

Heritage marble statuary at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney

As part of our special focus on conservation issues Julian Bickersteth provides an interesting story concerning the rescue and restoration of the heritage marble statuary in the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney

1880s photograph of statuary in the Royal Botanic Gardens (this photo c1900s Powerhouse Museum Collection).

Below: La Ballarina in the Royal Botanic Gardens in the 1890s

In 1883, a group of eight marble statues were imported from Italy and erected in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. An account of the times stated:

“An additional attraction has been given to our Botanic Gardens, in the form of eight marble statues which now gleam white against masses of dark green foliage in various angles of the many walks which are so much appreciated by our citizens and visitors”.

This group of statues included four allegorical statues of the Seasons, the *Boy extracting a thorn*, and *La Ballarina*, all of which remain in the Gardens today.

These statues had followed the importing by Sir Henry Parkes of various Carrara marble sculptures from Italy for the 1879 Garden Palace International

Exhibition. Parkes was an enthusiastic provider of public sculpture to beautify the colony, for the so-called ‘uplifting of the lower orders’, and promoted the use of classical statuary in gardens to educate those who could not afford the ‘grand tour’.

Charles Moore, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens from 1848-1896, had been driven by the same desire to see statuary as an integral part of the design of the Gardens. The heritage marble statues which are the subject of this article are the direct result of his vision.

“Statues were an important part of parks and gardens of the Victorian era... For gardens, as well as being places of beauty and quiet contemplation, are places for walking and talking - about gardens, or philosophy, or love, or art, or office politics... or even gossip. And in this respect the statues may act as beacons along the way - as talking-points in themselves, or as points of geographic recognition – and triggers of associations. And given that some of our statues have been standing in the one place for more than 100 years, they have been visited by generations, as focal points of learning, and happy memories.’ (Wilson, E. (1992), *The Wishing Tree*, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, p. 85)

A century and more after their arrival, the outlook for these statues was far less cheerful. Over the years, they had fallen upon hard times. They fell victim to changing attitudes, ranging from the ‘menace to public morals’ of the more flagrant nudes in the early 20th Century, to the





Below: *LaBallarina* in 'the Graveyard' prior to conservation work. Above: *La Ballarina* and others in the 'Graveyard', 1978.

mass replication of classical statuary in suburban gardens in the 1970s making them appear somewhat kitsch. And perhaps more disastrously, they were damaged by anything from a falling branch to a reversing truck.

I have been working on statues in the Royal Botanic Gardens since the mid 1980s, and certainly by that time *Spring* had been decapitated, but her head kept, and *Summer* had both been decapitated and her head lost. In addition they were both in pieces with various elements missing such as much of the scythe and the swag of lilies on *Summer*. When damaged, these historic artworks were ignominiously removed from their plinths for storage in what became known to Gardens staff as 'the Graveyard', located behind the Succulent Garden.



And it was in 'the Graveyard' that the team from International Conservation Services found them in 2006, during our survey of the statuary and memorials in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. We had been commissioned to assess the condition of over 60 statues, memorials and fountains in the Gardens, including classical copies, neo-classical monuments, romantic Victoriana, numerous lions, Australian historical figures and abstract contemporary works by Australians of Aboriginal, Asian and European descent. We also prepared a detailed maintenance plan, and assisted with the preparation of budget costs for the conservation and ongoing maintenance of this extensive collection of artwork and memorials. In the course of our work, the Garden staff led us into 'the Graveyard' to show us the sad remains of *La Ballarina*, *Summer* and *Spring*, amongst others, as well as a number of marble urns.

At the same time, consultants Conybeare Morrison were completing preparation of a Conservation Management Plan for the Royal Botanic Gardens, and their historical research had uncovered some previously lost knowledge about the origins of these statues. The Conservation Management Plan identified the heritage statuary as having historic significance.

As a result, International Conservation Services then worked with the Royal Botanic Gardens to develop cost plans for the conservation of the damaged heritage marble statuary. Private donors to fund the Heritage Statuary Restoration and Conservation Program were then identified by the Royal Botanic Gardens Foundation. Once funds were in place, we began work on the conservation and restoration of the statues.

La Ballarina (please note the 'a' in the middle where we would expect an 'e') dates from 1883 when it was part of that group of eight marble statues imported from Italy. She is a copy of a famous statue by Antonio Canova, the Venetian sculptor who lived from 1757 to 1822, whose work included *The Three Graces* now in the Hermitage, and *Theseus and the Minotaur* in the Victoria & Albert Museum. The original of *La Ballarina* has since disappeared but it is listed in Canova's work as *La Danzatrice con il dito al mento* (the Dancer with the finger on chin). Finished in 1814 she was sold to a Russian diplomat.

CONSERVATION

The Royal Botanic Gardens' copy of *La Ballarina* was almost certainly sculpted by an Australian, Charles Summers, who although born in Melbourne in 1858, had moved to Rome with his parents aged 11. He ran a successful business reproducing famous sculptures including those of Canova, was said to be friendly with two popes and made regular trips to Australia to sell his wares.

How *La Ballarina* came to be headless and footless we do not know, but she was moved to 'the Graveyard' at some stage in the 1960s or 1970s.

The process of conserving *La Ballarina* has been an interesting one, as it is not quite as simple as plonking a block of marble on her head and carving something appropriate.

First of all we needed to ensure we knew what we were carving, bearing in mind her title (*the Dancer with the finger on chin*), as we had no chin nor a finger to touch it with, nor incidentally a right foot. So we went to the Canova Foundation in Canova's home town of Passagno near Venice, where they hold a gypsum copy of the statue, to see if they could either organise the copy of a head for us to be carved, or provide good quality photos that we could copy here. Quick as a flash came back a letter from one Carlo Nicoli, declaring that he could see from our photos that the statue had been made in an 'exceptional way' by his great grandfather, another Carlo Nicoli, and that he would be happy to reproduce the head if we could ship the whole statue to him. Happily however we were able to source from the Canova Foundation high quality photos of the copy, and more happily source here in Lidcombe the carving skills of Polish-born master mason Jacek Luszczk.

So *La Ballarina* now has a head and foot carved in Australia (by a Polish-born sculptor) to go with her original body carved in Rome (by an



Conservation work in progress carving a new head for *La Ballarina*.
Plaster head in background?

Australian-born sculptor). Her wonderful replacement head has been copied by Jacek from photos to capture the form and feel of the original.

Finding a piece of pure white Carrara marble of suitable size and carving quality is not as easy as popping down to your local stonemason. We could find nothing in Australia and so went back to

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Carrara, eventually sourcing from Cave Michelangelo a block of stone of the right quality and size.

The process of replicating a carved work from photographs is a complicated one. Firstly the photographs were gridded up and divided into a series of points to allow for accurate measurement. Then clay mock ups of the missing head and limbs were crafted on the statue. These were extensively reviewed and altered until all parties were happy that they reflected the original. The clay forms were then removed and plaster casts made of them. The new marble was cut to size and the process of carving began, working from the plaster casts. Before these were finished they were doweled and glued to the original statue, and the finer details around the join completed. The result was once again reviewed and small alterations made.

Thus was the story of the restoration of *La Ballarina*. Her vital missing elements have been restored, her original parts cleaned, and she has been returned to her proper form and place in the Gardens. Her head, fingers and feet once again gleam white against the dark foliage, and though this currently appears somewhat as odds with her original elements, within a few years she will have weathered to once again look her full harmonious and seductive self.

The *Four Seasons* also date from 1883 when they were part of the same group of eight marble statues imported from Italy as *La Ballarina* and the Boy extracting a thorn. The latter is currently being restored in situ.

The *Four Seasons* are part of a long tradition of allegorical figures of the seasons. This tradition dates back at least until the 16th century and the figures are represented in many art forms from paintings by Caravaggio to Meissen figurines. Universal to them all are some key elements as follows:

Winter is always represented by an old man, and the other three seasons by nubile young women

Spring always carries newly cut flowers, *Summer* holds a scythe and *Autumn* incorporates a reference to the vintage

Thus in the *Four Seasons* at the Royal Botanic Gardens, we have *Spring* holding newly cut roses, *Summer* with scythe by her side and a swag of lilies, and *Autumn* with grapes by her side and cup at her lips. *Winter* allegorically is normally shown as an old man in furs often by a fire. In this case, we have a distinguished if rather dour figure holding symbols of winter in the form of pine cones and a dead bird.

Both *Summer* and *Spring* had been resident in 'the Graveyard' for some time. *Summer* had lost her head, and it had been lost as well. *Summer's* torso had also been broken away from her legs. *Spring* had been decapitated, and her hands damaged.

The process of conserving these two statues was a complicated one. Where small parts were missing, we could reinstate. With larger elements such as the recreation of *Summer's* head we had to work off 19th Century images of the Gardens, which were of variable quality. But happily, the creative and carving skills of Jacek Luszczuk, who had already carved *La Ballarina's* head, were up to the task. Unlike *La Ballarina*, of which we had excellent photos from another copy of the statue, the poor quality photo of *Summer* has meant that it has been more of a challenge. But Jacek has accurately achieved the form and feel of the original head, and inevitably brought his own creative skills to ensure it reads correctly. He also rejoined her lower legs to her body, and reconstructed her sickle and bouquet. Jacek also returned *Spring's* decapitated head to her shoulders, and repaired her hands.



La Ballarina returned to her original location in the Royal Botanic Gardens after conservation

The work brings a smile of satisfaction to Jacek's face. "Summer looks well with her sister beside her. I believe it is very good for all of us to see heritage statues in the Gardens in good condition. When we are here with the stone and all the natural art of a garden – the flowers and plants – and they all work together, that gives us joy", he said.

In regards to finding suitable marble, as with *La Ballarina*, we went back to the Cave Michelangelo to source another block of stone of the right quality and size.

I must acknowledge the key role my colleague Arek Werstak, a countryman of Jacek's and a long term friend and employee of mine at International Conservation Services has made in both coordinating the process and also undertaking the related conservation and cleaning work on all of the other heritage marble statues, including *Autumn* and *Winter*.

As in days gone by, the figures of *Autumn* and *Winter* now stand sentinel at the bottom of the Palace Gardens Steps with *Spring* and *Summer* at the top.

Botanic Gardens Trust Executive Director, Dr Tim Entwisle, said at the return of *Summer* and *Spring* to the Gardens, "It is wonderful to see our heritage returning to the Gardens in all its beauty and romance. We treasure our European heritage even though it no longer binds us."



Above: general view of the Palace Gardens Steps with all four (season) statues in place.
Below: The Four Seasons, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter.

Thus has been the story of the restoration of the heritage marble statuary in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney. It is so good to have these vital elements in the design of the Royal Botanic Gardens once again back in place. They may have started life to 'uplift the lower orders', but I am sure that those of us who now admire them as we stroll through the Gardens are all glad to be counted amongst that number. ☺

Julian Bickersteth is the Managing Director of International Conservation Services in Sydney, and has been involved with the conservation and maintenance of sculptures, statues and public artworks for nearly 25 years

