

Wings of Enterprise – Walter Ritchie (1991)



Walter Ritchie, sculptor: born Coventry 27 April 1919; died Kenilworth, Warwickshire 12 February 1997.

The career of the sculptor Walter Ritchie provides the best 20th-century example of the artist as his own worst enemy.

In a time when recognition turns on regular showing of a man's work Ritchie only ever had two exhibitions, the second of them last year. The first was 20 years ago, at the London Building Centre, arranged by the Brick Development Association. The second was arranged by Kent County Council. He was not, you will gather, like other sculptors.

But then there were practical difficulties to showing his work, not least the partial demolition of banks, hospitals, colleges, churches, even part of the Oval cricket ground, for it was his belief that art should be on show in public places, a belief reflected in one of the first essays on his work, by the critic Margaret Aldred, published in the *Monumental Journal* in 1959, "The Street His Gallery". As he himself said ruefully, "I do seem to have made things difficult for myself."

At 18 he was commissioned by Warwickshire County Council to sculpt a mermaid riding a seahorse. They had assumed the mermaid would ride side- saddle, but Ritchie, a realist, showed her with legs, or rather tails, apart, which horrified the councillors.

He went on to horrify many councillors in the course of his professional life. In 1953 Coventry City Council commissioned two huge panels, and the result produced the remarkable headline "Brain Peeps Shock Peeping Tom City" in the old *Daily Sketch*:

Two surrealist peeps at a man's brain in action are causing a howl of protest . The hands and arms, serpents, fish, half-women and birds, have horrified Councillor Francis Walsh: "It's like something out of a horror comic . . . "

It was not that he set out to shock or horrify, it was just that Ritchie went his own way. Commissioned by the Metropolitan Police in 1984 to do a wall, he submitted a design showing a dark figure running through a fingerprint, and there was no commission. "Most things go wrong," said Ritchie. He did not get the decimal coinage commission either; his design for the 10-pence piece had Boadicea in a chariot with a whip. Or, the great disappointment of his career, which came when he departed from his brief to sculpt the great wall separating the surviving third of Malmesbury Abbey from its ruins. He wanted panels, wild with action, depicting the Six Virtues, and there were 19 meetings of five committees across two and a half years, and again no commission.

It did not help that he was interested in erotic sculpture. The magazine *Men Only* called in its lawyers when, in a 1978 issue, it



decided to include a photograph of Ritchie's Yes!, a brick relief which was later bought by the directors of a London recording studio, who had been assured this study of copulation would do wonders for their acoustics.

Northampton Borough Council bought a series of brick panels but kept two of these in a walled garden locked most of the year. One which shows copulating lovers broke in two a few winters ago, but the council appears to be in no hurry to have them joined again. This would have delighted a man whose greeting on the phone was invariably "Grim as usual".

Ritchie was one of the last living apprentices of Eric Gill; he studied with him for just 18 months just after the Second World War, at Gill's workplace, Pigotts, in Buckinghamshire. He discounted the claims made about his old master's sexual exploits.

"The man I knew was near death, working flat out. He couldn't have fitted it all in," said Ritchie.

On the side of the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, almost facing the Ellen Terry building, in Earl Street are two carved stone murals by Walter Ritchie. They are called 'Man's Struggle' but they have not always been located here. They were originally located in the middle of Coventry's Upper Precinct. The sculptures were unveiled in 1959 and faced each other over a pool of water with fountains under a pedestrian bridge.

Coventry Society's Vice Chairman, Paul Maddocks, recalls "As a lad I grow up admiring them. Looking through the railings up at the sight of the man trying to hold on to a large horse, it was a powerful image. It reminded me of a cowboy! The other picture was more frightening. It had a large head and a ramp with men and animals being lead to what looked like Hell, with great big gnashing teeth."

"As I grew up I started to notice more of the detail and grew to love it, along with the new precinct. Being a teenager in Coventry in the 1960's, it felt like living in the centre of a new world. Everything was new and modern; everyone worked in some of the best paid jobs in the land; new pedestrian traffic free shopping areas; new works of public art; new housing estates and the great, new Cathedral. People from around the world were coming to see this new utopia, and the Coventry born artist Walter Ritchie reliefs were a major part of this New World."

The two works of art are both represent "man's struggle". The first is the struggle with the outside world: to control the physical things like nature and the environment such as taming and controlling a wild horse. There are representations of a man working, a coal-miner drilling, a man climbing a ladder, a man carrying a container on his back, surgeons performing an operation, while all around are magnified blood cells and plants, together with a rocket and shock waves.



'The Creation', carved brick panels by Walter Ritchie on Bristol Eye Hospital

One of the first things that I saw in Bristol, on walking out of the coach station, was this series of large sculptures carved into brick. They are on the wall of the Bristol Eye Hospital and were produced during the mid 1980s by [Walter Ritchie](#), who was one of the last apprentices to work with the famous and controversial sculptor and designer [Eric Gill](#).

If you don't recognise Gill's name, you would have regularly seen the typeface that he designed called Gill Sans, which is pretty much a standard on any word processing computer programme. I think that you can see his influence in the style of the designs that Ritchie carved.

Walter Ritchie died in 1997 and many of his other carvings in brick have sadly been lost, as the buildings that they featured on were demolished. He preferred to make public sculpture rather than private artworks.

The brick panels were the largest non-reinforced brick sculptures at the time and were actually produced at Ritchie's home in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. Each panel was then transported in two pieces to be installed into their present homes. The quote on the final panel of the series comes from a lecture on the theme of 'Creative Man', given in Oxford in 1947 by Viscount Samuel.

I still think that these relief carvings are beautiful and inspiring, despite having seen them many, many times when passing by. The use of carving techniques directly into house bricks is also unusual and interesting.



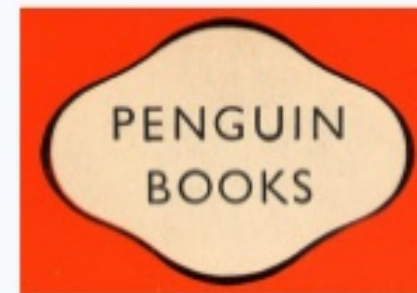
Quelques *utilisations*



Gill sans regular



Gill sans regular



Gill sans light



Gill sans Regular



Gill sans ultra bold