
The sculpture revival

David Williams-Ellis

David Williams-Ellis is one of the world's leading figurative sculptors, whose unique life-sized portrait, bird and animal sculptures are cast in bronze, silver and glass.



In recent years there has been a massive resurgence in figurative sculpture. This is, I believe, because people desire sculpture that they can relate to. Many artworks struggle to create a sense of empathy with the viewer that gives the sculpture a reason for being where it is. It has to excite, to fill the site with its form and make you want to return.

At a domestic level, people want to own something they love and are happy to live with. A painting or sculpture should offer something different and thought-provoking every time.

I was fortunate to come from an artistic family. My sister, Bronwyn Williams-Ellis, is a ceramicist and my great uncle, Clough Williams-Ellis, designed Portmeirion. I have always been interested in architecture. Modern sculpture and architecture draw impulses and inspiration from each other.

The Shard and the Guggenheim Museum are stunning sculptures in themselves. When you enter the immediate environs of many iconic buildings, however, you find that you are entering a repetitive architectural space with little differentiation. This is where figurative sculpture can really contribute something to the people who live and work in such buildings.

Elizabeth Frink's Water Buffalo in Exchange Square, Hong Kong, exemplifies how sculpture

can humanise public spaces that are normally designed with a very simple or even minimal line or form. Another example is my three-metre tall Watcher commissioned by Swire Properties for their Island East development in Hong Kong. A quiet, watchful, static figure – ever thoughtful among the teeming masses – is set in a very simple contemporary architectural setting, inviting those that work there to identify with that building.

As individuals, we generally identify with what we recognise, hence the value of representational art in an abstract environment. Where abstract art tends to rely on the association of form to suggest meaning, representational art establishes its identity by extending the real three-dimensional space to the viewer.

Some of the world's great new museums emphasise this approach by placing stunning masterpieces in very simple contemporary buildings, giving the artworks centre stage. Of course, putting very minimal designs among classical surroundings is equally striking – none more so than I M Pei's Louvre pyramid – a beautiful juxtaposition.

Sculpture can also have a social benefit. I have just designed a group of loosely modelled falcons in different positions on high pillars for a courtyard setting within a series of new contemporary buildings. The sculpture composition is specifically made so that a person can walk comfortably between, and around, each sculpture. This draws the viewer in and makes the courtyard a gathering point.

My dream commission would be to create a series of twice life-sized somersaulting figures between two really iconic contemporary buildings. It would also be interesting to do something with the residential developments springing up south of the river in London. From a distance they can appear architecturally quite interesting, but when you are up close and in their midst, they can feel very soulless.

The true power of sculpture is that it works beyond the visual. It grabs you and gives you something that you can't quite grasp. It fulfils a need. ①