

# Set in stone

Sydney University recognises Tom Bass, the sculptor who helped shape the face of Australian public art.

By **Margo Hoekstra\***

**T**om Bass, Australia's pre-eminent living sculptor, was honoured by the University with the degree of Doctor of Visual Arts (honoris causa) in April this year. The ceremony was held in the Great Hall, 25 years after he completed "The Arts" and "The Sciences" for niches in the facade of the building, commissioned and unveiled by Lloyd Rees AC CMG in 1984.

His relationship with the University began in 1931 when the 15-year-old Bass, working as a shop boy for sporting goods emporium Mick Simmons, was instructed to deliver a parcel of tennis racquets to the University.

More than 70 years later he still remembers the excitement and awe he felt as he climbed the steps. As he watched the students and staff, going about their business, the atmosphere seemed charged with intellectual energy. At the same time, he knew that for him, it was out of reach.

Bass's school nickname was "the Prof" but that was an ironic handle: he wore glasses to correct astigmatism. He was also dyslexic and left-handed, two gravely misunderstood handicaps for a child at that time. He was made to write with his right hand and never achieved academically. Nevertheless, his sense of the visual was developed early and he spent his weekends wearing the soles of his shoes thin walking from Dulwich Hill to the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The teenaged Bass's sensitivity to the magnificence of the University became idealised and later was passionately translated into sculpture. However, his education came via the Great Depression, poverty and casual factory jobs. At 17 he was tramping the roads and jumping trains at a time when itinerant workers seeking ration support had to be on the move, to prove they were seeking work.

Bass was in his early 20s when he met the teacher who would most influence his early artistic development. Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo taught in a manner that Bass later



realised was ideal for a sculptor, but his education was interrupted by WWII. Bass was conscripted but his eyesight confined him to the home front. The post-war reconstruction scheme allowed him to attend the National Art School under sculptor Lyndon Dadswell, where, age 32 and with three children, Bass graduated.

In 1953 Dennis Winston, first Professor of Town Planning at the University, commissioned Bass to create a work that became known as "The Student". It stands at the main gates and is the only Bass carved work in the public domain.

At the peak of his public sculpture career Bass made more than 60 significant works, including pieces for the Universities of NSW, Melbourne and Curtin. Each tells a powerful story reflecting the values Bass wanted to communicate about his

idea of a University. For Sydney, as well as the Lloyd Rees commission, Bass carved the "Votive Figure of the Sacred Heart" for the Sacre Coeur sisters at Sancta Sophia in 1962. In the citation for his doctorate it was said that, "Well before the notion of 'social capital' was developed, Tom Bass's life and work was based on the belief that the values and ideals of communities bind them, and sustain the individuals within those communities to interact in a positive and supportive way."

Bass is also an innovator. He developed processes such as copper deposit casting, necessary in an era when bronze casting was not available to the scale he required. In Canberra's Civic Square stands the 6m-winged figure of "Ethos", representing the spirit of the community, and, at the National Library of Australia, the "Lintel Sculpture" spans 21m, expressing the archival and intellectual values of this significant institution. In 2006, Professor Richard Goodwin described his "P&O Wall Fountain", on Hunter Street in the Sydney CBD as "the most significant public sculpture in the world".

In 1974 the Tom Bass Sculpture Studio School was founded as an independent art school. Thousands of students have passed through its doors. In 2003 the school became a not-for-profit Incorporated Association and Bass continues to mentor sculptors and students. In 1988 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to sculpture.

In 2006 a major retrospective of his work was held at the Sydney Opera House. This unique exhibition incorporated his four permanent sculptures situated within Sydney's CBD and was seen by thousands of visitors. Art critic John McDonald described him as a pioneer with "an indomitable spirit of perseverance" and acknowledged that "No artist had done more to shape the face of public art in Australia than Tom Bass."

Reflecting on the University's honour, Dr Bass says, "... the significance of it lies in the fulfilled yearnings of that 15-year-old boy and the recognition that my hard work over the years, and the contributions I have made to public sculpture and the promotion of sculpture have been recognised. I am proud of the legacy of my work – the social comment that is inherent in it, which I feel certain will endure beyond my time." **SAM**

Top: Tom Bass receiving his doctorate (Memento Photography); above: *The Student*, photo by Joshua Fry.

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