

# **330 Collins Heritage Overlay –**

## **Tom Bass sculpture *The Children's Tree***

A Report on the artistic and heritage significance of the sculpture, its place in the artist's *oeuvre* and in the context of the Melbourne CBD

Geoffrey Edwards, Curatorial Consultant

Under instruction from AMP Capital Investors Ltd and Hall & Wilcox



July 2021

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# **330 Collins Heritage Overlay – *The Children’s Tree* (1963)**

## **by Tom Bass**

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### **1.0 Introduction**

This Report has been prepared under instruction from AMP Capital Investors Ltd, the manager (on behalf of Sunsuper Pty Ltd) of the site, and Hall & Wilcox acting for the manager.

The Report responds to the City of Melbourne’s Hoddle Grid Heritage Review.

### **2.0 About the consultant**

Geoffrey Edwards is a freelance curator, lecturer and arts writer. Since 2016, he has been curatorial adviser to the Melbourne-based philanthropists John and Pauline Gandel, chiefly in respect of the Gandel family’s celebrated Pt Leo Estate Sculpture Park on the Mornington Peninsula.

Formerly, he was Director of the Geelong Art Gallery (1999–2016), prior to which he held various curatorial positions (1976–1999) at the National Gallery of Victoria, concluding his time at the NGV as Senior Curator of Sculpture and Glass. He has been a member of prominent peak bodies including the Australia Council’s Visual Arts/Crafts Board; Crafts Australia; Museums Australia’s Victorian committee; the Arts Committee (Vic) of the Winston Churchill Trust; and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Committee on Glass. He has published widely on historical and modern sculpture, painting and the decorative arts (chiefly glass and ceramics). Currently a Board member at The Johnston Collection House Museum in East Melbourne; he is a member of the Artistic Advisory Committee of Sydney-

based Sculpture by the Sea; a member of the Public Art Committee of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria); a Trustee of the Colin Holden Charitable Trust and he is National Vice President of the Australian Fine and Decorative Arts Society (ADFAS).

### 3.0 Description of the sculpture

Of approximately life (child) size, the cast bronze sculpture is located at the corner of Collins and Elizabeth Streets and depicts a whimsical tableau of a young girl and boy playing around the trunk of an expressively modelled tree. An owl perches atop the tree amidst boulder-like clumps of foliage. The modelling of the figures is more naturalistic than that of the tree which is highly stylised. The texture of bark is minimally suggested while the texture of foliage is evoked by herringbone-like detail. The owl's feathers are treated similarly with notched markings.



The surface of the sculpture has a classic brown-green patina with some areas of high polish (notably the figure of the boy who sprawls over the tree's

roots): predictably the result of frequent touching by generations of passing pedestrians.

A concrete and stone plinth elevates the sculpture above ground level both as a means of presenting the sculpture to best advantage and also to serve as a seat for members of the public.

The condition appears to be very good.

#### 4.0 Brief biography of the artist and his place in the story of modern Australian sculpture



Acclaimed Australian sculptor Thomas Dwyer Bass (above) was born on 6 June 1916 in Lithgow, New South Wales. He worked in various jobs during the years of the Great Depression and took classes at the Dattilo Rubbo Art School in Sydney from 1937 to 1940. During the Second World War he served in the Second AIF. Following discharge from the army, he resumed study at the National Art School from which he graduated in 1948.

Early influences on his work were Dattilo Rubbo and the prominent sculptor and teacher Lyndon Dadswell. He was Dadswell's assistant in 1949-50. Bass subsequently taught at the National Art School while later establishing, in 1974, his own school (the Tom Bass Sculpture School) in Erskineville,



Sydney. Early in his career, he had formulated a philosophy that as a sculptor he would be primarily a 'maker of totemic forms and emblems (to) express ideas of particular significance to communities or to society at large.'

Bass was a successful and prominent figure in the Australian art scene in the 1950s and 1960s. His accessible modernist style and technical proficiency saw him awarded a number of high-profile commissions for major sculptures in public places in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, notably in university precincts. He was, for many years, acknowledged by architects as the 'go to' sculptor for large and important corporate or institutional commissions. His partially abstracted figurative style, his engaging allegorical subjects, and confident articulation of form were perfect foils for the sparing modernist architecture of the post-war period.

Although his achievement has been eclipsed somewhat in recent years – as he never really embraced purely abstract or assertively expressionist idioms, and mostly worked in the long-established conventions of stone carving or bronze casting – he is nevertheless recognised today as a successful and distinguished member of the post-war modernist movement in Australian sculpture.

The art critic John McDonald observed that Bass 'understood the importance of bringing art to the widest possible audience... (and) aimed to push the boundaries of public taste, giving his audience a lesson in the visual language of modernism'. (Sydney Morning Herald, 13-14 March 2010, pp 14-15)

The sculptor's legacy is a significant corpus of large-scale sculptures in the public domain that still command attention and interest in multiple locations such as the University of Melbourne (*The Idea of a University* relief panels along the west wall of Wilson Hall (1954-59) and, above its entrance, *The Trial of Socrates* (1954-59)); Civic Square in Canberra (*Ethos* (1959-61)); the P&O Fountain (1963) in Hunter Street, Sydney and a wall relief (*Amicus certus* (1962)) on AMP's Sydney building. Also notable is a Lintel Sculpture (1967-68) at the Australian National Library, Canberra.

His *Children's Tree* (1963) and *Genie* (1973) in the Queen Victoria Gardens opposite the National Gallery of Victoria are both familiar images in central Melbourne.

These last two works exemplify the sculptor's express response to a widespread movement in the late 1950s and 1960s to commission sculpture for prominent metropolitan precincts that would encourage children to play on or about the works and engage with the imaginative or whimsical narratives that such works expressed. This was a notable aspect of public art theory and practice at that time.

Bass's contribution to Australian art was recognised in 1988 by the award of the Order of Australia (AM) 'for services to sculpture' and he was admitted to the degree of Doctor of Visual Arts (honoris causa) at the University of Sydney in 2009. He died on 26 February 2010.

#### 5.0 Location of the work and its relationship to its situation

Officially launched (by Lord Mayor Leo Curtis) in the same year (1963) as the completion of 330 Collins Street (CML Building), the sculpture stands on the NW corner of the Elizabeth and Collins intersection adjacent to 330 Collins Street. The sculpture is at the southern end of a gridded paved area 'contained' within the north-south and east-west footpaths at this juncture.



Originally, the sculpture enjoyed a far less cluttered and more sympathetic open space unencumbered by the street kiosk, bicycle hoops, public seating, bins and bollards that are such distracting features of the site today. By the same token, today's gaudy advertising signage, corporate logos and prominent ATMs that share the location effectively preclude any sense that the sculpture is the soulful and prime focus of the corner location as once it may have been.

That being said, it is also debatable whether passing pedestrians in 1963 would have made much of a connection – visual or symbolic – between the sculpture and the building at 330 Collins Street. The whimsical character (and stated subject) of the sculpture would definitely have engaged the imagination and attention of viewers but it is unlikely, as is unquestionably the case today, that casual observers would register any meaningful relationship (aside from mere proximity) between the building (330 Collins Street) and the sculpture.



## 6.0 Significance of this work within the artist's *oeuvre*

While perhaps not quite of the same significance (scale and stylistic inventiveness, and integration with architecture) as the artist's works, for example, at the University of Melbourne, *The Children's Tree* has long been one of the artist's most readily accessible and admired works of art in this city. As such it is regularly enjoyed by a wide audience (including children).

However, these considerations and attributes are not, in my view, necessarily contingent upon the work's presence on the current site. Of course, to retain *The Children's Tree* on this site would be a commendable option, but were there ever to be cause (e.g. future activation of Planning Permit TP-2016-1004) to consider its relocation, it could very satisfactorily, as I see it, command an alternative location that was similarly accessible to a wide audience, and in a suitably spacious 'plaza' within the Hoddle Grid.

For example, the sculpture could well suit a location in the wide, street-facing plaza at Collins Place. Such a location would properly respect the significance of the sculpture in terms of its artistic merit and its popular presence within the CBD, and still fulfil the original and principal aspiration that it be engaging for children on the basis of naturalistic and beguiling imagery as well as on the simple appeal of its seductively modelled surface.

## 7.0 National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and Heritage Victoria

The sculpture has not been classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and nor does it appear on the Victorian Heritage register.

## 8.0 Conclusion

The work is a much-loved and readily accessible work of public art – in fact, one of the most engaging and enduring in the Hoddle Grid. It has been a popular city attraction for over 50 years. However, pragmatically speaking, its relationship to the building at 330 Collins is scarcely nuanced. It is proximate without question but the organic and pictorial character of the sculpture makes no reference or allusion to the architectural style of 330 Collins, nor does it connect with or frame an entrance, for example. Its principal merits – and these are unequivocal – are its lyrical modernist style, the consummate modelling of its forms, the sympathetic treatment of subject and the suitability of its scale as a work in the public realm. Not to mention its secure place in the public imagination. It is a work to be valued and carefully preserved but these attributes are intrinsic to the sculpture and are transferrable to an equivalently suitable civic location of comparable scale.

In respect of the criteria used to assess whether an object or a sculpture is integral to a place, I suggest that this sculpture is not a ‘key part’ of the current location in the sense of its ‘contributing importantly’ to an ‘understanding’ of the history or social significance of the site. It isn’t, in this sense and so to speak, an ‘object integral to a place’.





Tom Bass *West wall reliefs*, c.1957 but commissioned c.1953), pressed cement, Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne (subjects: *Observation, Contemplation, Teaching and learning, The talents of knowledge*)

By way of comparison, a major suite (image above) of sculptural reliefs at Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne – the artist's most important public commission – serve, powerfully and deliberately, to articulate sweeping and soaring expanses of brick wall. They also serve to encapsulate, in their explicit narrative sequence, ideas and values consistent with and expressive of the fundamental 'idea of a university'. As the sculptor observed at the time, the specific values, in fact, to which any University's student cohort should naturally aspire.

This deeply considered and distinctive integration of the character and purpose of the architecture with the character and expressive purpose of the sculptural reliefs (four on the west wall in reconstituted concrete and a larger copper sheet group over the main entrance) is a point made in a commentary by Emily Wubben and Jason Benjamin on the scheme in their article *The Art*



of Wilson Hall for the publication *University of Melbourne Collections* (Issue 7, Dec 2010):

*The Hall's highly crafted interior, textured external surfaces and integrated artworks which were envisaged by its leading architect Sir Osborn McCutcheon (1899–1983), all combine to form what prominent architect and critic Robin Boyd described as 'the most beautiful jewel-box'.*

Wubben and Benjamin also remark (of the new Wilson Hall completed in 1956 to replace its Gothic-styled predecessor destroyed in a fire in 1952):

*For the new Hall, the collaboration between architects and artists resulted in a building that encompassed art as an integral element of its design.*

Overall, the large-scale sculpture conceived by Tom Bass for the 'new' Wilson Hall is acknowledged, again according to Wubben and Benjamin, as being entirely 'in accordance with the building's ceremonial and symbolic importance'.





Tom Bass *West wall reliefs*, c. 1957 but commissioned c1953), pressed cement, Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne (subjects: *Observation, Contemplation, Teaching and learning, The talents of knowledge* (details of these above main image))

Furthermore, the materials used for this major commission (copper sheet in the case of *The trial of Socrates* (image over) and pressed cement in the case of the four relief panels of *The Idea of a University*) work most effectively as textural foils to the warm-hued bricks of the building.





Tom Bass, *Trial of Socrates*, c 1957, copper (above and below)



Similarly, Bass's 1960 wall relief *Amicus certus* on AMP's Sydney building, serves as a monumental emblem for and visual activation of one entire face of the prominent building.



Tom Bass, *Amicus Certus*, 1960, bronze

As stated previously in this report, in view of these other major Melbourne and Sydney commissions undertaken by Tom Bass, I suggest that the *Children's Tree* is not – as the above works clearly are in their respective locations – a 'key part' of its current site in the sense of 'contributing importantly' to an 'understanding' of the history or social significance of the site.

Geoffrey Edwards

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