend, and the barman in the bar that we were drinking in one night asked us why we were over, and we said 'We're here to see Thorvaldsen's sculpture', and he said 'Oh, I don't like all that white, stiff, dead neoclassicism'. White is the first thing to be mentioned.

I've been very interested in why white is so objected to. I mean, nobody's objecting to your white t-shirt! They're not going to say 'that white t-shirt is a shocker'. Or 'I'm using white toilet paper, how dare you!' But in sculpture, whiteness becomes almost culpable of something. Many people, when they come to my studio and see all the white plasters, they'll say 'But didn't the Greeks always colour their statues?' And they say it with a distinctive indignation. Now, what's happening there is that the life-affirmative element in them is taking exception to figures – human figures – being seen without colour. Because this is what happens when you croak it! When you die, the first thing is that you go terribly white – you lose all that colour in your cheeks. And so what's happening there is that a life-affirmative type – particularly prevalent within the Contemporalist arts – will come to the studio and see something that looks mausoleal. It looks sepulchral, and they take objection to this. The 'will to live' within them forces them to express an instantaneous objection to that thing which transpires death to them. So they very quickly become extremely annoyed, and speak out against the whiteness.

I think that the sculptors of antiquity – Phidias himself for instance – may have been thrilled, had they come back into the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, to see their sculpture unimpeded by the application of pigment. They would have thought 'What wonderful patrons these sculptors had, who did not insist on slapping Dulux on it.' We never think about this. We always assume that the ones in the past were proud of their colour. In my view, I think that the Greeks would have painted sculpture and not painted sculpture. They did both things. There's too much sculpture being made for every one to be painted. John Gibson is interesting on this, with his *Tinted Venus*. Gibson is one of the greatest, I hold him in the highest esteem. And H. E. Freund himself did do polychromatic work too. And other sculptors towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Symbolists, they went into this in great detail. And they did it all with great aplomb and culture.

**JH.** The European tradition has been hugely important to you, but I know that many of your commissions come from the United States. From a sculptor's perspective, do you think that the US has a different relationship to classical antiquity, compared with the European tradition?

**AS.** Very different. There's a very vital Classicising movement in America. There was a particular Republican architecture made at the time of the American Revolution, the Jeffersonian style. Monticello and all these places. And it's essentially an Italianate style, so there's many people in America, architects in particular, who are allowed to build classical buildings in a way that we're not allowed to build classical buildings in Britain or Europe. There really is a serious clampdown on this kind of work in Britain. We do get to do it, but our commissions always come from private clients. There's no way that Paisley Museum will ever be extended by an architect who can 'speak' Ionic, Neoclassical architecture. It'll always have to be a glass box by some architecturally-illiterate practice, that is nevertheless 'cutting-edge'. In America, there's a better chance, although in the end it's still largely done by private people. So you might say that there are more classicising architects in America than anywhere else, but they still don't get proper public commissions to do.

Now, the thing is that Classicism in America is redolent of the Revolution because of Jefferson (who was quite a good architect) was building in that style. And the Modernists in America castigate any architect who's building like that because they say 'Well, Jefferson owned slaves!'. They all say that this is 'slave-owning' architectural style. But they never actually ask what Abolitionist architecture looks like. And who is the 'Iconographer-in-Ordinary' to Abolitionism? Well - it's John Flaxman, who made the medal with a slave in chains saying 'Am I not a man and a brother?' And the Lincoln Memorial is a Classical building (apart from the statue in it), and that's the greatest Abolitionist building in the Occident! So these people who object to Classicism because of slave-owning are just using slave-owning as a way of getting rid of the problem of Classical architecture. It's the same thing using the Nazi example. I used to get that in younger times, and there's still some people who say 'Well, this is the kind of architecture that Hitler would have liked!' And they use this as a dirty trick to castigate an entire thing that they don't want. So they're quite pleased that Hitler liked Classical architecture. What would have happened if Hitler had liked Modernist architecture? You would really be up the creek with no paddle in terms of an excuse not to do it. So you might say that Modernism and Hitlerism have a very close, collaborative relationship. Hitler will take all the Classicism, and demonise it, and by contrast the Modernists will eschew all Classicism and become saintly as a consequence of the negative contrast. It's a shocking arrangement, but it's an arrangement which they maintain.

I personally in my work have always tried to lift the jackboot off classical architecture. Because that's one area of the Western world that is still under the jackboot – Classical architecture. And it's under the jackboot by insistence of Modernists. But I've always tried to liberate Classicism from all these taints of slave-owning, of Fascism, of Nazism. No, it's time now to say 'Hitler can't have all that – it's not his property anymore'. I've tried to do it with specific emblems, like the *fasces*, for instance. I've used that quite often in my sculpture, because I don't think that Benito Mussolini should have exclusive rights

to it any more.

**JH.** Finally, may I ask you to speak about the theme of iconoclasm, or iconophobia, which you've spoken about on other occasions? You touched on this briefly when we talked about Rodin, but I'd like to ask you more about it now. I read the Open Letter that you wrote in response to the plans to remove the neoclassical statues from Glasgow's George Square, and I was particularly struck by the following phrase: 'This reflex, to remove by one means or another, under one pretext or another, all imagery and every icon, is common to all base-natural peoples, zealots and modernists. It is the job of civilised communities to protect these helpless subjects, not to collude in their expulsion, if not destruction.' What do you think it is that drives people to destroy or take away statues?

**AS.** Well, it never happened in George Square, because we managed to stop it. Statues are always hated by these people, because statues are pedestrians that won't move, and movement is everything to do with life, whereas a statue is everything to do with not moving, therefore it is an offence against life. I've had this often from heavy-duty Labour Councillors who've said to me 'We should take the statues from George Square down because we can't have them – they're standing there, they're all emblems of soldiers who run an Empire.' All soldiers who run an Empire? We've got Robert Burns (the famous imperial soldier?). We've got James Watt the engineer – not exactly a military man! We've got Peel, who ran the Reform movement and repealed the Corn Laws. We've got Gladstone, who was an out-and-out Anti-Royalist Republican. Then we've got Thomas Campbell who wrote a poem called *The Pleasures of Hope*, a poet and friend of Byron the Liberal. Then okay, we've got Lord Clyde, who put down the Indian Mutiny. Sure, that's the one. But we've also got Sir John Moore by Flaxman, who fought against Napoleon the tyrant. And then we've got Thomas Graham, who invented the chemistry for kidney dialysis. And they want to eradicate all these people because they're all just 'imperial soldiers'.

This proves to us that it's not the subjects of the statues that they take objection, but the statues themselves. And what can it be but the statues' refusal to move?

**JH.** And this urge to rebel against the 'stillness' of sculpture – is this something that you see as happening in earlier periods of history too?

**AS.** Yes, this is a trend that goes right through. We find that iconophobia is central to Jewish culture, as it became to Reformed Christian culture, particularly in Scotland. The Reformation in Scotland was very iconophobic. And we see iconophobia raging now in the Middle East. And it's all coming from the same scriptural background. The fundamental myth that will answer your question about iconoclasm, or iconophobia, really it occurs within Exodus, Moses takes the children of Israel out of Egypt, and they wander in the desert for all these years. They come to the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses goes up the Mount to speak to God – Jehovah. Meanwhile, the poor children of Israel, who are fed up of being dragged about the desert by this maniac – this constant perpetual, revolutionist – they decide to dwell, to stop. So they dig a foundation and they build an altar, and on top of it they make a work of art – the molten calf. And they put this thing up there and then they dance around it, as Poussin so beautifully depicts in his famous

painting. They dance in a circle and they go nowhere, and the dialectic has dried up as well, because when you dance you can't talk. Everything is in place to tell the truth of this idea: the difference between the Mosaic view, which is perpetual mobility, and the Culture view, which is 'stay put, put down roots'.

Moses then comes down off the mountain, and what does he do, for the first time? He opposes language to art. The text opposes the image. So there's the image of the calf, and Moses comes down with a text to say 'Go away! No!' And of course, this is happening in art schools all over. People want to make images, but art schools are encouraging all art students to write realms of pretentious garbage, and really just put nothing but a traffic cone in the middle of an art gallery. The image is not approved of: the word is everything. So we become logocentric as well as iconophobic.

Exodus is the first time that this occurs. A work of art is opposed with a tablet full of words. And what is the second commandment, brought in as a matter of priority? *Thou shalt make no images of anything that crawls on earth, or flies, or swims in the sea.* And it's not about worshipping the images, it's about making the images in the first place. If you go to Commandment Number Six, *Thou shalt not kill*, it's way down the line. This proves that, as far as Nature is concerned, making sculpture is worse than murder. Moses comes down with a prescription against exactly what they've made – an image of something natural.

Traditionally, Moses comes down from the mountain radiant, which a great aura around him. But look at Michaelangelo's Moses. If you look at it closely you'll see that rising out of the forehead is a pair of horns. Now, the Church has always been very, very upset about this – the fact that Moses is said to have come down with horns protruding from his forehead. This is in scripture. It's always been a great problem because horns are associated with the devil, and how could Moses be the devil? So there's a huge industry of redactive revisionism that says that 'This is a mistranslation, and 'horns' really means 'rays'.' It's the halo idea – the rays are associated with the saintly, and the horns are associated with the diabolical.

But for me, it's absolutely, certainly and logically (and I don't care if it's not true, it's symbolically so rich) that Moses does have horns coming out of his head. Why? Because as he comes down from the mountain to oppose the image with words, so he comes down off the mountain to oppose sculpted horns with real horns. *L'objet trouvé*. We have this relationship between the found object as opposed to the represented object – the text as opposed to the image – all bound up at this very fundament of Western mythological thinking, because of course the Old Testament is the basis of the West's culture.

**JH.** Well, that seems like the perfect place to end. Thank you so much, Sandy, for taking the time to share these fascinating views on art and philosophy, and for helping us to understand the relationship between your work and classical antiquity.

[1] In the catalogue to the exhibition Recent studies from the Artist's Youth, The Fine Art Society, Edinburgh 2014.