

Nathaniel Hitch and the Making of Church Sculpture

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Housed at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds is the archive of the now little-known sculptor, architectural sculptor, and sculptor's modeller, Nathaniel Hitch (1845–1938).¹ Unlike the extensive manuscript, printed, and visual material in Hamo Thornycroft's archive, also held at the Henry Moore Institute, Hitch's consists of hundreds of photographs pasted into two albums. These demonstrate the range of sculptural activity undertaken by Hitch, including figurative work, architectural sculpture, and animalier sculpture. Above all, they represent sculpture intended for Christian places of worship: recumbent effigies; altars; free-standing figures of saints, bishops, and biblical figures; reliefs of biblical scenes; Christ on the cross; Christ in groups; the Virgin Mary and Child; and sculpture for church furniture and furnishings. Hitch's archive therefore offers significant documentation for the study of Victorian sculpture practice outside the more familiar areas of the Academy and ideal classical sculpture: namely, church sculpture.

The photographs are taken within Hitch's studio or workshop. The space itself is only fragmentarily visible, and the sculptor himself is noticeably absent from all the photographs. This is distinct to the 'at home' and 'in studio' photographs of society sculptors such as Thornycroft, which recent scholarship has usefully examined in terms of the private-public domain of the artist's studio and the role of these studios and photographs in an

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¹ The Henry Moore Institute Archive's holdings for Nathaniel Hitch are as follows: 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, *c.* 1890–1930; 2004.26 Photograph albums of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and Frederick Brook Hitch, *c.* 1870–1957; 2009.21 Three lists of works executed by Nathaniel Hitch between 1885 and 1930, [1885–1930]; 2009.21/1 Printed list of works by Nathaniel Hitch, [*c.* 1899]; 2009.21/2 Photocopy of abridged supplementary list of work by Nathaniel Hitch, [*c.* 1930]; 2009.21/3 Photocopy of abridged supplementary list of work by Nathaniel Hitch, [*c.* 1925]. For a list of Hitch's works, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_works_by_Nathaniel_Hitch> [accessed 6 February 2016].

artist's self-representation.² Hitch's photographs present an alternative, perhaps more representative, account of sculpture practice. There are no interior views. Unusually, Hitch is known to have taken and developed the photographs himself rather than to have hired the services of a professional photographer.³ The photographs are embossed with his name and profession: 'Nathl. Hitch. Sculptor.' This indicates that Hitch took photographs regularly enough to merit investing in his own photographic equipment; that he wanted to personally control the image; and that his photographs circulated beyond his studio, his embossed name representing a form of authorial signature or copyright. Each photograph is tightly cropped and focuses on an individual work or group of sculpture. The albums serve to document works in progress and completed commissions.

What particularly concerns me in this article is the *ecclesiastical* nature of the works depicted in these photographs. From the 1840s onwards, the rise of Anglo-Catholicism and Ritualism generated an unprecedented shift in attitude in the Church of England in favour of the visual arts. Architects, designers, and artists were increasingly called upon to create lavish new churches and interiors, and to refurbish existing places of worship. These conditions enabled sculptors such as Hitch to establish successful practices specializing in church sculpture, producing works ranging from ornamental pew ends to free-standing polychrome figurative sculpture. Despite the importance of these church commissions to the growth and development of Victorian sculpture, this is an area of sculptural activity that has been largely absent from the scholarship to date. Recovering the important and neglected ecclesiastical dimension of nineteenth-century (and indeed twentieth-century) British sculpture complicates and extends our current understanding of sculpture in the period by presenting alternative models of education, style, subject matter, and practices of making in addition to the current emphasis on ideal classical sculpture and the New Sculpture. It also holds potential value for the study of the latter. Many of the sculptors associated with neoclassicism and with the New Sculpture worked on church commissions, including Holy Trinity, Chelsea (1888–90), where the architect John Dando Sedding employed the skills of sculptors, masons,

² See, for example, Jason Edwards, 'The Lessons of Leighton House: Aesthetics, Politics, Erotics', in *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, ed. by Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 85–110; Martina Droth, 'Sculpture and Aesthetic Intent in the Late-Victorian Interior', in *Rethinking the Interior*, ed. by Edwards and Hart, pp. 211–29; and Jon Wood, *Close Encounters: The Sculptor's Studio in the Age of the Camera* (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2001).

³ Canon Paul Mellor, 'Nathaniel Hitch, Architectural Sculptor and Modeller', *Truro Cathedral Occasional Monograph*, no. 1, February 2010, p. 6 <http://www.trurocathedral.org.uk/cathedral-story/documents/NathanielHitch_000.pdf> [accessed 6 February 2016].

and carvers including Harry Bates, Frederick W. Pomeroy, Henry Wilson, Edward Onslow Ford, Henry Hugh Armstead, and Thornycroft.⁴ This article offers a case study of one particular sculptor specializing in church sculpture: Nathaniel Hitch.

Nathaniel Hitch

Hitch's obituary in *The Times*, reprinted below, suggests that he was a highly successful sculptor with an international clientele:

MR. NATHANIEL HITCH: THE GOTHIC TRADITION IN SCULPTURE

Mr. Nathaniel Hitch, who died in London on Friday at the age of 92, was a notable craftsman and sculptor. A native of Ware, in Hertfordshire, he came to London at the age of 14 and for over 70 years he worked continuously. He was responsible for the entire decorative sculpture in Truro Cathedral when it was built 50 years ago, the reredos and sculpture to the screen in Bristol Cathedral, the great reredos at All Saints' Church, Hove, and the statues which complete Street's screen in the Chapel of New College, Oxford. His later work included the recumbent statues of Bishop Satterlee and Bishop Harding, both in Washington Cathedral, U.S.A. and of Bishop Owen in St David's Cathedral. Sydney Cathedral and Adelaide Cathedral both contain sculpture by him for their reredos as does also Calcutta Cathedral, and his work is to be seen in Canterbury, Lincoln and Peterborough Cathedrals, Beverley Minster and Westminster Hall. The Astor Estate Office, now the Incorporated Accountants', on the Thames Embankment, Hever Castle, and Cliveden, for the late Lord Astor, contain many examples of his ability in a classic direction. He leaves a son, Mr. F. B. Hitch, who is also a sculptor. The funeral will be in Brompton Cemetery today, after a service in Lambeth Parish Church at 2 o'clock.⁵

From this passage, we can glean that Hitch produced a range of sculpture that might be defined as figurative, monumental, architectural, ornamental, and decorative. His main patrons were wealthy and international: ecclesiastical clients from Canterbury to Calcutta, and Lord Astor — a far cry from his rural origins in Hertfordshire. The fact that Hitch is noted

⁴On this commission, see Jason Edwards, "A Curious Feature": Harry Bates's Holy Trinity Altar Front (1890)', *Sculpture Journal*, 17.1 (2008), 36–51.

⁵'Mr. Nathaniel Hitch: The Gothic Tradition in Sculpture', *The Times*, 1 February 1938, p. 16.

to have ‘worked continuously’ suggests that this was unusual for a sculptor, and is testimony to Hitch’s ability to secure work in a competitive and unstable market. This required extensive organizational and personal skills. Completing work to budget, on time, and to the satisfaction of architectural and ecclesiastical clients, required not only sculptural ability, but also a range of logistical, technical, architectural, theological, and client relations skills and knowledge.

Hitch’s success was also the result of two important factors: a radical shift in nineteenth-century Britain towards the visual arts, in particular their integration within ecclesiastical spaces; and his related facility for producing works that were closely related to Britain’s medieval (that is, pre-Reformation) past. Hitch’s obituary in *The Times* is aptly subtitled ‘The Gothic Tradition in Sculpture’. This derives from a brief tribute by one of Hitch’s collaborators and employers, the church architect Henry Philip Burke Downing, which was printed alongside the aforementioned obituary:

Mr Nathaniel Hitch was an able and scholarly sculptor and his friends lose one for whom all who knew him had the highest regard and respect. He was keenly interested not only in his own work, but in the work of others and in the problems of his art. He was trained in the Gothic tradition. The stone figures on the North Transept of Westminster Abbey are his and the great Christus in the church of St John-the-Divine, Kennington. Some of his best work was done when he was well over 80, including ‘The Adoration of the Saviour’ in stone, some 12 ft. by 6 ft., for the altar piece in Gillingham Church, Dorset, and the reredos in Budleigh Salterton Church, Devon. He made many beautiful things, working all his days cheerfully and quietly in devotion to his art.⁶

This brief passage identifies Hitch as an ‘able and scholarly sculptor’, who was ‘trained in the Gothic tradition’. It emphasizes the interconnection of the Christian qualities of Hitch’s character with his successful approach to sculpture — hard work, cheerful and quiet devotion, friendship, and a concern for his fellow sculptors and for his art. His is not a life of solitary or individualistic artistic contemplation and practice. Rather, Burke Downing aligns Hitch with the ideal medieval model of brotherly solidarity and contemplative, scholarly creativity. Hitch’s life and work is thus presented as distinctly Christian and collaborative, and as rooted in the Gothic tradition. This presents a different model of sculptural practice to the Greek ideal promoted by the Royal Academy, and an example of a Victorian sculptor who operated almost exclusively outside the Academy. He did not enter the Royal Academy Schools, and he exhibited there only

⁶ Ibid.

once, with a bust of F. Weekes (presumably Frederick Weekes, son of the sculptor Henry Weekes) in 1884.

Hitch and the New Sculpture

From the scant biographical details currently available to us, we know that Hitch was apprenticed to the sculpture firm of Farmer and Brindley in around 1860.⁷ There, he most probably worked alongside Harry Bates, who was apprenticed to the firm around 1866, and who would go on to become one of the leading lights of the so-called New Sculpture of the late 1870s onwards. Hitch does not appear to have enrolled in formal art education until the age of 54, when he entered as a student at the South London Technical School of Art from 1894 to 1901. Previously known as the Lambeth School of Art (1854–79), the school had been founded by the Rev. Robert Gregory as a night school for local artisans. It is associated with the New Sculpture due to its having employed Jules Dalou as a teacher in modelling during his eight-year exile in England (1872–80). Students included William Silver Frith (c. 1869–72), Harry Bates (1880–81), and George Frampton (c. 1880–81). And while Bates and Frampton only enrolled briefly before entering the Royal Academy Schools in 1881, through Dalou's connections they were encouraged, as were other Lambeth students, to look to Paris to develop their skills as sculptors. Bates, for example, set up an independent studio in Paris between 1883 and 1885, where he came into contact with contemporary sculptors including Rodin.

Whether or not Hitch selected the South London Technical School of Art specifically because of its association with modern French sculptural education and practice is difficult to determine, particularly considering that, living in Lambeth, it was the most convenient school to his own studio business at 60 Harleyford Road. Nevertheless, the fact that he re-entered formal education in later life does suggest, as Burke Downing states, that Hitch was 'keenly interested [. . .] in the problems of his art'. It might also be an indication that the skills required of a sculptor were changing, and that Hitch was conscious of the need to update and expand his methods, style, and practice in the face of contemporary developments.⁸

For example, at around the same time as Hitch entered the school, he was executing sculpture for Lord Astor's ambitious mansion and estate

⁷ On the firm, see Emma Hardy, 'Farmer and Brindley, Craftsmen and Sculptors, 1850–1930', in *The Victorian Society Annual 1993* (London: Victorian Society, 1994), pp. 4–17.

⁸ Continued education was perhaps more important for sculptors working outside the fine arts, as they had to respond more directly to client needs and changing taste.

office at Two Temple Place, London (completed 1896).⁹ The architect was the Gothic Revivalist John Loughborough Pearson, with whom Hitch had previously worked on numerous projects, including Westminster Abbey and Truro Cathedral.¹⁰ Pearson commissioned a number of sculptors to execute interior and exterior wood and stone carving for the project, including Hitch, Thomas Nicholls (who had worked closely with William Burges and employed William Goscombe John early in the latter's career, at Cardiff Castle), and Frith, who had succeeded Dalou as teacher of modelling at the South London Technical School of Art in around 1880. It is possible that Hitch and Frith first became acquainted during the Two Temple Place commission, and that it was through that connection that Hitch enrolled at Lambeth in 1894. Frith taught at the school until 1924, and his students included many names associated with the New Sculpture: Goscombe John, Bates, Frampton (who also created work for Two Temple Place), Pomeroy, and Henry Poole.

Two Temple Place was one of the most ambitious architectural and sculptural projects in 1890s London. As well as executing exterior stonework, Hitch was responsible for sculpture in the Great Room. This comprised carved statuettes and fifty portrait heads in relief. The Hitch archive holds photographs of these reliefs in Hitch's studio, packed tightly and evenly on five narrow shelves, one above the other, each secured to the slatted wooden wall behind (*Fig. 1*). On one of these photographs each relief is annotated with a number, which correlates to a handwritten legend attached to the photograph identifying the work with its subject. These combine historical and fictional characters from European and American literature including Voltaire, Ophelia, and Anne Boleyn, all dressed in period costume. The annotated photograph presumably facilitated both the identification of works during the carving process and their installation. Hitch, like his contemporaries, used photographs not only to record his work, but also as a means of communicating with prospective clients and with his patrons during a commission.¹¹ The final wood reliefs were partly gilded en suite with Hitch's twelve statuettes for the same room, which Astor requested be gilded due to his short-sightedness (*Fig. 2*) (Bryant, p. 56).

⁹ Barbara Bryant, *Two Temple Place: A Perfect Gem of Late Victorian Art, Architecture and Design* (London: Two Temple Place, 2013).

¹⁰ On Hitch at Truro Cathedral, see Mellor, and Canon Perran Gay, 'Truro Cathedral Reredos — A Theological Approach', Truro Cathedral Occasional Monograph, no. 2, February 2010 <http://www.trurocathedral.org.uk/cathedral-story/documents/TRUROCATHEDRALREREDOS_000.pdf> [accessed 6 February 2016].

¹¹ On photography and sculpture, see, for example, *Sculpture and Photography: Envisioning the Third Dimension*, ed. by Geraldine A. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



Fig. 1: Nathaniel Hitch, Annotated photograph of a series of relief portraits for Lord Astor at Two Temple Place, c. 1894-96. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890-1930, Henry Moore Institute.



Fig. 2: Nathaniel Hitch, Relief portraits for Lord Astor at Two Temple Place, c. 1894-96. Two Temple Place, London.

Each panel follows a similar format and scale, with a relief portrait of head, neck, and partial shoulders in an arched frame, with the subject's name inscribed below. The relationship between the busts, their socles, and their wooden architectural niche, recalls the synthesis between architecture and sculpture that Susan Beattie, in particular, has eloquently studied in relation to the New Sculpture.¹² Frampton's more famous (and signed) commission for the Great Room — his nine gilt-bronze reliefs for the Great Room door — sit passively within their allocated niches. One even rather ingeniously accommodates the door handle with a stepped gilt plinth. As Frampton himself noted, '[relief] might almost be regarded as an embossed picture, so subordinate ought to be the relief strictly so called, to the general colour scheme of the building.'¹³ Yet Hitch's reliefs seem to challenge the subordination of sculpture to architecture. Elements such as the hair protrude forwards, while his unusual application of depth in the upper torso extends the bust beyond its frame, suggestive of the recession produced by portrait busts when placed above eye level, as in the 'Temple of Worthies' at the Athenaeum Club.¹⁴

Given Hitch's association with Lambeth School and Two Temple Place, and with sculptors including Frith and Frampton, one way of understanding Hitch might therefore be to integrate him into the modernist canon via the New Sculpture. Yet that would enforce, rather than disrupt, the current framework that excludes Hitch from the scholarship on Victorian sculpture. An alternative reading might be to embrace the fact that Hitch had such a long and apparently continuous career, which spanned the mid-Victorian period and the decades associated with the New Sculpture and early twentieth-century modernism. His war memorial in All Saints' Church in Steep, Hampshire (1920), for example, with its rather naive crucified Christ in flat relief and accompanying lettered plaque, is reminiscent of the work of Eric Gill (or vice versa).¹⁵ Furthermore, Hitch's son Frederick Brook Hitch (1877–1957) was nominated by Thornycroft for membership of the Royal Society of British Sculptors in 1907, which suggests a bond of sorts between the Hitches and one of Britain's most illustrious sculptor families. Such cross-period, intergenerational mapping might reveal previously untapped connections, continuities, and associations across the art-historical divides of 'Victorian sculpture', the 'New Sculpture', and 'Modern sculpture', highlight the fragility of those

¹² Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹³ George Frampton, 'Coloured Sculpture', *Hobby Horse*, April 1892, pp. 53–57 (p. 57).

¹⁴ John Kenworthy-Browne, *A Temple of British Worthies: The Historic Portrait Busts at the Athenaeum* (London: The Athenaeum, 2011).

¹⁵ During his training under the architect William Douglas Caroe, Gill cut letters for a Boer War memorial at Canterbury (1904); the bronze figure was modelled by Hitch, who had collaborated with Caroe since the 1890s.

divisions, and generate a clearer understanding of how a sculptor's work adapted and changed over time.

While this section on Hitch's relationship to the New Sculpture might seem tangential to this article's central focus on church sculpture, it serves to highlight the importance of studying the entire (rather than selective) oeuvre of even well-documented sculptors who were operational during the Victorian period. The study of Hamo Thornycroft, for example (apart from Elfrida Manning's wide-ranging book), has almost exclusively focused on works that are aesthetically identifiable with the New Sculpture, and also largely on a single work, *The Mower* (1884).¹⁶ Thornycroft's war memorials, portrait statues, and church sculpture, for example, have received far less attention than his ideal works. It is hoped that this article will prompt research into the church commissions of sculptors across the Victorian period, including the complexities of combining Christian and classical ideals with the realism of the New Sculpture.

The particular case study of Hitch represents a sculptor who worked and trained alongside sculptors associated with the New Sculpture, but whose work was almost exclusively centred on church commissions and the Gothic style. Hitch may have attended the South London Technical School of Art to refresh his skills and develop ways of adapting them to the more secular range of architectural commissions that were emerging in London in the 1880s and 1890s, but his knowledge of Gothic sculpture ran deep and was rooted in his knowledge of historic church sculpture. Two Temple Place might be regarded as an anomaly in Hitch's oeuvre because it was a secular commission, and one with a literary rather than a biblical theme, but, as the following section will make clear, its Gothic style was the result of Hitch's extensive experience of working in and for ecclesiastical buildings.

Hitch and church sculpture

Hitch's career is representative of how sculpture significantly re-established itself in British churches over the course of the nineteenth century. Church sculpture — as opposed to public and private monuments to the dead — represented a relatively new opportunity for sculptors from the 1840s onwards. This was the boom time of church building, and of an increasingly

¹⁶ Elfrida Manning, *Marble and Bronze: The Art and Life of Hamo Thornycroft* (London: Trefoil Books; Westfield, NJ: Eastview Editions, 1982). On *The Mower*, see, for example, Terry Friedman, "'Demi-gods in Corduroy': Hamo Thornycroft's Statue of *The Mower*", *Sculpture Journal*, 3 (1999), 74–86; David J. Getsy, 'The Difficult Labour of Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower*, 1884', *Sculpture Journal*, 7 (2002), 44–57; Michael Hatt, 'Near and Far: Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower* and the Homoerotics of Labour', *Art History*, 26 (2003), 26–55.

relaxed attitude towards church decoration. These conditions allowed for sculptors such as Hitch to establish successful practices specializing in sculptural objects for churches, with Hitch, as we have seen, supplying churches and cathedrals across the globe. At his death in 1938 his estate was valued at £9618 16s. 5d.¹⁷

The proliferation of sculptural commissions for churches represents a radical shift in the Church of England's relationship to the visual arts, and to the more sensory and visual aspects of pre-Reformation practice. It forms perhaps the most important, and hitherto largely unrecognized, contribution to sculpture in the Victorian period. From the Reformation onwards, Protestants had in part distinguished themselves from Roman Catholics through their rejection of imagery and idolatry. Even crucifixes, candles, and coloured vestments had been frowned upon. Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, sculptors such as Hitch were peopling churches with statues of crucified Christs and Virgin Marys; reredos, sedilias, and screens (as in the five-tiered reredos for New College Chapel, Oxford (1888–92), above marble reliefs by Richard Westmacott (1793)); and pulpits, fonts, and choir screens with figurative scenes in relief and in the round.¹⁸ Furthermore, while the scholarship on polychrome sculpture has focused on classical precedents and archaeological investigations in Greece and Rome, this new church sculpture incorporated a more local source: British, medieval, and Renaissance precedents. Although most of Hitch's figures are in undecorated stone, others, as in the parish church of St Giles, Bradford on Tone, are polychrome and gilt, including painted skin and hair.

It might seem useful, at this juncture, to consider Hitch's own religious beliefs. From his obituary, we can assume that he aligned himself with the Church of England. Yet the degree to which he (or, indeed, the architects or clients with whom he worked) was conversant with contemporary theological debate is difficult to determine. It would require extensive research into the complex nexus of each commission and its protagonists, including the spaces across and between belief and practice, religious community and individualism, Puritanism and idolatry, to try and pin down

¹⁷ 'Nathaniel Hitch', in *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951*, University of Glasgow History of Art and HATII <http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=ann_1239657440> [accessed 6 February 2016]. As a comparison, the estate of the more renowned Hamo Thornycroft was valued at £24,903 2s. od. in 1926. 'Sir William Hamo Thornycroft RA', *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951* <http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=msib2_1208265032> [accessed 6 February 2016].

¹⁸ On Hitch's involvement in the reredos at New College Chapel, University of Oxford, including correspondence and associated photographs, see Jennifer Thorp, 'The Chapel Reredos' (undated), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA3140/1-2 <http://www.new.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/4NCN8_Chapel_reredos.pdf> [accessed 6 February 2016].

the religious meaning in his works. To attempt to interpret Hitch's work along denominational lines might therefore incorrectly infer difference, and obscure the important role of individual architects, clergy, and localism in their creation.

Furthermore, as Dominic Janes's study of idolatry in the Church of England usefully indicates, the decentralized nature of the Church of England meant that liturgical practices and associated objects of both Protestant and Anglo-Catholic churches were largely determined by the particularities of its individual clergy and congregations, irrespective of broader church directives.¹⁹ The temptation to seek out religious or liturgical significance might therefore obscure the contribution of aesthetic choice, personal taste, economics, architecture, materials, and other constraints and influences in their creation, including the vagaries of the commissioning process, and the sculptor's agility in adapting to client needs and taste.

Given these concerns regarding interpretation along theological or denominational lines, I propose to approach Victorian church sculpture not in terms of its iconographic and religious meaning, but in terms of how the Hitch archive can inform us about the *practice* of making sculpture for religious spaces.

Restoring church sculpture: an alternative education in sculpture

While restoration, as opposed to conservation, is now largely dismissed as invasive, the opportunity to work within historic ecclesiastical buildings and to restore their medieval sculpture enabled sculptors such as Hitch to examine a great variety of medieval sculpture at first hand. Their participation in restoration projects offered an important avenue for professional and personal study and development, in addition to more formal art school training (where taken). Burke Downing's eulogy seems particularly resonant in this respect. Hitch was a 'scholarly sculptor' who was 'trained in the Gothic tradition'. This training was not available at the Royal Academy, whose teaching programme focused on classical precedents. The opportunity for sculptors to view, study, work with, improve, copy, and draw inspiration from extant examples of surviving Gothic sculpture was therefore central to their accumulation of knowledge about Gothic (i.e. Christian and church) sculpture. It was also essential, as Frampton noted, for sculptors to develop an emotional affinity with the style in which they worked:

It is very distressing to hear men who have undertaken to decorate a building say, that they 'have no sympathy with it',

¹⁹ Dominic Janes, *Victorian Reformation: The Fight over Idolatry in the Church of England, 1840–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

because the house, or church, or whatever it may be, is not to their liking, not in their particular style — men who cannot appreciate a beautiful building, because it is opposed to their preconceived ideas. It follows that no man can work satisfactorily in a style with which he has no sympathy, nor would any man with a true artistic conscience care to do so. (Frampton, p. 54)

This study of British — as opposed to Greek or Roman — sculpture in a sculptor’s training expands the current scholarly focus on classical and art school training.²⁰ Unpublished sketchbooks in the Thornycroft archive demonstrate how Hamo Thornycroft extended his sculptural education outside the Royal Academy through independent visits to alternative collections, including Westminster Abbey.²¹ Frampton too recalled the influence of Westminster Abbey on his own desire to become a sculptor: ‘[the monuments and architecture] seemed to awaken within me a keynote of appreciation of the beautiful.’²² And, by 1893, Leighton himself was advising pupils at the Royal Academy’s banquet to embrace the past:

I would ask them to believe that the gathered experience of past ages is a precious heritage and not an irksome load, and that nothing will better fortify them for future and free development than the reverent and the loving study of the past.²³

Throughout his career, Hitch worked with architects who restored churches and cathedrals. Given the historical importance of sculpture to memorials to the dead, these were significant repositories for Gothic sculpture, despite the Reformation. Churches and cathedrals were also important repositories for the study of later works by British and foreign sculptors. Hitch’s involvement in church projects therefore enabled him to develop a keen understanding of medieval practices. The opportunity to study medieval sculpture at close hand was to be found almost exclusively in ecclesiastical buildings, and in the new public museums such as the South Kensington Museum. Churches, however, afforded contact with medieval sculpture in its original setting, and the close association between the Gothic Revival and church building and restoration in the Victorian period is reflected in the combination of Christian and Gothic influences in Hitch’s work. The photographs reveal how Hitch acquired and developed his sculptural knowledge through close

²⁰ On the training of sculptors, see Ann Compton, ‘“Art workers”: Education and Professional Advancement in Sculpture and the Stone Trades c. 1850–1900’, *Sculpture Journal*, 21.2 (2012), 119–30.

²¹ See the author’s display, ‘Taking Note: William Hamo Thornycroft’s Education Outside the Studio’, Institute Library Display, 22 May–22 July 2012, Henry Moore Institute Research Library.

²² Roy Compton, ‘A Chat with Mr G. Frampton, A.R.A.’, *Idler*, October 1897, pp. 403–10 (p. 404).

²³ Frederick Leighton, ‘A Word to Young Art Students’, *British Architect*, 5 May 1893, pp. 321–22 (p. 322).

and sustained contact with medieval sculpture and architecture, rather than through formal artistic training or through visits to the galleries of plaster casts that were springing up throughout the nation.

Yet Hitch was also a sculptor of his age. The photographs reveal how, even in his restoration work, he integrated elements of contemporary sculpture within his church practice. Take, for example, this photograph of a once recumbent figure supported on a wooden board (Fig. 3). The photograph is annotated 'Bishop Fleming, Lincoln Cathedral (restoration) hands. Crozier'. The figure forms the upper part of a rare example of a cadaver tomb in Britain. It was placed on the tomb at the time of restoration in 1893.²⁴ It is likely that the project was undertaken by Pearson, who had been appointed consulting architect to Lincoln Cathedral in 1870, and for whom Hitch worked for many years on numerous ecclesiastical projects between at least 1880 and 1912. It is not known whether Hitch removed the figure to his studio for restoration, or whether it was conducted *in situ* in or near the cathedral and photographed there by Hitch. The design and modelling of the bishop's staff is in keeping with the original, but the realism of the gloved hands as they grasp the staff and make an episcopal blessing are in stark contrast to the somewhat stiff, flat, and linear folds of the bishop's robes. They expose Hitch's interest in contemporary sculptural practice, in particular the realism of the New Sculpture. It was just after this commission that Hitch enrolled as a student at the South London Technical School of Art. The incongruous realism of the gloved hands might be explained by the fact that they are shown here in clay, modelled directly onto the historic sculpture. The final stone restoration is more in keeping with the original and its medieval setting. This suggests that Hitch explored a variety of sculptural interests in his modelling, while simultaneously fulfilling the needs of his clients in the final work.

Church commissions such as this opened up new avenues for Victorian sculptors to explore Britain's sculptural heritage, and to create modern works that diverged from the classical tradition. This included animalier, ornamental, and architectural sculpture; working with native and Christian materials of wood and stone, as opposed to the more traditional fine art materials of marble and bronze; and integrating polychromy and gilding into their work, drawn from Gothic rather than classical precedents. The neglected study of sculptors primarily associated with church sculpture thus exposes differences in sculptural practice in Victorian England. It raises, as shall be seen in the following section, important questions regarding accepted notions of artistic concepts such as the model, the original, and direct carving.

²⁴ Albert Frank Kendrick, *The Cathedral Church of Lincoln: A History and Description of its Fabric and a List of the Bishops*, 3rd edn (London: Bell, 1902), p. 128.



Fig. 3: Nathaniel Hitch, Photograph annotated 'Bishop Fleming, Lincoln Cathedral (restoration) hands. Crozier'. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.

Modelling clay as if it were stone

The archive photographs demonstrate how Hitch incorporated historical techniques and compositions into his own practice to produce work that is undoubtedly not medieval sculpture, but is nevertheless more than a superficial understanding of a medieval 'style'. His figures are not simply inspired by medieval sculpture, for example through the addition of medievalizing costume, but the broad, shallow lines of the draperies, and the illusion of fully three-dimensional works in what are, at times, almost foreshortened high reliefs, are attentively reminiscent of medieval stone carving. He transferred his knowledge of medieval sculpture into his own creations, modelling clay with a keen understanding of the ways in which medieval craftsmen worked stone. His knowledge of medieval stone architecture and sculpture, accumulated through years of experience of working within ecclesiastical buildings, taught him how to produce a clay model appropriate to its ecclesiastical context and its end material, stone. Hitch worked his clay as if it were stone. The clay itself simulates direct stone carving, producing a preparatory work to guide its transposition into stone.

The photographs almost exclusively capture clay models. This is unusual, as sculptors generally favoured documenting their works in the more permanent mediums of plaster, marble, or bronze. Although most sculptures begin their life as clay models, clay has little longevity, as it will crumble and disintegrate on drying. The solution — at least in fine art practice — is to take a plaster cast of the completed clay model, as plaster can survive almost indefinitely. Most sculptors hired professionals to transpose their clay to plaster, and to photograph their work in this more stable state. Hitch's photographs therefore suggest that his practice operated differently, and represent alternative processes of making sculpture in Victorian Britain. They appear to have been employed as part of his working practice rather than as documents of completed works. Although we know that Hitch employed staff, workers are notably absent from the photographs, and there are no studio views to suggest the organization of his sculpture practice. Nevertheless, the photographs are intimately bound to practices of making.

For example, *Fig. 4* shows five clay models, from left to right: the Virgin and Child, two saints, and the Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary. In contrast to free-standing figurative sculpture, which is modelled in clay on a supporting armature and conceived and executed fully in the round, Hitch's figures are integrated within a predetermined architectural setting. Each began life as a block of clay inserted into a wooden frame. A decorative wooden canopy was subsequently attached. On a shelf below rest around thirty assorted wooden modelling tools of different shapes and sizes (*Fig. 5*).²⁵ These are placed in such a way as to suggest that Hitch was

²⁵ On tools in sculpture, see *Journal of Modern Craft*, 3.3 (2010).



Fig. 4: Nathaniel Hitch, Photograph of a clay and wood model for the reredos for the church of St Mary & St Michael's in Egremont, Cumbria. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.



Fig. 5: Nathaniel Hitch, Photograph of a clay and wood model for the reredos for the church of St Mary & St Michael's in Egremont, Cumbria (detail). Note the modelling tools on the shelf. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.

working on all five works simultaneously. The tools indicate that Hitch worked the clay block *in situ*, almost like direct carving, creating a sculpture from within its architecturally defined space.

Hitch's sculptors and stonemasons may have worked quickly and effectively from the clay model, removing the intermediary stage of the

plaster cast. Damp cloths would have kept the clay sufficiently moist during works, particularly if they were operating in adjacent workshops. The relationship between the clay model and the final work can be seen in the following two photographs (Figs. 6, 7). The first documents Hitch's clay model for a reredos for St Erth's parish church in Cornwall; the second, the



Fig. 6: Nathaniel Hitch, Photograph of a clay and wood model for a reredos for St Erth's parish church in Cornwall. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.



Fig. 7: Nathaniel Hitch, Photograph of the completed stone reredos for St Erth's parish church in Cornwall. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.

completed work in stone. The annotated photograph of the model identifies the solitary figures: Saints Petroc, Erth, Piran, and Conan — saints with Cornish, Welsh, and Irish associations. The central figures clearly represent a scene from the Nativity. The saints and central group are all contained within a wooden framework and set within individual brackets and canopies. The central group expands beyond its architectural frame, suggesting that it was modelled *in situ* from a block of clay.

In the final work in stone, the model's rough wooden framework has been replaced by intricate pierced and foliated canopies, which allow light to enter the recess above the figures. The saints now stand on clearly defined architectural supports. Above, a pierced canopy unites the whole, and extends above the central composition. The format of the reredos and its intricate details recall English and French Gothic ivories. These were keenly collected in the Victorian period, notably by the ecclesiastical historian and antiquary William Maskell (a Roman Catholic convert), who donated and sold works to the South Kensington Museum and the British Museum.²⁶ This association between Gothic ivories and Victorian sculpture reveals an additional source of medieval, British sculpture that was increasingly made available to nineteenth-century sculptors, and underscores the importance of church sculpture in enabling sculptors to explore alternative sculptural idioms. The model's lack of guidance for these architectural elements suggests that Hitch supplied his workshop with detailed designs, or even that he had developed a shorthand with his staff for this type of work. The clay figures are much more detailed and are faithfully transferred into stone, although perhaps somewhat lacking the animation of their clay counterparts.

Hitch's clay model is therefore precisely that — a model, a guide, an indication. It is not a work to be considered as complete. Nor is it created with the intention of being minutely and accurately copied. The model provides a guide for the stonemason or carver. It is a process which sits between modelling and direct carving. Given the nature of Hitch's training, it is possible that this was common practice for sculptors who worked in stone, particularly those who developed close working relationships with specific architects and builders. Shorthand was needed, particularly within the commercial restrictions of short timescales, concurrent projects, and tight (or at least restricted) budgets. Pugin, for example, surrounded himself with the firms of Myers (stone carving and building), Hardman (metalwork), and Crace (furniture and decoration) to execute his designs, because he trusted their methods and their interpretation of his designs.²⁷

²⁶ William Maskell, *Ivories Ancient and Medieval in the South Kensington Museum* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1872).

²⁷ On Myers, including a chapter on the Lambeth Workshops, see Patricia Spencer-Silver, *Pugin's Builder: The Life and Work of George Myers* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1993).

Photographs of Hitch's clay model for the architect William Douglas Caroe's Boer War memorial (Dane John Park, Canterbury, 1904) indicate a more traditional fine art relationship between the clay model and the final work; that is, one which is centred on the *exact* reproduction of the original. The clay model is shown in Hitch's studio (*Fig. 8*), being produced to scale. As this particular monument was destined to be cast in bronze, the final clay model would have been cast in plaster in order to facilitate its transposition into bronze. From the 1870s onwards, a renewed interest in the lost wax technique of bronze casting — particularly by sculptors associated with the New Sculpture — distinguished the lost wax process as a more 'authentic' form of bronze reproduction than sand casting. Lost wax casting was promoted as being more authentic because it was said to preserve the traces of the sculptor's hands. This idea of direct transference prioritized *accuracy* in sculptural reproduction. Underpinning this was the belief that the clay model was fully complete and inviolable. This also applied to fine art marble production, in which pointing tools were employed to ensure complete accuracy with the original model.

In contrast, Hitch's clay models present us with an alternative approach to the sculptor's model. They appear to be in large part working models, a guide for the stonemason and sculptor.²⁸ The aim is not necessarily to produce an accurate facsimile of the model. The stone carver, possibly Hitch himself, would have had a degree of freedom in the carving and finish of the piece. He can, and does, adapt the stone as he carves it. The function of Hitch's model was therefore to give an impression of the intended work, rather than a fixed image to be faithfully translated into another medium. This approach depended on a trusted workforce who understood the sculptor's methods, aesthetic, and the needs of his clients. Relations between architects, designers, and makers depended on similar guidelines that were both specific and not overly prescriptive. The Gothic Revival was perhaps particularly suitable for this approach, as it was simultaneously based on creating a unified, cohesive whole, and encouraged principles of craft which could allow individual workers to express themselves creatively within a particular given framework.

Take, for example, a page in one of Hitch's albums, in which ten photographs are annotated 'Bosses groined roof R.C. Church Farm St W' (*Fig. 9*). This refers to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, Mayfair, also known as Farm Street Church. This is the first permanent Jesuit church in London, conceived following Catholic emancipation in 1829. The architect was Joseph John Socles, a Catholic who designed both Roman Catholic and Anglican churches in the Gothic Revival

²⁸ On the role of interpretation in copying and the influence of machines on mimesis, see Trevor Fawcett, 'Plane Surfaces and Solid Bodies: Reproducing Three-Dimensional Art in the Nineteenth Century', *Visual Resources*, 4.1 (1987), 1–23.



Fig. 8: Nathaniel Hitch, Clay model for bronze statue memorializing those fallen in the Boer War, designed by the architect William Douglas Caroe. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute. Note the Astor reliefs behind.

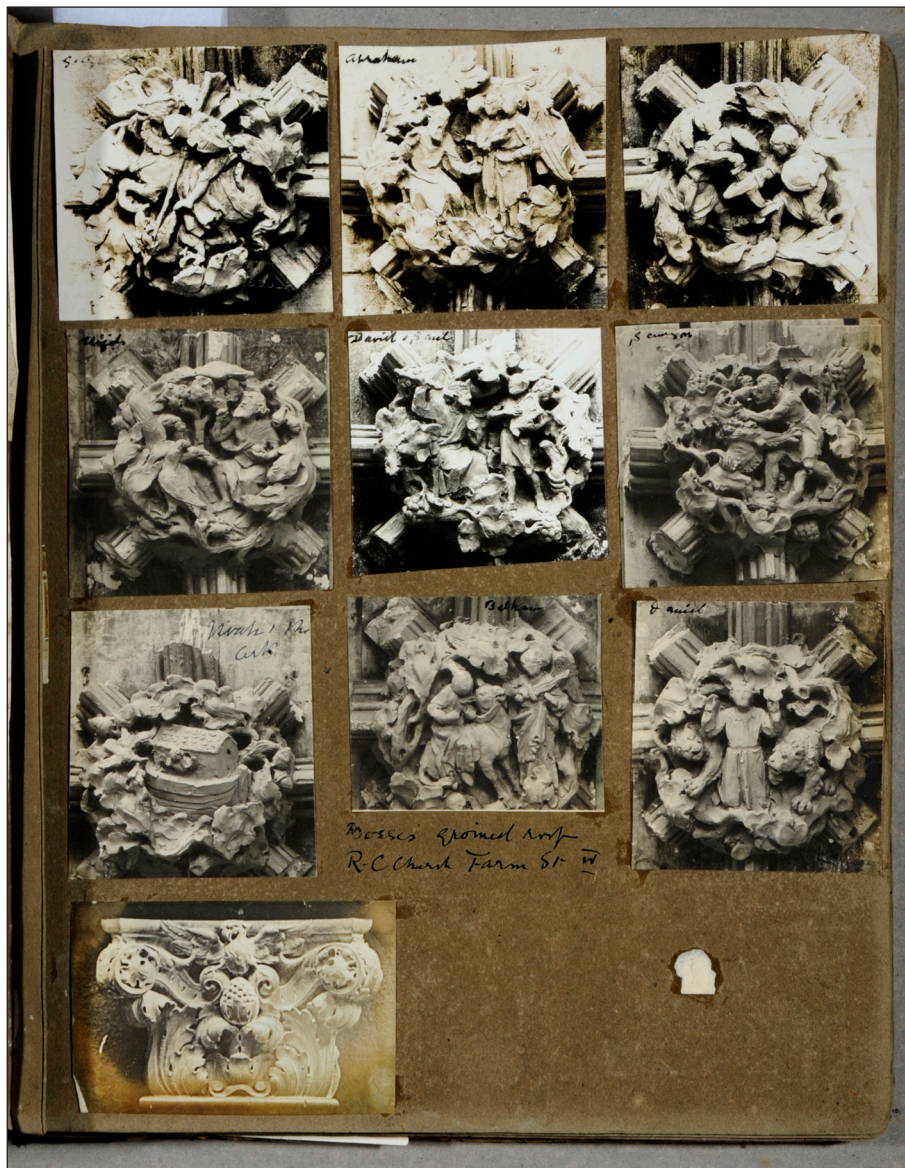


Fig. 9: Nathaniel Hitch, Photographs of clay models annotated 'Bosses grained roof R.C. Church Farm St W'. 1999.1 Photograph album of the sculpture of Nathaniel Hitch and others, c. 1890–1930, Henry Moore Institute.

style. The church was completed between 1844 and 1849, and its extensive polychrome decorative scheme includes a high altar designed by Pugin.²⁹ Hitch's photographs are of clay models for architectural bosses,

²⁹ *Guide to the Church of The Immaculate Conception, Farm Street, Berkeley Square, London, W.1.* (London: [n. pub.], 1912).

following the medieval precedent of concealing the intersection of the ribs in a vaulted ceiling. The photographs are annotated with the names of their Old Testament subjects, including Daniel, Daniel and Saul, Elijah, and Noah's Ark. These are roughly modelled and left unfinished, the clay residue from tool marks left on the surface, and the indentations left by finger and thumb marks clearly visible. The foliage throughout is particular to each boss, but similarly loosely modelled, with little detail.

By freeing himself from the rigorous emphasis on accuracy of reproduction that (debatably) characterized fine art sculpture, Hitch was able to work, and allow his workers to work, with a degree of creative autonomy. This suggests a more sustained and successful link with medieval craftsmanship than even William Morris's experiments. Furthermore, Hitch's practice was directly associated with the materiality of the particular sculpture in hand. He modelled clay as if it were stone, with an eye to its final realization in stone. He does not appear to have fully indulged in the modelling qualities and opportunities of clay, unless it was for a rare casting in bronze. This suggests that material specificity was important to Hitch: his work was modelled in sympathy with its final material, with different materials offering finite and specific variations in resistance and surface effect.

Protecting employers' interests: the Master Carvers Association

It would be inaccurate, however, to suggest that these working methods represented a horizontal relationship between Hitch and his workers. There may have been a degree of creative freedom in the transposition of his models, but these were still set within strict aesthetic, financial, and time constraints. As the census returns demonstrate, Hitch self-identified as both a sculptor and an employer: 'Architectural Sculptor' (1871), 'Sculptor employing 9 men' (1881), 'Sculptor' and an employer (1891), 'Sculptor's Modeller' and an employer (1901), and 'Architectural Sculptor and Mason' and an employer working at home (1911).³⁰

In November 1897, the Master Carvers Association of London was founded to further the interests of '*employers* [emphasis added] of Stone Carvers, Wood Carvers, and Modellers'. Its *Constitution and Rules* record Hitch as a member of the Executive Committee.³¹ Additional members were as follows: President, Henry Wheeler Barnes (William Brindley's son-in-law); Vice President, Gilbert Seale (from a family business of architectural

³⁰ 'Nathaniel Hitch', *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851–1951* <http://sculpture.gla.ac.uk/view/person.php?id=ann_1239657440> [accessed 6 February 2016].

³¹ *Constitution and Rules of the Master Carvers' Association of London* (London: [n. pub.], 1897). With thanks to Paul Ferguson, Hon. Secretary, Master Carvers Association, for a copy of the *Constitution and Rules*.

sculptors, modellers, and wood carvers); Treasurer, James Erskine Knox (wood carver and architectural sculptor, formerly apprenticed to Thomas Earp of Lambeth).³² Alongside Hitch, the members of the Executive Committee comprised William Aumonier (head of a firm of architectural sculptors and carvers), John Daymond of John Daymond and Son (stonemasons and architectural sculptors), and four additional members including Frith.

As previously noted in this article, Hitch and Frith probably became acquainted in 1894, when they both worked at Two Temple Place and Hitch enrolled at Lambeth. The art critic Marion Harry Spielmann has noted that ‘the main influence of Mr. W. S. Frith has been that of a teacher — one of the most successful Instructors who ever worked in England’, and his impact on sculptors including Frampton, Bates, Goscombe John, and Pomeroy is often cited.³³ Frith’s involvement in founding the Master Carvers Association might therefore seem to be in keeping with the more collaborative and supportive aspects of professional association, education, and practice.

Yet despite the apparent paternalistic qualities of the teacher–pupil relationship, this new organization demonstrates that Frith and Hitch were intent on protecting their own interests as businessmen. The association sought to regulate the sculpture industry for the benefit of employers, by presenting a united front against workers’ demands and strike action. Its first aim outlined ‘unity of action in the settlement of all questions arising between employers and their workmen, with a view to preventing lock-outs, and unjust strikes against individual Members of the Association’. Furthermore, any member whose workers required ‘any alteration in the hours, or customs, or rates of wages’, had to send notice to the Honorary Secretary, to be discussed before a committee meeting: ‘no member shall generally raise the rate of wages in any department without giving at least one month’s previous notice to the Committee’; and all members were to assist each other during strikes. This presents a less benevolent aspect to relations between sculptors than might be deduced from the mapping of names across teaching schools, individual commissions, and business and family associations.

Hitch and Frith were Executive Committee members of an organization that supported the interests of sculpture-related businesses. This information adds a new dimension to the flowering of architectural sculpture in the 1890s, which to date has been largely interpreted in positive terms as a conduit for the New Sculpture. It suggests that the rise in architectural

³² On Earp, see Anthony Mitchell and Olive Mitchell, *Thomas Earp: Eminent Victorian Sculptor* (Buckingham: Baron Books, 2002).

³³ Marion Harry Spielmann, *British Sculpture and Sculptors To-Day* (London: Cassell, 1901), p. 95.

sculpture in the period placed new demands on sculpture businesses. As a later president recalled,

In the later years of the last century when ‘trade’ was busy my firm, John Daymond & Son employed regularly fifty wood carvers and a small army of stone carvers, sculptors and modellers in addition to masons, joiners and fibrous plasterers, there were, to the best of my recollection no working rules or agreements with any trade unions or other bodies. The method of arranging wage rates, expenses, &c., between employers of stone and wood carvers and their employees was not satisfactory and it was decided by the leading firms at that time to band themselves together to regularise matters and protect their own interests. Consequently [. . .] the MASTER CARVERS’ ASSOCIATION was founded.³⁴

The association’s focus on establishing uniform wages, hours, and practices across the profession, and of acting collectively against the demands of their workers, suggests that sculpture businesses felt under threat from strike action and workers’ demands. This in turn indicates that sculptors, modellers, carvers, and stoneworkers were working together — either by specific profession or more collectively — to improve their pay and working conditions. Given the unfortunate loss of the association’s archive during World War II, a study of police records of strikes and related activities would be required to shed light on the unionization of sculptors and sculpture-related professions. And a closer analysis of the economics and business of sculpture is required to better understand these complex relationships across what might be broadly defined as the practice and profession of sculpture.

The foundation of the Society of British Sculptors in 1904 suggests that, within this continued boom time in British sculpture, there also arose the need for an organization dedicated to protecting the interests of independent sculptors. Founder members included Thomas Brock, Frampton, Goscombe John, William Ernest Reynolds-Stephens — and Frith, suggesting that the professional distinctions between employers in the ‘sculpture business’ and independent sculptors were not tightly drawn, or necessarily in conflict with each other. These professional associations and distinctions require further investigation, not least because the current scholarly division between fine and decorative art, and between the New Sculpture and other forms of sculpture, has obscured the ways in which these sculpture practices operated in the same networks, and as businesses, employing full-time

³⁴ *Master Carvers’ Association, Founded 11th November, 1897, Some Historical Notes by the 1940–50 President* [J. Dudley Daymond] (London: [n. pub.], 1950), p. 1. With thanks to Paul Ferguson for sending me a copy of this pamphlet.

or casual staff to prepare, execute, copy, pack, transport, and photograph sculpture. Over time this produced, to some extent, a parallel system of sculptors: those, like Hitch, who described themselves as sculptors and employers; and those, like his son, who is listed in the 1911 census as a sculptor working on his own account. Rather than becoming successor to the family business, Frederick Booth Hitch moved out of his father's Lambeth studios and crossed the river to Chelsea, eventually taking over William Reid Dick's studio in the affluent artistic enclave of St John's Wood.

Conclusion

This article repositions church sculpture within the scholarship on Victorian — and, indeed, modern — sculpture. Far from being a marginal or secondary activity to the Academy, I have argued that sculpture was able to rise to such prominence during the nineteenth century in very large part due to the combined efforts of sculptors, architects, and church patrons to ornament and embellish old and new churches with a complex range of sculpture. Hitch's surviving photographs provide a rare glimpse into this practice of a branch of largely undocumented sculpture: that of a sculptor who specialized in church sculpture, operated outside the Academy, and managed a successful business working for a global range of clients. Through his close and sustained contact with church sculpture Hitch developed a keen understanding of medieval sculpture, which was to inform his own working practice. His specialization in church sculpture and the Gothic style may have been partly serendipitous — the result of his early apprenticeship to the London firm of architectural sculptors Farmer and Brindley, and his subsequent associations with architects working largely on church building and restoration. Whatever his personal beliefs and tastes, these experiences partially determined the trajectory his career would take, and had a measurable impact on his own aesthetic and practice. And while my focus in this article has been on Hitch's church sculpture, his professional networks, training, and commissions demonstrate the complexities of Victorian sculpture practice, as his interests and work extended beyond the church. Given the range and subject matter of his work he could equally be considered in relation to the statuette, the New Sculpture, debates regarding restoration and conservation, English nationalism, and the patronage of British sculptors by American émigrés in England.

Re-evaluating the Christian dimension of Victorian sculpture across the long nineteenth century has the potential to challenge the centrality of ideal classical sculpture and of the Academy in the scholarship, and to open up new areas of research, knowledge, and debate. Foregrounding the neglected Christian dimension of neoclassical sculptors such as John Flaxman and John Gibson would, for example, open up alternative and

parallel areas of sculptural experimentation, meaning, and practice in the oeuvre of these celebrated sculptors, and reassess their influence on subsequent generations of British sculptors. And while my focus in this article has been on Hitch's church sculpture, the involvement of 'modern' sculptors such as Thornycroft, Alfred Gilbert, Frampton, and Bates in church commissions, and their interest in pre-Reformation *and* classical and modern sculpture, opens up new areas for understanding the breadth and scope of sculpture practice and education in Victorian Britain. This new area of study might usefully integrate not only church sculpture into the scholarship, but include works of a biblical nature not necessarily intended for use in ecclesiastical spaces, and, perhaps more profoundly, examine the broader influence of Christianity on British sculpture, through the complex incursion of Christian values and sentiment on its sculpture.³⁵

³⁵ The author is currently completing a book on Victorian sculpture, which will include a chapter on Christianity and sculpture.