

Francis William Sargent (1870-1960)

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A sculptural work of ‘high quality and singular interest... [is] the little-known F.W. Sargant’s dignified series of reliefs on the exterior of Oakham School Memorial Chapel’. So reads the promotional announcement for the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association’s recently published volume focusing on the counties of Leicestershire and Rutland.¹ This succinct comment encapsulates the reputation accorded by posterity to the sculptor Francis William Sargant. For, despite the notable merits of his oeuvre, his fame has nonetheless been eclipsed. In this he at least partly resembles his considerably better known near contemporary, the Royal Academician Gilbert Bayes (1872-1953). Like Bayes, Sargant’s style is analogous to the so-called ‘New Sculpture’, that sumptuous sculptural aesthetic that so characterises turn-of-the-century Britain. Sargant studied at the Slade School of Fine Art, London from 1895-6 where it is likely he encountered Sir George Frampton (1860-1928), one of the greatest exponents of this movement, who had begun teaching there a year earlier in 1894.² Frampton found inspiration in the early Italian Renaissance tradition and this might well have served to initiate a stylistic precursor that was to have a strong and enduring influence on the work of the younger man.³

Given these connections it is fitting that Sargant should have chosen a theme addressed so magnificently by this preceptor: namely Frampton’s life-sized bust of ‘Lamia’ (1899-1900, bronze, ivory and opals, h. 60 cm, Royal Academy of Arts). This depicts the dramatic denouement to John Keats’s eponymous poem of 1819, which relates the tragic story of the Corinthian, Menippus Lycius who falls in love with Lamia, a serpent who had assumed human form.⁴ When her true identity is revealed on their wedding day she turns a ‘deadly white’ and vanishes, thus precipitating the death of her beguiled lover.

Sargant’s interpretation is significantly more ambiguous than Frampton’s - and therefore just as intriguing as its famous predecessor. It is a bronze statuette (c. 1952-58, h. 30.5 cm)⁵

mounted upon a plinth coiled by a snake-like pattern. Lamia's anthropoid figure, sheathed in the sinuous skin of a snake, throws 'a gordian shape' around the prostrate body of her ill-fated paramour. Upon first encountering this 'cruel lady' Lycius is described as being so mesmerised that he 'Swoon'd, murmuring of love, and pale with pain'. Much later, with the revelation that he has been deceived, the beguiled suitor 'heart-struck and lost... sank supine beside the aching ghost'. Sargent's rendition can therefore be seen to depict either the doomed beginning (I: 287-295) or calamitous end of the poem (II: 291-294). This tergiversation, coupled with a superbly sensitive treatment of the bronze, testifies to Sargent's sculptural excellence, a fact that surely makes up for the slightly recherché style and subject of the work. Indeed this example eminently testifies to his faculty for modelling in clay. For even though the bulk of his output was in marble, he was not an advocate of direct carving, favouring instead the use of a pointing machine and enlisting the help of professional carvers.⁶

The sculptor's career was a wide-ranging one. Following an upbringing and early education in England he spent most of his life in Italy. After his time at the Slade he went on to train under the German sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand (1847-1921) in Florence and Munich from 1899 until at least 1903.⁷ In the latter city he was awarded a gold medal in 1904.⁸ His obituary in *The Times* rightly characterised his memorial to Florence Nightingale in the church of Santa Croce, Florence (1913) as 'one of his principal works'.⁹ Acknowledgement of this fact came a year prior to the sculptor's death when a study for the project in the form of a marble bust was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts, London.¹⁰

An equally accomplished commission was the aforementioned limestone reliefs for G.E.S. Streatfield's Oakham School War Memorial Chapel (1924-5). Sargent's complex scheme of embellishment, completed in 1927, constitutes a fusion of the real and the ideal. The four Cardinal Virtues flank the trefoil windows of the chapel's southern façade whilst the tympanum over the door depicts the risen Christ in the centre of a group of beseeching

worshippers. Level with this, and directly above the Virtues, is a pair of tripartite panels skilfully populated by a host of emblematic figures, capturing both the tragedy of war and the indomitability of the human spirit. Such qualities must surely have stemmed from Sargant's direct involvement in the Great War, during which he served as Commandant of the British Red Cross Unit No. 2, Italy - for which he was awarded an OBE.¹¹ This physical and emotional engagement with the subject-matter is brilliantly articulated courtesy of Sargant's superb 'control of spatial relationships'.¹² That this attribute is apparent even in such a diminutive work as 'Lamia' suggests that the 'little-known F.W. Sargant' is deserving of far greater acclaim.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.liverpool-unipress.co.uk/publicsculpture.html>. Cf. T. Cavanagh & A. Yarrington, *Public Sculpture of Leicestershire and Rutland*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. xvi.

² S. Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 89.

³ See S. Beattie, *The New Sculpture*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 243; D. Buckman, *Dictionary of Artists in Britain since 1945*, Bristol, Art Dictionaries Ltd., 1998, pp. 1071--2.

⁴ J. Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats*, London, Heinemann, 1978, pp. 452--475.

⁵ A version of the work -- 'N^o 2' -- held by the Henry Moore Institute was presented anonymously through the Leeds Art Collections Fund in 1958. The same year had seen this piece displayed at the Royal Academy (no. 1456). A study for this group had also been shown at the summer exhibition of 1952 (no. 1388). Royal Academy of Arts, *Royal Academy exhibitors, 1905--1970: a dictionary of artists and their work in the summer exhibitions of the Royal Academy of Arts*, Wakefield, E.P. Publishing, 1973--82, vol. 5, p. 450.

⁶ Anon, 'Mr F.W. Sargant: a talented sculptor', *The Times*, 13 January 1960, p. 15.

⁷ See the entry relating to Sargant on the Tate Gallery website -- <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/AText?id=13106&type=caption&sid=null&group=general&name=&start=null&end=null&mda=> [accessed 07.10.02]; for information on Hildebrand see H.W. Janson, *Nineteenth-Century Sculpture*, London & New York, Thames & Hudson, 1985, p. 236.

⁸ G. Waters, *Dictionary of British Artists Working 1900--1950*, Eastbourne, Eastbourne Fine Art, 1975, p. 291.

⁹ Anon, 'Mr F.W. Sargant: a talented sculptor', *The Times*, 13 January 1960, p. 15.

¹⁰ No. 1520. Royal Academy of Arts, *Royal Academy exhibitors, 1905--1970: a dictionary of artists and their work in the summer exhibitions of the Royal Academy of Arts*, Wakefield, E.P. Publishing, 1973--82, vol. 5, p. 450.

¹¹ T. Cavanagh & A. Yarrington, *Public Sculpture of Leicestershire and Rutland*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 384.

¹² T. Cavanagh & A. Yarrington, *Public Sculpture of Leicestershire and Rutland*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000, p. 296.