

An Introduction to the Sculpture of George Wallace

by Robert Clark Yates

Some words about the world we live in. How a society feels about life and its purpose is expressed in the way its people manipulate the tangible world about them. When by choice or chance a group of human beings live together in an urban community, what they collectively value most, whether it be money or morals, traffic or tradition, is always made physically evident. The settings they create are in fact the actual product of what they do with their days. If they enjoy civilization and celebrate life, their streets will be deliberately beautiful, their environment naturally healthy, their heritage honoured and enhanced for their posterity.

Our schools teach our young that ancient Athens and Florence of the Renaissance were two of the most culturally meaningful gatherings of people in western civilization. Crowned by the Parthenon, her public places adorned by her many accomplished sculptors, Athens in her glory had less than a third the population of the present City of Hamilton. Florence of the High Renaissance abounded in artists and became perhaps the most beautiful city in the world with about one sixth of the present population of Hamilton. I hope the point here is obvious. Hamilton boasts that it is the Ambitious City, but ambitious for what? In our best moments we secretly know that as individuals we want our spirits moved; we want some tangible signs of the significance of life. If this was reflected in our collective priorities, we would have here the equivalent of three Athens, six Florences or one Hamilton that is worthy of us as we imagine ourselves at our best.

Unfortunately ours is not a time that reverences the environment in which we have to live our days. With extremely influential business interests directed to profits rather than serving human needs, our natural surroundings and architectural heritage are gradually being destroyed, suicidal self-poisoning through pollution has become publicly acceptable, city planning for people is a dying art and with it public monuments of any meaning. We don't have to look far into the Hamilton smog for examples. Outside the Art Gallery of Hamilton in the windswept wasteland, which was designed, to be a place for people, a three dimensional super-graphic provides an inoffensive public sculpture which is an effective business emblem for the gallery. It is related to contemporary commercial logos and has (as I imagine it is meant to have) the same impact on our spirits as those sterling symbols.

The single-minded multi-national style in industry, business, building or art leads to the impoverishment of regional expression, the loss of local self-determination and the break-down of traditional convictions. As you well know, the roots of our civilization are being forgotten and our collective goals are undefined (or certainly not democratically defined by us as a people). The dilemma of our time is a spiritual one with all-too-real physical parallels. Sadly, the most obvious signs of hope are protest and opposition.

It is a commonplace that artists (like convicts) are a product of their environment. The preceding preamble should provide an appropriate atmosphere to introduce the work of a local artist, which through a highly personal vision achieves a rare universality. In mood and material, the sculpture of George Wallace is very much a product and reflection of the contemporary world, but in the imagery he chooses, Wallace carries on with his job as if the society he addresses still believes in the traditions on which it is based. In this, George Wallace's sculpture is art of conviction. It is also a quiet sign of hope.

The physical state of societies (or sculptures) can often be interpreted as a parallel to mankind's spiritual state. The classical world glorified the human body, often portraying it as ideal in their sculptures. The shoulders and chests were strong, the bellies taut, every muscle of the arms and legs was heroically defined. Today, the physical descendants of Ulysses and Hercules are Tarzan of the Apes, Superman and other comic book characters, somewhat lacking in soul. Wallace's subjects tend to have flabby tummies, untuned limbs and an unheroic stance. They are not extremely handsome and their awkward sense of balance suggests people who are not particularly competent at manipulating the material world around them. They are poetic products of the twentieth century and the spiritual brothers of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and the Great Misfits of our time. In an age that can remember nothing of the courage and nobility of a great ancient hero like Achilles but only his one small weakness, the tragic comics are as close to heroes as we are liable to get. They are the only ones now capable of capturing the collective imagination. Often exuding an ironic gray humour, Wallace's tragic comic characters are naked and bald or timelessly and anonymously dressed. They are similar to classical Greek sculpture in that the essence of Being is captured in one descriptive moment. What went on before and what will likely happen afterward is understood. The figures are in the act of stretching, hanging, balancing or losing balance. Bondage, a fragile balance, a taking wing or the grief of Daedalus are all passing things and cannot last. In the Man Releasing Eagles, the action is stopped at the instant of release, between the birds' restraint and their complete freedom. It cannot last. In the naked Death With Flowers, a momentary offering is fixed sculpturally in time but we know that the freshness of a bouquet of flowers and the size of a penis are two of the most temporary things in all creation. Even the Dead Christ rests in a motionless state, and that too will pass.

If we choose to ignore or fail to grasp any meaning Wallace has given his sculptures by means of literary references or repeated motifs, they are still good objects to look at. Being human or human-like figures they are easily read and readily understood as very convincing natural forms. The Benevolent Angel on its weightless horizontal glide reaches to the tips of his fingers, its robes flowing out behind. The Hanging Thief sags in a way that belies the rigid metal out of which it is made. Large, smooth wings parenthesize Daedalus, hiding much of his naked, textured body, and like a pomegranate broken open to reveal the intricacies hidden within, an aesthetically pleasing peep-show is provided as we walk around the sculpture. The strong silhouette of the totem-like piling up of visually interesting forms of the Educational Experiment appeals to the child in us. Much like the Grimm fairy tale of the travelling musicians of Bremen, we see a winged figure on top, a cruciform in the middle and an irreverent ass on the bottom. The simple aesthetics of balance and form displayed in many of these works is easily appreciated, as is the craftsmanship

of the meticulous welding. But I find the special and rare quality of these works is their strange stimulation of perception beyond the visual.

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception. We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity unless there is supernatural intervention. ---Simone Weil

We don't have to see many of Wallace's sculptures to realize we are being given descriptions of various states of the soul. Most of the work has an aura of spirituality and an unmistakable ring of authenticity. What they are about is gravity and grace. Despite their often precarious balance and the prevailing mood of lostness in the world, they are very sure-footed as works of art. They confidently spring from the unwobbling way of a creed, a solid foundation one is sure is Christianity.

These sculptures are ominously surrounded by gravity and its spiritual counterpart, the fall. The Hanging Thief hangs. The winged Daedalus is anchored to the earth. The Balancing Act, a family of acrobats on the high wire who have lost their balance, is falling apart. Even the Man On A Cot is potentially a Man On A Broken Cot.

The state of grace is made visible when gravity is defied, as it is by Wallace's angels of God or agents of the spirit. The Benevolent Angel skims over the earth. Above St. John an angel is suspended weightlessly. The angel with whom Jacob wrestles is unmoved by any force.

A force parallel to that of gravity, with the same power to dictate physical movement, is utilized in the bound figures such as the men on cots and Lazarus. The release from bondage, like the transcending of gravity, illustrates the recovery of grace.

In utilizing traditional Christian postures of the arms open in the attitude of a crucifix or the head gazing skyward in an attempted communication with God, Wallace does not leave even the most despairing of his subjects in a void but provides them with a context. That context is the Christian agony in overcoming the dark night of the soul.

In quite a few of these sculptures, the subjects are figures taken straight from the Bible and interpreted poetically in the artist's own distinctive style. Although they can be appreciated simply as fine and haunting objects, I believe their full appreciation comes only with some familiarity with some basic stories from our culture's past, the past through which we can better understand the present. Being literary in nature, these sculptures invite talk about them.

The Apple Pickers, for example, portrays Adam and Eve in the act of harvesting the forbidden fruit that led to mankind's fall from grace. Eve is capable of reaching the apple of her eye only by standing on Adam's shoulders, which Adam, his arms spread like a martyr, allows her to do. This may be the sculptor's nod of recognition to the important women's movement of the past decade. In the Biblical account of our Genesis, God's commandment to Adam that he was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was made before the creation of the woman. It may be that

the admission is long overdue that man deserves a more fundamental role than woman in original sin. In Wallace's account of this most decisive moment for human destiny, Adam cannot blame his downfall on the woman for he is voluntarily making it possible by lifting her. Likewise, the woman cannot blame the serpent who is nowhere to be seen. All the responsibility for our misfortunes, however, does not stop with Adam and Eve. Just as Eve relies on Adams support, Adam is lifted off the ground by standing on a triangular beam. (The triangle is suggestive of the Trinity, the Christian Godhead.) Adam and Eve's risky performance on the Straight and Narrow requires a skilful and experienced sense of balance. They look good for now but they are due for a fall.

It would be presumptuous of me to assume I could state exactly what Wallace intended to say with his sculptures, but literary subjects invite interpretation. Even a mildly active mind cannot help responding to these visual images which seem so comfortable in the world of ideas. Since they are suggestive and provocative, I find they attract and embrace important thoughts, which help to clarify our closest feelings and fears.

Wallace's early Lazarus is the personification of the question "Why?" No answer is imminent as Lazarus blindly searches the skies with eyes like the empty sockets of a skull. Life for him is the Great Unknown most of us imagine Death to be. His arms and legs are tightly bound in gravesclothes and the only bodily movement we can imagine is a loss of balance followed by a fall.

Unfortunately the Bible does not tell us much about Lazarus, what he thought or said. We know far more about his sisters, Mary and Martha. But he was, you remember, a man loved by Jesus and whose death inspired the shortest and most poignant verse in the Bible. (John 11:35 "Jesus wept.") The life to which Lazarus was raised was likely not easy and was probably one of agony because those who successfully plotted the death of his friend and Master, also sought a way to put him back to the death from which Jesus had raised him. It is made clear in one of Christ's parables that if a man (whom he named Lazarus) was to return from the dead to warn the world away from the wickedness of its ways, he would be no more heeded than the long unheeded prophets. It seems a resurrection does no good except as a sign for those who have already accepted the Way it signifies.

As I am writing this, Wallace's current work-in-progress is another Lazarus Risen From The Dead. The earlier Lazarus, whose face is the harshest and most masklike of all Wallace's work, suggests a heathen fear and wonder at the unspeakable confusion of life and death. The glorious resurrection and acceptance of the later Lazarus, on the other hand, is a celebration of life and of death as a part of life. His face, the softest and most gentle of all Wallace's work, is raised to God and reminiscent of Bernini's Ecstasy of Saint Theresa. As the body of Lazarus is being warmed back to life, his eyes with their other-worldly vision are like two burst bubbles in a gently boiling pot of porridge. He is seeing the Light. His earthly bonds are broken and, with his arms raised in thanksgiving, his body assumes the all-embracing open stance of the crucified Christ.

It is not the first time (and I hope not the last) that Wallace's most recent sculpture has assumed

the position of my favourite. The paradoxically gentle force required to break those bonds, and the earth-inheriting mildness of expression portrayed in that face have the same effect on us as the words of Saint Theresa, "It is no laughing matter that I have loved you." It brings a twinkle to the eyes and a smile to the lips.

A natural subject for a sculptor who insists we should not forget our roots is Daedalus who in legend is credited with being the first sculptor. Wallace's welded Daedalus is for me the definitive visual image of the fall of Icarus. What is not portrayed by the sculptor is unquestionably felt by the viewer. The unseen is articulated. More than Brueghel's famous painting or any other work dealing with this subject, the monumentally simple focus of Wallace's strong lone figure is inseparable in my mind from the ancient Greek myth.

For anyone interested in a traditional framework for understanding modern times, the myth of Daedalus, the Father of Technology, is very important. This fact has been recognized by some of the twentieth century's most influential artists. With the powerful presence of Picasso's minotaurs, Kafka's labyrinths and Joyce's serial character named Daedalus, the essence of the story has become part of our way of seeing the world even though the story itself may be largely unknown.

What do we know about Daedalus? Because he killed an apprentice who surpassed him by inventing such unexciting but useful items as the toothed saw and compasses, Daedalus was forced to flee Athens to Crete. There his ingenuity produced an artificial cow to house the lusty wife of King Minos. Disguised as a cow, she could mate with a bull which had aroused her passions. In much the same manner as the tale of Doctor Frankenstein, the myth of Daedalus illustrates that the coupling of untoward desires with the technical ability to fulfill them gives birth to monsters. So the fearful Minotaur is born, half bull, half man, with an appetite for young human flesh.

When technological innovations give you more than you bargained for, the solution to unforeseen problems tends to be sought in more technology. Daedalus then designs the Labyrinth to house the Minotaur. As necessity mounts, Daedalus himself must escape the maze he has created, a situation that requires yet more technology. He devises wings which enable him and his son to fly to freedom one more time. Forgetting the ground rules, Icarus flies too close to the sun which melts the wax holding his wings together. As his wings and life come undone, he falls in a great undertaking.

The force of gravity that we feel at work in nearly all of Wallace's sculptures invisibly ties his Daedalus to the earth which Mankind is very much dependant on no matter how high our flights of cleverness. Rather than instruments of elevation, Wallace has made these wings heavy objects which weigh the figure down. Standing there, the earthbound Daedalus seems to hang, a dangling man. With his face looking skyward, it seems he wants to stretch in that direction, but his elongated neck is more the result of his upturned head reluctant to follow his downward sinking body. We know that the same silent force now at work on his wings and fallen shoulders, on his

drooping paunch and heavily hanging testicles, is also at work on the fruit of his loins. Icarus is falling. In a symbolic posture of modern man, Daedalus watches his offspring, his inventions and intentions, fall --- and the fall is quite beyond his control.

Now, while we wait the necessary re-establishment of the humanities (rather than the sciences) to provide the guiding principles for the pursuits of civilization, technological advance continues to uproot us by destroying our relationship to our past and even threatens to destroy our absolutely essential relationship to the earth, trees, water and sky. The images Wallace places before us underline yet transcend the modern dilemma because they have to do with eternal souls. They seem all the more strong and precious and meaningful because the onslaught of Progress has no need for such things.

The silence of God may often seem to collaborate with the prevailing propaganda which would have us believe the sole purpose of our daily doing is to make money and participate in the business of the economy, or that the meaning of life can be found only by following the news and submitting to the pre-emption of our prerogatives by Progress. This is simply another way of saying the world around us is as cold and metallic, as hollow, empty and dark as the inside of one of Wallace's sculptures. We are encouraged and strengthened by signs that this is not so.

It is a strange truth that meditation on the incomprehensibility of existence promotes joy, compassion and equanimity, and encounters with good things provide real nourishment for the soul, which is the only daily bread worth praying for. Deeds done by fellow human beings which lean on the bubble of our daily concerns serve to remind us of the mystery of our being here. The sculptures of George Wallace must be placed in this category of human endeavours.

It is not our concern whether or not these man-made objects gain admission into art history or are found acceptable to partake of the economy. It is enough that they are helpful and that they are signs. This, more than the fact they are well-made in deterioration-resistant metals, insures their permanence and staying power. The monuments you are about to view, our grandchildren will proudly call part of their heritage.

Now enjoy the Jim Chambers photo essay that accompanies *An Introduction to the Sculpture of George Wallace*.

Daedalus Man Releasing Eagles The Apple Pickers Lazarus
Lazarus Risen From The Dead

[Distillate © HA&L + Robert Clark Yates & Jim Chambers {from the Greek *bios*} -- the course of a life.]



Daedalus



Man Releasing Eagles



The Apple Pickers



Lazarus



Lazarus Risen From The Dead
