

The Story of a Jubilee Masterpiece

Beth Taylor - 12 December 2012

Background Notes



Alfred Gilbert's *Jubilee Memorial to Queen Victoria*, 1887

WAHG

Winchester Art History Group

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The artist

Sir Alfred Gilbert (1854-1934) British sculptor and goldsmith. After initial training as a surgeon, he studied at Heatherley's Art School, 1872-3, worked as an assistant to Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834-1890), also studying at the Royal Academy (1873-5) and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris (1875-1878). He moved to Rome in 1878, returning to England in 1884. His *Perseus Arming* 1883 was shown at the Paris Salon of 1883, and he was commissioned to sculpt *Icarus* by Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, in 1884. This work created a sensation when exhibited at the Royal Academy and led to his decision to return to the UK where he received a number of important public commissions, being best known for his statue of *Eros* atop the Shaftesbury Memorial in Piccadilly Circus.

Initially very successful, gaining royal commissions, becoming member of the Royal Academy and Professor of Sculpture there, he proved to be no businessman and was forced to go into voluntary exile in Brussels in 1901 following his bankruptcy. He was brought back to England to complete his memorial to the Duke of Clarence and to create the memorial to Queen Alexandra at Marlborough Gate in London. He was knighted in 1932.

The patron

William Ingham Whitaker (1841-1893) was born in Sicily where his great uncle, Benjamin Ingham, was a very wealthy and influential merchant, with interest in the Marsala wine industry, in shipping and in American railroad stocks. William Ingham Whitaker became heir to his great uncle, leaving Sicily in 1870, purchasing Pylewell House near Lymington.

In 1886 Whitaker offered to pay for a full size statue of Queen Victoria to mark her Jubilee in 1887 and the year in which he was High Sheriff of Hampshire and commissioned Gilbert to carry out the work.

The statue

The statue was unveiled by Princess Louise as part of a programme of Jubilee events in Winchester. Slightly more than life size, the monument to the Queen Empress shows her seated in state robes on a throne of complex design. In her

hands she holds the sceptre and orb, the latter surmounted with a statuette of Victory. On her head is a small crown and above it is suspended a larger imperial crown. Around the two main uprights of the throne are canopied niches with statuettes of Faith, Hope, Charity, the Law, the Constitution and the Colonial Empire. On the back of the throne, at the top, are larger seated statuettes representing History and the Sciences. On the reverse of the throne is a statuette of Britannia, holding a model of the Royal Harry, one of the first warships of the British navy.

The sculptural language of the statue, its visual signs, provide the viewer with a recognisable portrait of Queen Victoria and of her 'body royal' with its accoutrements of regal power and status. Gilbert intended it to be a recognizable likeness, working from a photograph of the Queen to model the head of the statue.

The intricacy of the main figure and its draperies, and the detailing of the smaller statuettes, all produced within months, were a demonstration of his technical and artistic ability. As the commission required some celebration of Empire; he chose to depict this with allegorical figures representing the values or qualities of the British Empire. The throne, Victoria's formal robes and the other symbols of state such as the orb denoting royalty, the imposing size of the statue and its placement above the viewer give it authority, Britannia and the ship signify national pride and naval power, Victory, balanced on the orb, denotes the widespread British empire. The civilizing and morally improving mission of Britain and Christianity is signalled in titles given to the statuettes – faith, hope, charity, the law, the constitution, history, the sciences.

Few statues of Queen Victoria received the praise in contemporary and subsequent art criticism afforded to Gilbert's. On seeing the model of the work exhibited at the Royal academy in 1888, the French sculptor August Rodin described it as 'the finest thing of its kind in modern times'. In 2011 the statue itself was exhibited at the Royal Academy in a show entitled "Modern British Sculpture". The catalogue acknowledges that its imperial image belongs to a bygone era, but argues that "it continues to have presence and relevance- not only as a historical signifier, but also as a sculptural form that allows us to experience the object's authority resonating beyond its iconographic specificity". As our seminar will show, however, the life of this particular masterpiece has not always been one of unqualified success.....



**Gilbert's statue on display in the section entitled
The Establishment Figure, *Modern British Sculpture* Exhibition,
the Royal Academy, January to April 2011.**