

THE STUDENT AND THE TOUR

Visitors to the Camperdown campus can now enjoy a guided art walking tour around the University, exploring famous sculptures such as Tom Bass's *The Student*, along with other publicly accessible modernist works on campus. **Alan Spackman**, designer of the tour, explains why Bass deserves to be rediscovered.

While developing the tour, Alan Spackman met with sculptor Tom Bass' partner, Dr Margo Hoekstra, and was able to access remarkable photographs by Axel Poignant from Bass' archives (soon to move to the National Library of Australia). These photographs show the creation of *The Student*, a sandstone sculpture carved at Minto, NSW, when Bass was 37.

The Student, acquired in 1953, is the University's earliest modernist public artwork. The cubist-style figurative sculpture stands at the University's main gate.

During the years of post-war economic growth in Australia, many architects and sculptors shared a modernist aesthetic sensibility that favoured simplicity over ornamentation, as well as an allied social purpose aimed at influencing the way people experience the built environment through the arts and sciences.

Reflecting on this post-war optimism in art and architecture, Bass wrote in 1957: "the architects are ready for us; the building has a new form; a new relationship between sculpture and architecture that has to be worked out. I recommend this vast field for genuine experiment".

In 1953, Bass was the winner of a public art competition for a sculpture to be placed in the campus grounds. The competition was organised by Denis Winston, the first Professor of Town Planning at the University of Sydney, and Founding President of the Sydney Sculpture Society. Winston had designed a driveway and garden path from the main University gate on Parramatta Road leading to the Quadrangle, with an octagonal plinth at the pivot point of the new pathway. Bass would use the octagonal plinth as the foundational shape for the base of his sculpture.

The Student has a monolithic scale and its proportions work beautifully in the context of its position – inside the main gate with its back to the hubbub of Parramatta Road. Its design rhythm flows into internal reflection and study, and unconsciously reimagines Rodin's *The Thinker*. The sculpture expresses the idea, for Bass, "that the University is not just a place of teaching but also of learning".

In his autobiography, *Tom Bass: Totem Maker*, Bass describes his philosophy of sculpture as 'totem making'. He argues that, throughout the ages, sculpture "has had a totemic function in society, and through sculpture, people, communities and societies have been reminded of the things that are most important to them".

His other works on campus include *The Arts and Sciences* – two (reconstituted stone) figures commissioned by Dr Lloyd Rees in 1984, which are in the eastern wall niches of Edmund Blacket's Great Hall. The figures include a female singing – a totem for the arts, and a male figure gesturing a rational thought with his hands – a totem for the sciences.

Bass gained an honorary doctorate from the University of Sydney on 6 April 2009. Sadly, he died a year later. He leaves an enduring legacy to public sculpture, not just at the University of Sydney, but throughout Australia. With more than 50 sculptures on public display nationally, Bass has played a key role in developing the enduring relationship between sculpture, the built environment and architecture.

To book a group to explore *The Student* and other modernist works on a guided art walking tour, please contact us on (02) 9351 8746 or email museums.education@sydney.edu.au. The cost is \$13.50 per person (\$7.50 per senior citizen). Tours are available Monday to Friday for groups of more than five.

Alan Spackman is an Education Officer at the University Art Gallery.

Tom Bass, *The Student* (1953), sandstone sculpture (UA1955.5)

