



European Sculpture in the Collection of His Majesty the King.

Reviewed by: Mark Stocker

INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

DOI: 10.21039/rsj.560

Abstract: Review of Jonathan Marsden, *European Sculpture in the Collection of His Majesty the King*, (Modern Art Press, 2025).



***European Sculpture in the Collection of His Majesty the King.* By Jonathan Marsden.**

Modern Art Press, in association with Royal Collection Trust, 2025. ISBN

9781738487813. 1648 pp. £350.00.



ir Jonathan Marsden's catalogue, *European Sculpture in the Collection of His Majesty the King*, is a veritable tour de force. Nearly thirty years of painstaking research—inevitably prolonged by other priorities when he was employed at a senior level in the Royal Collection from 1996 to 2017—have been brought to a triumphant culmination. In four hefty volumes, some 1,800 works of sculpture are expertly described and excellently illustrated in chronological order, from early Renaissance busts of dreamy female saints and a laughing child to—half a millennium later—an unrelentingly abstract steel table piece by Antony Caro. Other areas of the collection, including Victorian miniatures, porcelain, and Chinese and Japanese works of art, have all been catalogued in recent years, whereas sculpture has for a long time been the proverbial elephant in the palace chamber. Not any longer, fortunately.

Marsden's formidable task has been further complicated by the diffusion of the Royal Collection sculptures over a dozen or more palaces, castles, and other residences, unlike works on paper, which are concentrated in the Print Room of Windsor Castle. With the partial exception of Osborne House, there is no architectural space devoted exclusively to sculpture. Instead, sculptures inhabit mixed artistic arrangements, combined with paintings and furnishings of all kinds. The distinctiveness of the sculpture collection, its display, stewardship, and its care and repair over the centuries, constitute the 113-page introduction. Marsden provides readable overviews of respective monarchs who took most interest in sculpture, starting with Charles I. He understandably regrets the fate of Charles's impressive collection which included a Michelangelo and sixteen Giambologna statuettes, forcibly sold during the Commonwealth. Likewise, Marsden laments the loss of Gianlorenzo Bernini's bust of the king, presumably destroyed in the Whitehall Palace fire of 1698. The "flaccid mannerism" of Hubert Le Sueur's surviving earlier counterpart (194) is clearly no substitute, and Marsden suggests that it led to Bernini being approached for something better. The next significant sovereign in this regard, George IV, is characterised as "an individual who was unquestionably attracted to sculpture in many forms" (18), from antiquity to Antonio Canova, and from marble busts to bronze equestrian statuettes.

Quantitatively, the catalogue is dominated by the acquisitions of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, whose degree of engagement with sculpture—extending to several of

their children including Princess Louise, herself a sculptor—"cannot be overstated" (30). Albert wrote with characteristic intelligence of how sculpture "derives a higher value and interest" than painting "from the fact that in it we have to deal with the three dimensions, and not with surface merely, and are not called upon to resort to the illusion of perspective" (34). Such was his involvement that he himself took up the modelling tool to improve Thomas Thornycroft's model for his equestrian statuette of Victoria, and "while thus employed the Queen appeared." Thornycroft reported how "the Royal sculptor paused in his work that HM might see the design as she passed and I saw her eyes meet those of the Royal Consort for a moment." Was it good? "Yes it is very good I am sure of it," said Victoria, "with all that decision and emphasis which characterises her" (1031).

It will already be obvious that this is no drily meticulous catalogue. Throughout the four volumes, Marsden's technical knowledge repeatedly provides admirable grounding for the works, and he lucidly summarises the process involved in casting the hand of a beloved royal child. He frequently appraises the quality of casts and the technical prowess of carvings, saying for instance of Francis Williamson's bust of Prince Leopold that "the level of detail achieved in the costume ... is scarcely credible for a work in marble" (1345). The contexts of relevant acquisitions and commissions are carefully explained, and anecdotes woven in where appropriate, as with the Thornycroft (and Albert) statuette. Although Marsden's brand of art history is, from today's academic vantage point, distinctly old school (and surely the better for it, in a publication like this), he goes considerably further than previous cataloguers in situating art in its wider social and political contexts. A memorable instance is Victoria's purchase of two terracotta groups of humble folk, mostly children, by the French sculptor Pierre Adrien Grailion from the Great Industrial Exhibition, Dublin, in 1853. In Ireland, she noted how the people "are too amusing but the rags one sees, & the apparent satisfaction of their wearers, is marvellous, & I should think unequalled in any country. Albert said he had never seen anything like it" (916). "Marvellous" in this sense means remarkable and astonishing, and certainly not excellent, making her observation of people's forbearance, made in close historical proximity to the traumatic Potato Famine, look less callous than it would first seem.

Marsden is also able to indulge in light-hearted commentary surely impossible for earlier cataloguers working in more staid times, as when he observes how the Amazon figure in Joseph Engel's ponderous marble group, *An Episode in the History of War Between the Amazons and the Argonauts*,

does not seem capable of supporting her companion, and it appears almost as though they have migrated from another scene, stumbling across the Dying Gaul ... who is trying to avoid being crushed. Engel's workshop also had the unfortunate practice of incising a channel round the edge of each figure, the carved equivalent of an outline in felt-tip marker pen (860).

Irreverence becomes downright naughtiness when Marsden likens the base of Alice Chaplin's bronze statuette, *Indian Cattle with Attendant*, "whether intentionally or not," to a cowpat (1407). That said, he does not suffer perceived art historical foolishness gladly, sternly taking to task Jason Edwards's attempts to "out" the "homoerotic appeal" of Alfred Gilbert's exquisite ivory and alloy *St George* statuette:

This interpretation ... is in places based on misunderstanding, such as the repeated references to the saint's codpiece, which is not present. The reason that this armour (or any equestrian armour) does not cover the saint's behind is to enable the wearer to sit on a horse (1287).

It seems churlish to find fault with such an outstanding publication, but inevitably an undertaking of this scope has minor shortcomings and errors. While Marsden is referring to the more "portable" sculpture in the Royal Collection, it is somewhat misleading to say that from the 1860s, Victoria "dealt with a smaller number of artists and her acquisitions were confined almost entirely to portrait busts and statuettes" (36). This may be correct about acquisitions, but it overlooks the queen's extraordinary patronage during her long widowhood of multiple monuments that populate the Royal Mausoleum and St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, which lie outside the scope of this catalogue. Queen Mary, consort of George V, is described in the foreword by Tim Knox (Marsden's successor as director of the Royal Collection), as a "surprisingly avid collector," evident for example in her acquisition of Edgar Howes's modernistic, Buddha-like *Madonna of the Lily*. She was also responsible for the patronage of talented sculptors like William Reid Dick and A.G. Walker. Therefore, one regrets that there is no specific discussion of her memorable personality and tastes in the introduction.

Marsden notes the collection gaps in earlier period sculpture from the Renaissance to the Baroque, not helped by the Commonwealth sales, but at the other end of the time frame these are more conspicuous. Queen Mary aside, there was negligible interest in the medium from successive twentieth-century monarchs from George V onwards. Tellingly, Caro, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth each presented a single, small-scale specimen of their work to Elizabeth II, the sum total of their representation in the collection.

Although there are four works by Charles Sargeant Jagger (two are miniatures in Queen Mary's Dolls' House), and a baby's head by Jacob Epstein, modern continental sculpture from Auguste Rodin to Louise Bourgeois is completely unrepresented. Perhaps a former courtier's tact explains Marsden's silence here. There are several literals, for example in relation to Napoleon Bonaparte (81) and Hepworth (1559); the dates of Helena, Duchess of Albany, are confused with those of Princess Helena, daughter of Victoria (1351); and the dates of master-forger Giovanni Bastianini (1469), and Queen Alexandra's visit to Naples (1486) are also wrong. Rather more seriously, Sir Charles Eastlake could not have given advice about the location of Sir Richard Westmacott's monumental Waterloo Vase "by 1881" (635), as he had died in 1865. Princess Louise's modelled bust of her brother, Prince Arthur, subsequently carved by her teacher Mary Thornycroft, wife of Thomas, in 1867, could hardly have been created "under the tuition of J.E. Boehm," whose significant role as the favourite sculptor of the Royal Family only began in February 1869 (1274).

These errors, together with any updated information that is certain to surface, could be easily rectified if the distributors, Yale University Press, in conjunction with the Royal Collection Trust, agreed to bring out an electronic version once sufficient hard copy sets had sold to institutions and well-heeled individuals. This reviewer was saddened to learn, however, that there were no such plans. Such a policy ignores the fact that in today's digital world, the form and presentation of publications are just as important as their contents. While Tim Knox in his foreword commendably refers to "sharing [the Royal Collection] with the public," the price ticket of the four volumes means that they are rather destined to be appreciated by the few than the many.

MARK STOCKER

Independent Scholar