



Simon Keeley by Jan Lasnon

There aren't many of us who can say, hand on heart, we have been able to contribute to something that becomes part of our country's heritage. But for Simon Keeley, with a pedigree of sixteen dedicated years as a stone carver, he already has an enviable list of achievements with the promise of many more to come.

Simon did show an early interest in art, achieving 'A' level and then going on to do a foundation course. After this course he needed a few years out, to consider what he wanted to do.

By his mid twenties he was in a job he didn't particularly enjoy and decided it was time for a bit of a rethink. It struck him that, as the two things he enjoyed the most were Art and The Antiques Roadshow, he could do a lot worse than try to combine the two. Simon soon found himself enrolling on a two year course at Lincoln Art College for a National Diploma conservation and restoration work.

Going to Lincoln completely changed Simon's life, particularly when he first visited the cathedral where he was to spend many hours. He also joined the Lincoln Castle Longbow men, who met at the weekend and used medieval styled bows and arrows in the appropriate older part of the castle. The chap who led the castle bowmen was Don Adams. He worked in the cathedral works department as a stonemason and carver. Don used to arrive at the castle covered in dust and Simon believes he may have had a subliminal influence on his ultimate destination – his carvings were fantastic!

When it was time to leave Lincoln Art College, Simon had to choose between setting up in business with a friend or moving on to do a stonemasonry course at York. It was a tough choice but he decided to try out his skills restoring antiques.

Some time later Simon did decide to enrol on a course at York electing to do a stone masonry course. As soon as he was 'on the tools' he knew he had made the right choice and followed his college work with a couple of years working as a stonemason for Bowmans in Stamford, Lincolnshire. This was great experience and enabled him to build on the skills he had gained. It was only when the more interesting work he enjoyed seemed to dry up that he moved to the London City & Guilds Art School to train as a stone carver, with particular emphasis on historical/ornamental carving.

Here Simon's eyes were opened, as he was shown

how to do a clay model before beginning to carve. It was definitely just what he needed.

At that time it was quite rare for students to win commissions, but an opportunity came up to design and carve an Heraldic Plaque for The Worshipful Company of Skinners. Simon fought off competition to win the commission which can be seen today on the roof garden of the prestigious Skinners' Hall in London. The Worshipful Company of Skinners is one of the "Great Twelve" livery companies with a pedigree of more than 700 hundred years. The Hall was rebuilt in the 1680s following the Great Fire of 1666.

With a prestigious commission under his belt, Simon followed his historic stone carving diploma (equivalent to a degree) with an MA, Art in Architecture at the University of East London. This was studied part time whilst working from Limehouse – London, in a shared Artists Studio. Here he did his first commissions since leaving college, from carved stone roses, marble tomb tops and a corbel angel for Westminster Abbey, to marble memorial tops and elaborate plinth designs for Westminster School.

There have been a number of equally prestigious commissions, including one that arrived via Art Projects Ltd. The brief was to produce low relief hand carved panels featuring a series of designs incorporating healing plants. These were to be set into an historic facade of a clinic development. The address: 120 Harley Street, London.

Simon spent months researching various healing plants and carefully composed a design appropriate to the classical style and age of the building. The carved panels were installed in August 2009 and the work has been highly commended by many people.

August this year saw the unveiling of the 'no longer missing' head of the Three Graces. Whilst still at art school Simon's final project was to create a head and he chose the missing head as his subject – winning 'the David Ballardie Travel award' – traveling to Italy and gaining access to the original plaster sculpture by Antonio Canova; in order to



Archer carving - based on 14th century wood carving Ancaster limestone.



Heraldic Plaque - first carving commission in 2000. To celebrate the milenium, The Worshipful company of Skinners commissioned a new heraldic plaque which was designed and carved by Simon.



3 Graces head commission for the National Trust

“Simon’s courses were very busy at both our shows. They should have been 45 minutes each, but some people got carried away and spent the rest of the day chipping away - we had to usher them out after the show had closed! Simon is very talented and very keen - his enthusiasm sweeps people up.”
 Robin Younger,
 Living Crafts
www.livingcrafts.co.uk

take careful measurements. The finished piece began as a skull with muscles, then flesh - a technique he had learned during his course. Some time later he was commissioned by the National Trust to add hair to his design to complete the missing head. It was added to the original sculpture by student Kimberly Reczek. The unveiling took place on 3rd August at Clandon House, a National Trust property in Guildford, Surrey.

In addition to his work, Simon now also has a real passion for teaching and sharing the skills he has gained over the years. His MA gave him the confidence to talk about his work and the teaching



Complete Gargoyle carved in Portland limestone - wall mounted at City & Guilds final show 2001



Corbel Angel-Westminster Abbey-Bath Limestone - June 2006

has become a natural progression. It was this desire to share his skills that really clinched Simon’s award.

Full details of Simon’s courses can be found on his website, these range from evening classes to courses held over one or more days at venues such as The Art Academy in London, West Dean College in West Sussex and courses run from Simon’s ‘Summer’ studio in Windlesham, Surrey.

This year Simon also held workshops for the visiting public at two major craft events during Craft and Design Month May 2011. The first was at Living Crafts, Art, Design & Innovation at Hatfield House and, later the same month, Art, Design & A Taste of Summer at Blenheim Palace. Simon thoroughly enjoyed teaching in an informal setting and this must have shown, as his workshops were almost fully booked throughout both shows.

“I am thrilled to have received recognition for my work with the *craft&design* Selected Gold Award for Specialist Media. I do feel that I work really hard and take great pains to ensure the highest standards both in terms of the commissions I have been awarded and my teaching. I hope that perhaps this will be the start of many more! My thanks to everyone who voted for me.”

Simon Keeley
www.simonkeeley.co.uk
 For details of courses at West Dean College please call 01243 811343 or visit the website www.westdean.org.uk

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The Specialist Judge in the Specialist Media category was Miriam Rose, who says:

When accepting the role of Specialist Media category judge for these awards I did not expect my task to be an easy one! Having been immersed in the craft designer-maker industry for over 30 years I know there is a huge number of highly skilled, creative and talented people working in the UK today and expected to be presented with some of the best work to be seen anywhere.

However the making of my decisions has challenged me beyond anything I anticipated. I have repeatedly had to return to the criteria I laid down and re-examine all the finalists and their work in the light of these.

All the finalists show exceptional skill and creativity, but for me the work of Simon Keeley takes my breath away. He is not just an immensely skilled stone carver, he has exceptional draftsmanship and the ability to adapt his skills to traditional and contemporary styles of work. Perhaps for me though, it is his desire to not just demonstrate his skills and have his work on view for all to see, but to pass on his skills through teaching at workshops and on courses that stands him out above the other finalists. All craft skills used today are based on those used for centuries by generations of master craftsmen and the passing on of these skills to future generations is vital to the survival of the skills and to enable our children and grandchildren to experience the joy that owning - and maybe creating - a skillfully made, beautiful piece of handcrafted work brings to our everyday lives.
www.romorexhibitions.co.uk



Miriam Rose

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