



Material world

Geoffrey Clarke pushed the boundaries in post-war sculptural technique. Catherine Croft looks back at his architectural work

If you peer through the doors of the Time-Life building in New Bond Street (as we did on our recent 'Hugh Casson's London' walk) you can still see Geoffrey Clarke's welded iron relief, 'Complexities of Man'. This is just one of a distinguished collection of works Casson commissioned for the building as a permanent showcase of British design (including work by such major figures as Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore, although some elements have controversially been removed). Time-Life opened just a year after Casson directed the Festival of Britain's acclaimed temporary displays, which included a work by Clarke in iron and stained glass in the Transport Pavilion. Clarke also worked on the other outstanding architectural project of the period, Coventry Cathedral, where he designed and made windows for the nave as well as the cross for the openwork metal flèche (spire), and the high altar cross which stands in front of the Graham Sutherland tapestry. From the early 1950s until the late 1960s he was very prolific, carrying out around fifty architectural commissions.

This concentration on architectural works meant that he had fewer gallery shows of work for sale, and is also why he chose to leave London to secure a larger working space. Perhaps it also explains why he is less well-known today than his contemporaries such as Reg Butler and Lynn Chadwick. But, as Peter Black commented during a 1994 exhibition of Clarke's work, 'The opportunities for collaboration that arose at that time, far from being an artistic compromise, kept Clarke from the potentially damaging routine of making small sculpture for private buyers... Not every artist relishes the demands made by architects, nor wishes their work merely to embellish a building.' But Clarke clearly did, and worked with many of the leading architects of the day, including Basil Spence, Hugh Casson, Peter Moro, Peter Shephard and Gollins Melvin Ward. But, although his sculptures and relief panels featured in or on many prominent buildings, he is no longer a household name. A reappraisal is much needed, and this should be prompted by an exhibition at the Pangolin London Gallery this autumn which includes four pieces directly relating to some of his most important architectural commissions.

Geoffrey Clarke's involvement with both Time-Life and Coventry Cathedral came about through his studies at the Royal College of Art, but his route to the College was tortuous. He was born in Derbyshire in 1924. His father was an architect who had taught at the Architectural Association and also had his own etching press, while his grandfather had run a successful church furnishing business. Geoffrey always assumed that he too would become an architect, but he was deterred by his lack of

academic ability and particularly by his struggles with maths. He spent a year at Preston School of Art (1940-41) and moved to the Manchester School of Art the following year, but his education was then interrupted by the war, when he joined the RAF. After a year at Lancaster School of Art in 1947, he succeeded the following year in getting on to the RCA's graphic design course, newly established by the Rector, Robin Darwin. But Geoffrey was not inspired by the course's comparatively traditional teaching, and soon switched to Stained Glass under Robert Goodden. He also explored many other media, and his 1951 Diploma was for stained glass, engraving and iron sculpture. In fact it had been in the in Woods, Metals and Plastics Department – rather than the Sculpture Department – that he had found a brand new forge and anvil, and started to make iron sculptures. He had already been on an industrial welding course run by the British Oxygen company in 1950 (where he first met Lynn Chadwick). The Department was located above the Science Museum's aeronautical section, but when his night-time visits disturbed the aircraft suspended below he was given studio space behind the building, which he continued to occupy until 1954.

In 1955, Geoffrey and his wife Bill (who he had met at the RCA) left London and moved to a large early C19 house, Stowe Hill, near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. The home and studio they established there was profiled by *Country Life* as 'stark modernity in a Victorian frame', the writer noting (without reproach) that 'Few people manage to decorate a house with a complete disregard for its period.' The article commended the 'assured brilliance of colour, the precise and austere arrangement of shapes'. Photographs showed built-in furniture, benches and box seating, while there was praise for the Edinburgh Weavers textiles and Indian rugs, and the lavish use of colours such as orange and olive green. Several of the main bedrooms were knocked together to make a stained glass workshop, and – crucially – the stables offered space for him to set up a forge where he could experiment with aluminium.

The works at the current Pangolin exhibition bridge this period of innovation and experiment. They include two maquettes: one for an enormous work, *The Spirit of Electricity* (1958) which is still in place on Basil Spence's Thorn House in Upper St Martin's Lane, London, and another for a relief originally in a branch of Westminster Bank on New Bond Street. The latter was re-sited at Warwick University after the bank building was demolished. The gallery is also showing a test panel for the large window at Taunton Dean Crematorium, (by Robert Potter, still in use, and listed Grade II) and *Square World V* (1959), one of a set of panels made for St



Opposite: *The Spirit of Electricity* (1958) by Geoffrey Clarke (above). The work is still in place on Basil Spence's Thorn House (now Orion House) in Upper St Martin's Lane, London. Photography by Sarah J Duncan



Far left: aluminium relief for the staircase at Castrol House (1959). Left: auditorium mural at Nottingham Playhouse (1963)

Chad's, Rubery (Richard Twentyman, 1956/57) but rejected by the parish and removed before consecration of the church.

The Spirit of Electricity had its origins in the spiky welded iron works that Clarke was creating behind the Science Museum building, and was inspired by images of historic light bulbs and radar antennae in the museum itself. The brass maquette must have functioned mainly as a presentation tool. Translation to bronze (to ensure its longevity in an exposed location where iron would rust) required the construction of an 80ft wood and fibreglass model in Clarke's barn, which then had to be sent off to a professional foundry. He found the process laborious, expensive and frustrating.

When he first began to use aluminium, he used an open-cast method, pressing material into moist sand and forming voids which were then filled with molten metal. But this method does not allow undercutting of forms, and in Suffolk he was able to explore the use of expanded polystyrene to create more complex shapes. It is unclear to what extent he worked out the potential of this method for himself (others were experimenting similarly at about the same time), but he learned to make excellent use of the fact that a polystyrene form bedded in sand will vaporise when molten aluminium is poured in. While *SquareWorld V* and the Westminster Bank piece both used the simpler open-cast method, the Taunton Deane windows have a fully 3D quality that could only be achieved by the more sophisticated polystyrene technique.

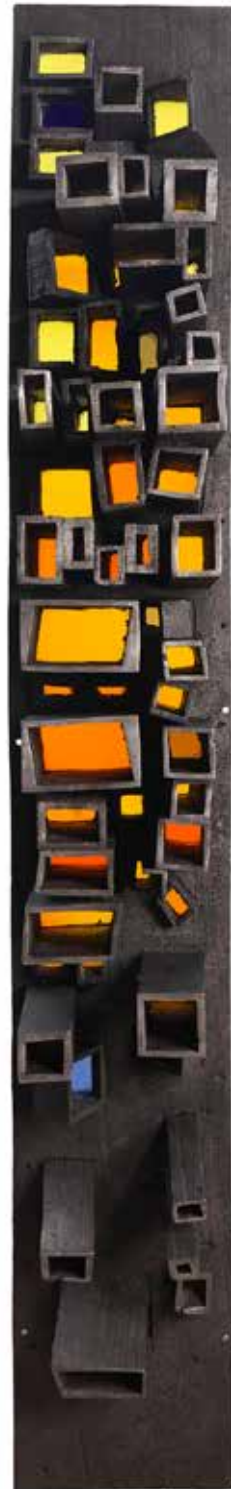
Geoffrey's interest in innovative processes was further shown in *A Sculptor's Manual* (written with Stroud Cornock), a detailed and practical guide in which he explained that 'The modern sculptor working in the wealth of new media and processes available to him has need of an up-to-date source of readily accessible information.' He even included notes on materials as yet unused by sculptors which he felt had potential.

He also appeared in a film made by Shell, while a pamphlet describes his way of working with expanded polystyrene as being

more like handling metal directly, or carving wood, than working with wax or clay which are shaped by hand: 'From the start, he regards "Styrocell" as metal, and shapes it by one of several methods: with a hot wire or other hot implements, a sharp knife or saws. Thus he builds up a full scale pattern from shaped blocks of expanded polystyrene, joining them with adhesives and, if necessary, filling cracks in the material with polyurethane foam formed in situ by mixing two liquid components. Once complete, the pattern is taken to the foundry, whole or in sections, depending on its size, and packed in mould sand. He finds it necessary to have more than the normal "air-venting" but only the usual number of feeders and risers... Eventually the molten metal is poured in, vaporising the foam pattern as it comes into contact with it.'

Perhaps Geoffrey Clarke's reputation suffers from his being seen (mistakenly) as mainly an ecclesiastical designer and stained glass specialist, rather than purely a sculptor. Some of his best architectural works have been destroyed or lost: Castrol House (now Marathon House) was converted from offices to flats twenty years ago, and there is now no trace of his staircase mural. The piece that Basil Spence installed at his own weekend house on the river at Beaulieu in Hampshire is no longer in situ. However, others are preserved by listing, including panels in Nottingham Playhouse (Peter Moro, 1963), gates and retractable cast aluminium grilles in the banqueting hall at Newcastle Civic Centre (GW Keynon, 1965), and the doors to the library at Churchill College, Cambridge (Sheppard Robson, 1968).

I would very much like to know the fate of three of his works, originally installed at Culham atomic research centre, Aldershot Civic Centre and Exhall Grange School (the first purpose-built school for partially sighted children in the UK). A work created for the same school in 1964 by Barbara Hepworth was sold at auction in 2009 for £37,200, and the increasing financial value of mid-C20 architectural sculpture makes its removal and sale a matter of considerable concern.



Left: test panel for window at Taunton Deane crematorium



GEOFFREY CLARKE RA

A DECADE OF CHANGE

13.9.13 - 26.10.13

Exhibition includes iron and aluminium sculptures, stained glass, jewellery, prints and drawings. A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

PANGOLIN LONDON

Modern British & Contemporary Sculpture

King Place, 90 York Way, London N1 6AP

T: 020 7306 2480 E: gallery@pangolinlondon.com

www.pangolinlondon.com

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