



As artists' intentions go, symbols and meanings are laid out for interpretation and sought after by art lovers reaching for some understanding or self-identification. The artist's imagination is translated into physical matter and played out by the medium of their choice—be it with acrylics on canvas, photographs, clay—or, as in the case of David Williams-Ellis, with luxurious metals and glass. Recently, we spoke with the world-famous sculptor for some insight into his creative process, inspiration and breath-taking figures.

LUSH: Tell me a bit about how you started sculpting

DAVID: As a child I always messed around with plastercine, clay and sand. At school I had a very enlightened art teacher who recognized that I had a 3 dimensional bent and suggested that, at the age of 14, I try and make a sculpture in clay. I never looked back. By the time I left school, I felt that, technically, I was at a level that many people much older than me (having gone to art school) hadn't been able to achieve. At the age of 18, I decided to go to Italy to study drawing with an 87 year old Florentine art teacher (Signorina Nerina Simi), where we spent 2 weeks on one drawing using sharpened charcoal, which definitely taught me the art of control and the art of seeing. Whilst in Florence, I discovered the wood carvers of Santo Spirito, which led to me working in wood. I then came across the marble carving of Carrara and Pietrasanta, where I worked with the artisans.

L: Do you work with any other medium, or have you?

D: I have carved in wood and marble but discovered that I am not a carver, just a really natural modeler. I hate not being able to add energy and mood by adjusting the sculpture as I go along which, of course, you are able to do with clay. I now work with a mixture of modeling and carving whilst using plaster, as shown with the finished sculptures of the Sentinels and Guardians.

I have great fun casting in silver and glass which, in order to achieve a really good sculpture, you have to use the clay in different ways than normally used with bronze. In silver, the surface needs to be worked very carefully and intricately in order to manipulate the light on the form.

L: You grew up in an artistic family. How did that influence you?

D: My artistic family had a very strong influence on me. In the sixties, as a child, I was dragged through the Louvre and the great centres of the Renaissance in Italy. Both my parents had a natural artistic talent but, due to circumstances, never developed this fully. My sister (Bronwyn Williams-Ellis) is a full time ceramicist and my great uncle (Clough Williams-Ellis, the designer of Portmeirion) was a renowned and colourful architect. Added to the fact that all my aunts, uncles and grandparents all had a creative eye, it was a great nursery for an aspiring young artist.

L: What are some of the major themes you like to work off of?

D: Whether from my formative years in Italy, my love of Egyptian, or working from life, the human figure has always inspired me. Landscape has also always fascinated me to an extent that I often envisage my figures in an outdoor environment.

L: Most of your work captures the human figure. What inspired you to focus on the human form?

D: My focus on the human form has developed from my captivation with different attitudes – one achieving stillness and calm and the other the capture of movement and energy.

L: How long is the process from the moment you decide to sculpt until the finished product?

D: There are no fast rules with regards to the time it takes to make a sculpture. I can work for months on one piece which ends up being discarded. Equally, I can work on another which develops really quickly, as though there is nothing stopping the fluidity between the brain and the hands and it might only take a couple of days. If I find the right model then instinctively I know what will work. However, the technical side of casting takes a minimum of one to two months.

L: Do you prefer to work alone or is it a process you share with others?

D: I have found that being an artist is a lonely profession. Whether you are working with other people or alone, the decisions are all yours. While it's fun to have other people around you sharing the process, it isn't always as productive as working alone.

L: You've created sculptures of T.E. Lawrence and Sir Kyffin Williams. Why did you choose them in particular?

D: Both Kyffin and Lawrence were, to some extent, chosen for me as they both had connections with my family and Welsh heritage. T.E. Lawrence was born 1 mile away from my home in North Wales and my grandfather met him in Damascus in 1918 after Lawrence had captured the city – the opening dialogue from my grandfather to Lawrence was “And where were you born”, Lawrence's response was “Tremadog, North Wales” to which my grandfather's response was “By God, so was I”. Sir Kyffin Williams, as a boy, lived 1/4 mile from my home in North Wales, was a friend of the family and, in his latter years, a great influence, supporter and collector of my work.

L: Are you working on anything in particular now?

D: At the moment, I am finishing the Kyffin figure and am about to start the large statue of Lawrence. I am also working in plaster on a couple of large figures, which seem to be evolving as I go on.

– Alex G. Brown

David Williams-Ellis is one of the world's leading figurative sculptors and currently works out of his studio in Penrith, United Kingdom. You can find his bio and more information on his body of work at www.dve.com

All photos courtesy of David Williams-Ellis



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