**Bronze heat**

Public art is undergoing a revolution. About time.

We think that stone is hard and grey. Similarly we think of bronze as hard and cold, tough and inert. But most of the Earth’s stone and metal is lively and hot, a flowing liquid, as we see when bronze is poured and formed, and reformed, or when it erupts from the ground. It is only hard and grey on our external crust. Like us, inside it is soft and warm, and much of it flows red.

Our proximity to the cold hard exterior makes us cold and hard. In our use of these materials, we celebrate the lifeless, and treat it as if it is set in stone.

Public art is undergoing a revolution.

About time that bronze and stone gets toppled and reformed.

We love tradition. And craftsmanship. These, however, are not art’s full glory. Because art is also supposed to speak. The art which does speak is kept in quiet quarantine, locked up in dedicated safe-houses called galleries, where it can be viewed under controlled conditions, with guiding descriptions. Paintings are kept inside wooden frames, to contain them in a notional fiction. ‘Do not touch’. Art is required to wear a face mask, and cover its mouth. Read my lips: the power of art is restrained in boxes, to prevent it from affecting the world. Because culture is dangerous. Art is made, as potted bonsai trees with roots trimmed, drip-nourished, in designated, contained jails.

Public art is still mostly statues. Sculpture is a creative practice. However the sculpture which is publicly endorsed and funded, for public view, has mostly been the slightly poetic replication of people, in stone or bronze, on pedestals. These materials are know to resist weather and vandalism, arson and rot. Public art almost always celebrates people for city-building achievements, or for defeating an alternative religion or way of life, so that citizens and visitors may remember their contribution forever. Through public statues, such people literally are made a pillar of the community. These statue pillars hold up an invisible ideal.

Governments frequently instigate reform, in ways that religions rarely do. In religious buildings, the ideals are explicit, and rarely change. Icons endure. By comparison, there seems no reason for regional contributors to socio-economics to have similar longevity.

Yet they are still there. Or rather, they are there, being still, while the world moves. Many statues, admittedly, celebrate freedoms such as liberation from child labour, but more usually they still sanctify an admiral from a battle of indeterminate purpose, or how a businessman made a wool firm into the dominant economic force of the town two hundred years ago.

Compared with religious iconographic sculpture, the ideals which civic arts support are far less explicit. In town squares and thoroughfares, ideals are not clearly or consistently spelt out, or shared. In religion, participants and observers are told that they are being presented with a moral code. Such messaging in civic symbolism is not stated overtly. As such, many people are unaware that there is a message. The use of public art could be stated more clearly, and it is essential that the public be involved in identifying messages which become implicit, and whether those messages deserve support.

Most Greek and Roman sculptures that have survived are made of stone, rather than bronze. Both Greek and Roman civilisations regularly used to melt down or recycle their bronze statues as times, fashion and sentiment changed, or when metal was needed to make weapons. In times of war, bronze became swords and spears, and when wars were won the weapons took sculptural shape again in the form of newly victorious figures displayed in cities. The Roman Empire is well known for accepting the cultures and practices of peoples it conquered or absorbed. It is part of how Rome managed to retain so many regions and cultures and races in its spread, without being so oppressive as to incite rebellion and wars within. It knew that society changes. It also knew that, as part of civilisation’s ongoing story, public art needed to change with the times. Roman society had a fluid view of culture, and knew that art can be transient. So their bronzes were not expected to last forever. They were recycled and re-cast to new forms. Very few lasted long, and those which have survived seem more for artistic, aesthetic merit, than because anyone felt that the statue’s subject matter should endure.

Western culture today is, by comparison, lazy. Particularly European war statuary, and particularly in Britain. The Black Lives Matter movement is a solid example of this issue of public art and statuary needing to change for the inclusion of peoples and culture. There is a similar imperial context, and similar bubbling of internal conflict.

Western culture takes much artistic inspiration from Greek and Roman origins, and also notions of democratic values and expansion. Modern wars do not use bronze weapons, so we no longer have that material need to melt statues as a way to stimulate the circulation and updating of public art. Some of it should still be melted down as new times are recast. In the name of the public, our civic society should honour those other reasons that Greek and Roman cities changed the messages offered in their public statuary: to be relevant, to celebrate the aspirations of endeavour without conquest or violence…. to become better.

Part of the reason that public sculpture has gone unaddressed for so long is its materials and techniques. Stone and metal are also the materials of walkways and buildings and handrails, which rarely aim to tell us stories. When art looks like the background, it becomes invisible. It is no longer thought about, let alone interesting, and hidden morals and immorals can fester under the skin of social ideals.

Public art should use materials which are capable of expressing the nuances, colours and tones of our subject matters, and should change frequently. This would serve public interests of pleasure, aesthetics and information, and social interests of sharing and debating ideals.

There is an aspect of realism in sculpture. People often say a statue looks “realistic”, if it is well crafted with a sense of movement and expression. But they do not move, and they never look ‘real’. “Realistic” is as close to real as stone and metal can get. If only we could sculpt with clothes and flesh tones. We can, but it is not supported. Sculpted fabric would not last forever, and would let art in.

Public figures look formal and aloof partly for this reason. Those celebrated people did not look like statues. They were made of flesh and hair, sparkling eyes and wig powder. They were not smooth bronze or marble. The materials of buildings. Those materials make people look like furniture at best. No colour. No sense of their interactions in the social machine, or their life. These material limitations have resulted in postures akin to architecture: a bastion of the community is usually depicted as sticking their chin in the air like the prow of a ship, holding the lapels of their jacket and puffing their chest like the rutting pigeons that streak their wig-hair. The general public’s experience of great achievement is usually effort and failure and perseverance. We see it sometimes in memorials of soldiers. Statues of dignitaries rarely depict it. This is probably not entirely due to the materials, but bronze and stone do not help portray how we try.

Statues are not sculptures. Statues are commemorial and replicative, next to sculpture’s artistry.

Statues have a rulebook for style, materials and technique, while sculpture takes these as playgrounds. Sculpture yields thought and surprise. When public funds are spent, there are few surprises, and little is new. You could save money by putting up a mirror to face a pre-existing statue. Twenty people would notice. Two would care. Yet stone and bronze endure. When we consider new housing estates, and how Section 106 regulation’s arts funding is applied, it is obvious that the aim of most public art commissions is to spend about two years’ average salary on one sculpture that should last forever, in vanilla. This is achieved by paying a semi-known sculptor to provide something that blends in, in metal or stone. The way Section 106 is applied perpetuates a lack of innovation, or public involvement. Public consultations discuss the subject matter and history, to determine the path of least resistance. And nobody, if asked, would say “Stone or bronze, please”. These are no-one’s preferred method of communication. But no-one ever questions the materials.

Bronze casting is at least 3,000 years old in Western culture. Stone carving dates back at least 100,000 years.

In what other areas of public investment is it acceptable to use 3,000 year-old technology? If a municipal swimming bath today were made using technology from the Victorian era, there would be baffled outcry. If the fire service equipped us with buckets and horse-drawn carriages, we would say “wtf? Use modern tech!” If a state school installed a blackboard, and desks with inkwells, there would be hysterical ridicule and protest. So how come public art gets away with using 3,000 year-old technology every time, with the occasional bit of welded steel or brushed aluminium? It is utter nonsense, and public art has got away with it for too long.

There are many sculptural materials and techniques. Public sculpture does not have to be displayed on heavy rectangular plinths, as if it were an extension to a cemetery. There are plenty of other ways and places to display public art. Some artists work to develop new construction methods and ways to use materials to achieve robust, lightweight sculpture.  The purpose is to expand the possibilities of how and where public sculptures can be installed, such as on walls and roofs, and to reduce the material input and carbon footprint of public sculpture.

Techniques for lightness make it possible for public sculpture to be moved from city to city. People get used to static art. If sculpture installations change often, more people find them interesting, and see art as a pleasure, for their benefit, rather than heavy blocks in their physical and emotional space.  A hero for a year in one town, may merit a month in another town, and a week in other places, to spread the word about what they did, rather than becoming invisible or boring in one city. You can do that if you change your approach to what public art is.

Many sculptors explore build techniques to make sculpture more realistic and alive, and better suited to short-term and mobile installations. Such techniques are typical in street art and festivals, and are far less expensive to the public purse.

There are always new things worth celebrating. New heroes and concepts for the future, as well as the past. If we remember forged heroes forever, there will be no space, and no bronze, for others to have a voice.

Now Colston has been toppled. Metal and stone’s red core is flowing out.

When public sculpture loses impact and beauty, it is time to change it.