

The **BOLD** *and the* **BEAUTIFUL**

Defying the image of the spritely, whimsical and other-worldly artist, countryman David Williams-Ellis is one of Europe's leading figurative sculptors, whose work is commissioned all over the world. **Charlotte Metcalf** visits him at his Cumbrian studio



THIS PICTURE Mary
RIGHT David in his studio

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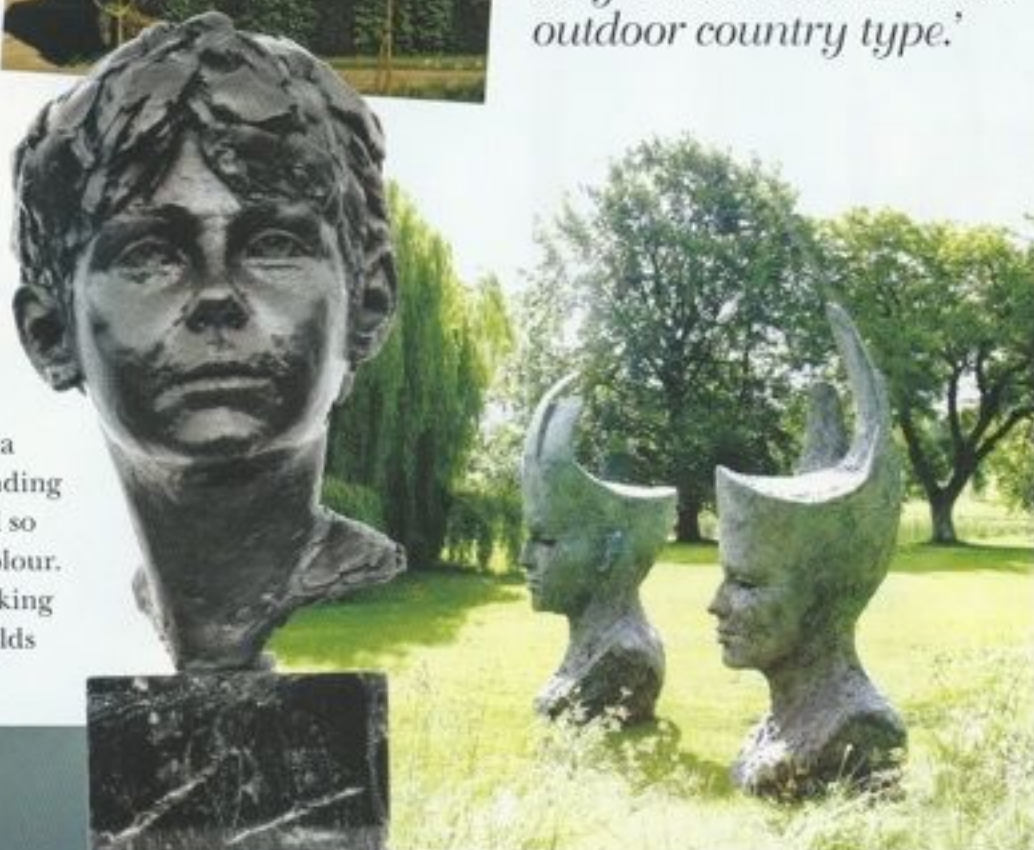
his is a sculptor who teases exquisitely vibrant figures from lifeless lumps of clay, so I imagined David Williams-Ellis to be a slender figure with something of the quicksilver sprite about him. I was not expecting the robust, smiling, jolly man, who picked me up from Penrith Station in a muddy Land Rover smelling of wet dogs. But then David Williams-Ellis has every reason to be jolly. Forget the idea of the tortured artist wrestling his creative demons. Success came early for David and, now in his early fifties, he is delighting in its rewards.

Artistically, he's globally exhibited and sought-after and, on a personal level, he's happily married with three children and lives and works in a house he loves in the Cumbrian countryside. His family is artistic, from his great uncle, Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect who created the Italianate village of Portmeirion in North Wales, to his children, whom he describes as all 'having an eye'. His sister, Bronwyn, is a renowned ceramicist but of the three siblings (he has two older sisters), he was the one whose talent blazed from an early age, though he says, 'My early success did rather infuriate my sisters who thought it a bit unfair that I could be arty when I was such an outdoor type who loved fishing and sport.'

By now, we are eating fishcakes in his kitchen. He and his wife, Serena, inherited an old farmhouse from her grandfather 17 years ago and renovated it, building a substantial tower at one end which David describes as 'a Cumbrian medieval fortification or a Tuscan folly depending on how you look at it.' Serena is an interior designer and so their home reflects her love of exotic textiles and rich colour. The house stands on the edge of an escarpment overlooking a valley, which tumbles away over formal gardens and fields of black-faced sheep to the hills beyond. It's a beautiful,



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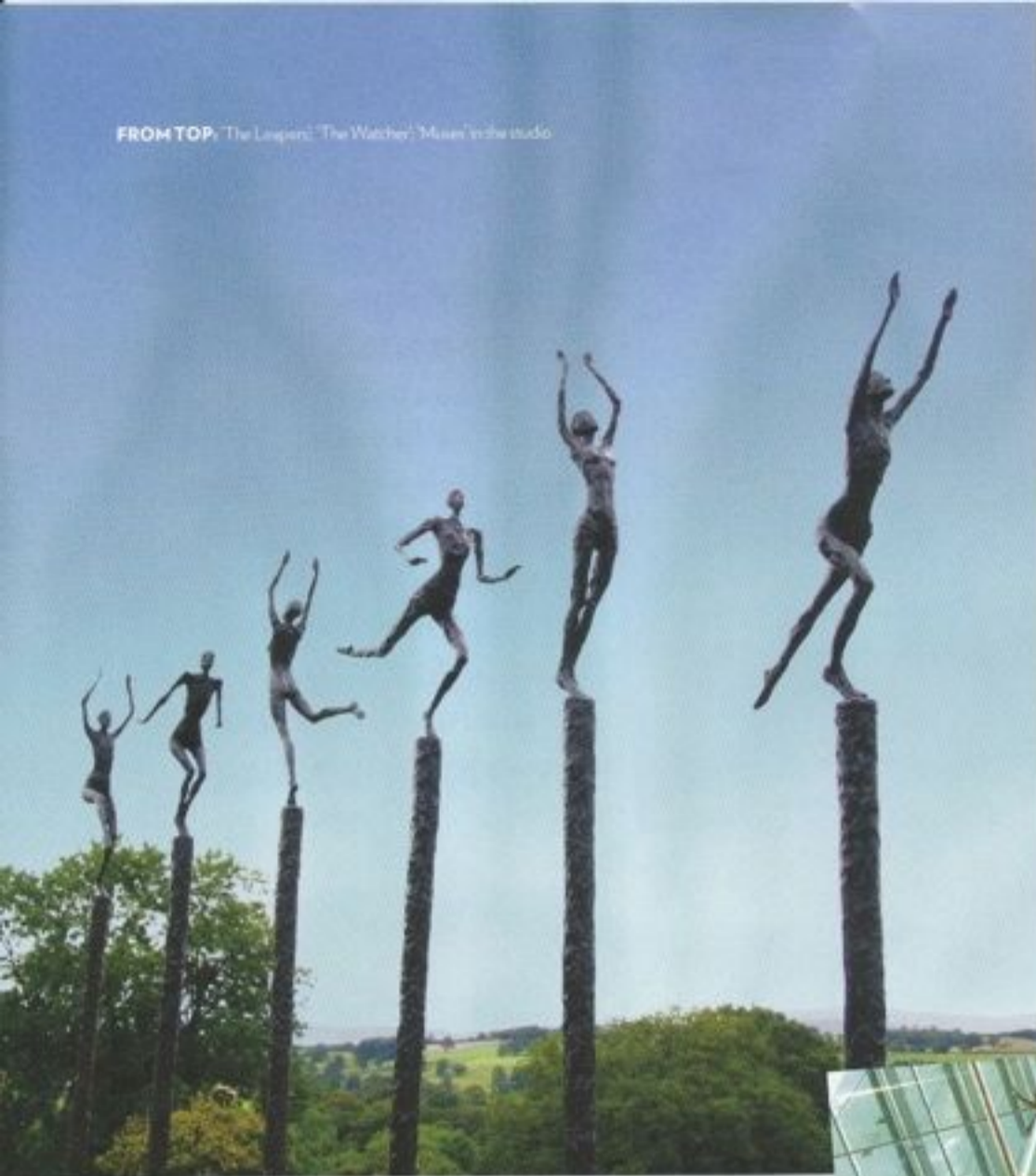
FAR RIGHT *Sordani*
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BELOW *Louise on a Pillar*



wild setting for David's sculpture and there are bronzes everywhere – by the front door, springing from a barn roof, dancing round a pond; there's even a glass mermaid on the dining table between us that is catching the sunlight through the window and a big, glistening, sinuous silver salmon on the kitchen island. David hasn't worked with silver long and is enjoying the challenge of its shininess. He picks up the salmon to show me how he's worked the scales and the fish flashes in the light and seems so real that it's on the verge of hurtling and wriggling out of his arms. 'Now you know why we've so many salmon fishcakes in the freezer,' he laughs. 'It took me a few goes to get him just right.'

David's work is delightfully easy on the eye but what thrusts it way beyond the ornamental is its energy. Every figure seems to strain at its bronze bounds as though he has imprisoned the very essence of life and movement within the form.

'Ever since I was a small boy I was creating shapes in the sandpit or modelling figures out of plasticine,' says David, who made his first sale to a friend's mother who paid £15 for his A-level plaster figure. 'That was a fortune in 1977,' says David.



and showed them to a Japanese gallery, which snapped them up immediately. A Japanese collector bought lots more of David's work and commissioned him to sculpt six life-size bronzes for the roof of his Kobe mansion and 'Deities' remains one of his most celebrated works. An exhibition in the Mitsukoshi Department Store followed and David was soon sculpting for public spaces all over Japan.

Now his work can be seen dominating public spaces and flagship buildings from Scone Palace in Perthshire to the IFC Building in Shanghai. He continues to sculpt portrait busts with clients as diverse as the Duchess of Abercorn and Bryan Ferry's sons. Currently he is working on a bronze of the Welsh artist, Sir Kyffin Williams and on the 125th Anniversary Commemorative sculpture of Lawrence of Arabia. His 'Lawrence' will be unveiled this August at Lawrence's birthplace, Snowdon Lodge (now a hotel) in Tremadog, just a mile and a half from where David grew up. David's grandfather discovered by chance that he and Lawrence were both born in Tremadog when they met in Syria in 1917 just after Lawrence had taken Damascus.

I visit David's studio in a converted barn, a big space full of tranquil, milky light. 'I sculpt from instinct,' David explains as I look at the figures in the process of being shaped around me. 'I work in intense, short bursts and

Though he later attended classes at the Sir John Cass School of Art in London, David initially decided against art school: 'They were all going in a conceptual direction and no-one seemed to be teaching the craft and traditional skills that I wanted to develop. Instead I asked my parents for a ticket to Italy for my eighteenth.' David sought out the world-famous drawing teacher, Simi (already in her mid-80s) at her Florence studio, but she turned him away. 'I kept going back until she let me in,' says David. 'She taught that a life drawing should take two weeks but I did about ten drawings the first morning. I took six months to slow down enough to look properly. Then one day I was walking down the street and suddenly realised I was seeing people's faces, the folds in their clothes, the detail on a building in a totally different way.'

David was able to carry on living in Italy with a scholarship from the Canadian Greenshields Foundation. He worked with Florentine woodcarvers on huge statues of Christ and St John the Baptist and joined the marble carving community in Pietrasanta under the Carrara Mountains. He discovered that carving was not for him: 'The grain in wood is restrictive and with marble you have to make your decisions before starting. You can't change things, whereas I like things to evolve and may want to alter the angle of a head or the way an arm is pointing.'

On his return to Britain, a group show cemented David's reputation and soon he was travelling round Britain sculpting commissioned portraits. Shows at the Bruton Gallery, Agnews, Sladmore and Cadogan Contemporary followed. Then, on a friend's recommendation, David visited the American Will Richeson who started collecting David's work in earnest. David received the same enthusiastic response to his work when he visited a friend, who used to model for him, in Tokyo. He'd packed three small bronzes



sometimes I use up so much energy that I'm totally burnt out. I only ever know when something's right when I feel it in my gut,' he says. 'I can't articulate it but the figures must breathe and have powerful energy.' As an illustration of what he means, David's latest work in progress is a gigantic pair of seated women, reminiscent of a Gauguin painting. They sit towards but facing away from each other, creating a mysterious but palpable emotional tension, despite their rough polystyrene and plaster of Paris shells. 'So what's the story here?' I ask. 'That's entirely up to you,' he grins.

