Exhibiting Victorian Sculpture in Context: Display, Narrative, and Conversation in 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend'

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In 1909, the politician and writer George Wyndham wrote to the sculptor John Tweed:

> The English painter, or sculptor, has a chance *in his models*. It is a passing chance. The 'Gentry' of England — as a type — are interesting; probably we have done what we are here to do. We are a survival. By 'we' I mean the countryside English gentry [. . .]. Let the coming world, of oriental finance, + of Colonial Britons, know what the old people were like, who were nurtured for centuries on English acres.[1]

This is excerpted from a letter in the Tweed Archive, housed at Reading Museum and the subject of my own doctoral research. The letter shows John Tweed as the artist destined to depict a dying breed, the English land-owning aristocrat. Tweed, a respected and, by 1909, relatively well-known artist, had already produced a portrait bust of Wyndham and went on to depict the latter's stepdaughter and her husband as well as several other relations. In the early years of the twentieth century, portraiture was an important part of the income of sculptors: approximately 80 per cent of Tweed's professional commissions were for portraits. Other roles and subjects that Tweed's sculpture was to negotiate over his career included the history and promotion of the British Empire, the negotiation of French and British sculptural styles, the assimilation, reaction, and propagation of modernism, and the remembrance of World War I.

This article reflects upon the exhibition 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend' held at Reading Museum between 23 March and 8 September 2013 (*Fig. 1*). The show, co-curated with Elaine Blake, exhibition and partnerships curator at Reading Museum, took over four and a half years of planning and execution. This article considers its successes and challenges, particularly the curatorial practice and processes employed in the completion of the exhibition. It will examine three different areas of exhibition production: the curatorial rationale, the exhibition content,

[1] George Wyndham to John Tweed, letter, 21 February 1909. Reading, Reading Museum, Tweed Archive.

Fig. 1: 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend', 2013. Courtesy of Reading Museum.

and the exhibition narrative. The specificities of exhibiting sculpture will also be noted together with the role played by archival and other supplementary material to provide contextual situations for the artworks. The commentary reflects upon how narrative is created between sculptural objects and how this narrative can be supported and deepened by the addition of contextual materials and information.

'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend': aims and approaches

Born in Glasgow in 1869, the eldest son of a modestly successful publisher of travel guides, John Tweed attended the Glasgow School of Art where he also taught before moving to London in 1890. There he began work in the studio of Hamo Thornycroft and attended both Lambeth School of Art and the Royal Academy Schools. In 1893 Tweed studied in Paris for six months at the École des Beaux-Arts and was introduced to Auguste Rodin. Tweed's friendship with the French sculptor was cemented in 1902 when Tweed was part of a successful campaign to purchase a cast of St Jean Baptiste (1878–80) for the British nation. Professionally, Tweed had begun to produce large-scale public sculpture for Britain and the empire, a prominent patron being Cecil Rhodes to whom Tweed was introduced by the architect Edwin Lutyens. In 1903 he won the controversial commission to finish Alfred Stevens's Wellington Monument in St Paul's Cathedral, which was finally completed in 1912. Tweed became well known for his large-scale sculpture of public and historical figures as well as for his promotion of Rodin in Britain. He worked with networks of patrons especially

within the British aristocracy and produced portrait busts of many of the people who then commissioned him to create public statues. During World War I Tweed joined the Artists' Rifles and petitioned the government to allow him to become a war artist. He was not successful in Britain but was employed by the South African government to go to the front in France in 1918 and produce life drawings and models for a planned South African war memorial. Tweed's time at the front and his experience in producing public sculpture meant that he was employed in making war memorials from 1918 until his death in 1933.

This was the career that was examined by 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend'. The exhibition was housed in the first-floor bespoke Victorian art gallery that was the main exhibition space for the museum. The large proportions and high ceiling of the space lent itself to the subject matter by allowing us to create a relatively full exhibition with several cases and plinths to showcase sculptures in the round, while still maintaining a sense of space for the individual works and the visitors. It was also a space that was fundamental to Reading's own history of art: while Tweed was not an integral part of this heritage, the gallery had been exhibiting art since the late nineteenth century and was next door to the original site of Reading's first art school.

The Tweed Archive had come to Reading Museum in the 1960s from the sculptor's daughters. It is an extensive collection of examples of the artist's work in bronze, marble, and plaster; together with pieces from Tweed's own art collection, drawings, photographs, letters, and press cuttings. Reading Museum and the University of Reading successfully applied to the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the resulting project funded a doctoral researcher to document, catalogue, and rehouse the archive. Other outcomes included an exhibition of the collection, an accompanying publication, and an academic symposium.

In the exhibition we aimed to portray a full, detailed, and accurate sense of Tweed's life and career and to display his artworks and those of artists associated with him in beautiful surroundings with unimpeded 'in the round' views. We hoped to display his artworks in context of their commission, the historical events surrounding them, and their wider significance: the Victorian, the Edwardian, modernity, modern art, the war, and sculpture in the UK and abroad. In addition we hoped to create a sense of a sculptor's career during the boom of sculpture at the turn of the twentieth century.

To this end, the exhibition was laid out in sections that were broadly chronological and followed Tweed's career progression; each was also contextual allowing for detailed discussion of the range of his career. This approach aimed to facilitate layers of interpretation while making the exhibition accessible to those with no knowledge of the art

of the period in addition to those with more specialist backgrounds. Artworks and images were used to illustrate the range of Tweed's style as well as his own personal taste and the people he associated with artistically.

The inherent difficulty in displaying a sculpture exhibition is incorporating the three-dimensional forms: this creates a set of unique issues in comparison to the more traditional 'hang' of a painting exhibition. The aim from the start was to have several central works on plinths laid out to allow views in the round and to illustrate in an opening glance from the entrance the quality and range of Tweed's career. Works included two female marble nudes *Carmen* (1903) and *Drucilla* (*c*. 1905), a half-life-size male bronze figure *Luigi* (*c*. 1905), and the two bronze heads of George Somers Clarke and Le Boab (both *c*. 1920s). We also included two untitled bronze female nudes from a recent bequest made by Lendal Tweed's god-daughter. Other smaller pieces were arranged in cases around the walls with large-scale enlargements of photographs from the archives.

These large photographs served an important purpose by providing a sense of the scale of Tweed's works. One of the several issues that make definitive exhibitions of sculpture so difficult to organize is the challenge — and often impossibility — of including large-scale public works. As the exhibition could not include any of Tweed's life-size public statues, we instead suggested their scale through large copies of archive photographs. Photography was a very important development in Victorian sculpture and the Tweed Archive has an extraordinarily rich collection. The photographs became paramount in helping to explain a further difficult-to-represent area of sculpture: that of the artistic process. Tweed's process was a complex, multi-medium undertaking that frequently spanned many years.

We also benefitted from the inclusion of early models of Tweed's work in the collections — especially significant where we had no idea of the location of the finished work. Conversely, we also included finished work for which we had very little preparatory evidence, such as the portraits of Tweed's daughters, Ailsa and Lendal — two more personal works that perhaps had not warranted the 'in-progress' photographs of commissioned work. A mixed-media case that exhibited photographs, newspaper cuttings, drawings, models in several different materials, and sketchbooks all helped to make sense of the sculptor's progress of ideas. While the evolution of a painting style or period might be adequately illustrated within small displays this is not always the case in sculpture where very different processes and materials may be employed in producing similar style objects (*Fig. 2*).

Fig. 2: Photograph of John Tweed's Chelsea Studio, *c*. 1899. Courtesy of Reading Museum.

Exhibition narratives and display

The exhibition was split into six main areas: an introductory space, ideal works, portraiture, Tweed's friendship with Rodin, colonial and public sculptures, and war memorials. Each area had a quotation about Tweed enlarged on the wall; the aim being to use quotation and text to bring Tweed's career into focus in the contexts of the objects on display. These sections invited viewers to move around the walls of the gallery circling a central display of sculptures on individual plinths, facilitating detailed viewing of the works in the round.

The introduction to Tweed began with a career timeline, display of personal letters and items from his art collection, and a selection of his newspaper cuttings and scrapbooks. Tweed's ideal works were illustrated by several of the central sculptures and a large image of his most successful

piece *Latona* (*c*. 1905). Also shown was a small case of maquettes and sketches together with some larger drawings framed and displayed on the wall. Portraiture was composed of a display of eight framed photographs of portrait busts, all related in that the sitters were friends and family of each other or of Tweed. This section helped to illustrate the sophisticated networking Tweed encouraged in order to secure further commissions. Linking this section to the next was Rodin's portrait bust of George Wyndham (1904), the author of the quotation under which the portrait section was displayed. This object gave opportunity for the comparison of approaches to a subject while introducing Rodin. His impact on Tweed's career was illustrated through a selection of archive documents and a large wall photograph of a dinner in Rodin's honour that took place in London in 1902.

The final two sections showed Tweed's work on public statues both at home and within the British Empire, followed by World War I memorials. These works were hardest to illustrate as their size and public placement made direct display impossible. Large-format photographs on the wall provided a sense of scale while archive documents and maquettes allowed for further detail and discussion. We were especially pleased to be able to exhibit a small model for one of Tweed's finest ideal works, *Defeat* (*c*. 1932). The finished work of this title is a life-size male nude posed with his head in his arms sunk into despair. The finished work is untraceable but the maquette gave a sense of the distinctiveness of the pose. The final small case featured documents from Tweed's last exhibition at Knoedler's Gallery in 1933 and his memorial exhibition at the Imperial Institute in 1934.

The colours of the exhibition were complementary: the tones of black, grey, cream, white, and bronze came together in a unified palette with the wooden floors of the museum space. The large-scale reproductions of black and white photographs and the grey oversized quotations printed on the wall brought the sections of the exhibition together into a cohesive whole, while privileging the central display of free-standing works on plinths.

The archive and the exhibition: *George Somers Clarke* and *Le Boab*

The role of archival research in bringing about an exhibition is paramount. In our case, the archive was used extensively to identify and locate Tweed's work including important exhibition pieces such as the bust of George Somers Clarke. Archival material showed that Tweed's daughters had given the bust to St Paul's Cathedral. Somers Clarke had been the surveyor of the fabric at the cathedral for many years, and indeed the work is still in the cathedral's collections. The work is a bronze head portrait

of the architect in a skull cap made in later life when Somers Clarke was living in Egypt (*Fig. 3*). It contains detailed and textural modelling of his skin. Tweed's daughters had bequeathed a selection of works that remained in their possession to Reading Museum along with the archive. One of these was *Le Boab*, a beautifully modelled bronze head of a young man with North African features and a determined, rebellious expression. At the start of the project we knew only that 'Le Boab' meant 'doorman' in French and that there was some suggestion that Tweed may have visited Egypt — a trip that, in turn, may have suggested the subject material for this portrait. The archive revealed that Tweed had indeed visited his friend Somers Clarke there, and *Le Boab* was modelled on one of Somers Clarke's servants. The two works, when shown as a pair, as they were in the exhibition in Reading, powerfully evoke their Victorian context foregrounding tensions of colonizer and colonized, empowerment, ethnicity, and class struggle. Tweed has depicted Somers Clarke staring straight out at the viewer, master of all he surveys and able willingly to interact with his audience. Conversely, *Le Boab* is depicted with his face turned downwards to avoid the viewer's gaze but with a flattened snarl of defiance flickering across his face. New exhibition contexts enabled new readings of Tweed, his era, and his works.

Fig. 3: John Tweed, *George Somers Clarke*, *c*. 1925, bronze, 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor; Rodin's Friend', 2013. Courtesy of Reading Museum.

Tweed and Rodin: portrait of a friendship

Above all, the exhibition aimed to make John Tweed known to a modern audience. To this end it made sense to utilize the relationship between Tweed and Rodin, propping the discussion of Tweed's relatively unknown career on the familiar history of a more famous sculptor. It initially seemed very difficult to illustrate this relationship without relying predominantly on wordy captions or text panels. Their friendship was an abstract concept yet it had its own trail of physical traces in letters, photographs, and artworks. In the small section of the exhibition devoted to Rodin we wanted to illustrate his influence on Tweed's art as well as areas where they differed; we also wanted to discuss Tweed's role as Rodin's promoter in Britain and the depth of the personal relationship between them.

Our challenge was to demonstrate how the two artists interacted and how their careers were interwoven. Borrowing Rodin's portrait of George Wyndham from the Victoria and Albert Museum allowed us to show Rodin's more traditional portraiture commissions demonstrating that even artists of Rodin's standing, now revered as a father of modern sculpture, were working in situations similar to those of lesser-known artists with regard to financial considerations and, occasionally, patrons' desires.

Fig. 4: 'John Tweed: Empire Sculptor, Rodin's Friend', 2013. Courtesy of Reading Museum.

Another way we linked the two artists was through shared sitters and patrons. George Wyndham sat for both artists and was a shared patron: he formed the topic of a mainly document-based case discussing Tweed's and Rodin's networks. He also provided a track back to the section on Tweed's portraiture through photographs of portraits Tweed undertook of Wyndham's family and friends. The case focusing on Rodin and the portrait photographs further illustrated the networks utilized by artists of the periods. Tweed was neither alone nor ashamed of using the family connections of his better-connected sitters in order to gain further commissions (*Fig. 4*).

Conclusions

Seismic shifts in power, industry, and culture took place during the nineteenth century. The curators of the 'Sculpture Victorious' exhibition highlight how, 'together these works exemplify the florescence of sculpture in nineteenth-century Britain: the increasing opportunities for sculptors afforded by national, civic and private patronage, and by a maturing market, which generated a proliferation of kinds of sculptural object.'[2] Displays of Victorian sculpture have to strike a delicate balance: the work is difficult to separate from the many levels of contextual meaning relevant to its production but it can at the same time become swamped by this context.

This exhibition aimed to display sculpture in an environment that encouraged viewers to consider the works on show while enabling the conversations between the works to be heard, allowing layers of interpretation and narrative to reveal the complex and compelling history of John Tweed. Tweed's career was one of contradictions. He was not accepted by the Royal Academy nor did he agree with modern ideas of technique and form. He was aligned with the establishment through his numerous public commissions from the government, yet he was an outspoken critic of the state of sculpture itself and of the lack of audience to appreciate what work there was. Like many once-renowned Victorian sculptors, many of Tweed's achievements had been forgotten. Throughout the course of the twentieth century Victorian sculpture — like its sculptors — was subjected to so much contempt. Now, however, the artwork repays this kind of inquiry with a huge return.

[2] 'Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age on Invention, 1837–1901', devised and curated by Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt, ran from 11 September to 30 November 2014 at the Yale Center for British Art, and from 25 February to 25 May 2015 at Tate Britain. Michael Hatt and Jason Edwards, 'Introduction: Displaying Victorian Sculpture', *Sculpture Journal*, 23 (2014), 127–30 (p. 127).