

MEMORY PALACE

Works of sculpture, based upon the mnemonic writings of Fr. Mateo Ricci, S.J.

I have had a longstanding interest in the mnemonic work of Fr. Matteo Ricci S.J. (1552-1610). The mnemonic technique that Ricci would have studied as part of a more general education in rhetoric followed a pattern set down in Greco/Roman texts. It instructs the student to create an architectural space within the mind - such as a cottage, palace, or barracks. In a set order, one would mentally place images - the images being individually created to remind one of a word, person, thing, or idea - in the space. When one wished to retrieve a specific memory, then he or she would "enter" the memory building and pass all the various images by until the right image is viewed in its proper place. By then viewing the desired image one is able to retrieve the information stored within the image

This was a skill which required constant attention and the use of the visual imagination. A visual imagination - that quality which all artists strive to develop and increase, can also be seen or felt in the works of non-visual artists such as the writer Dante in his Comedy, or in the symphonic poems of Beethoven or Wagner. In fact, the works of Dante in his Comedy, has had a direct influence on some of the images which I have chosen to use in some my sculptures and bas-reliefs. Ricci himself would also have had to have used his visual imagination as part of his work during his mission to China. He used his memory skills to impress his educated Chinese hosts to great effect. He imparted those same skills when he instructed the son of a local Chinese notable in the subject. In one of his written works he described four Chinese ideograms-along with corresponding images, to explain how these images could be used to retain specific ideas or information. The subjects of the images had a moral theme, and as such related directly to his purpose in China- that of inculturation and conversion.

I came across four surviving Chinese ideograms, used by Ricci, in Jonathon Spence's book: "The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci". After reading through Spence's descriptions of the Ricci source material I was struck by how meaningful these ideograms were to me personally, and how easily these they would lend themselves to meaningful works of sculpture. As each of Ricci's images described a moral choice, I created multiple images from each of the ideograms in order to illustrate the choice inherent within the subject matter of each of the four. At the end of this stage of work I was left with twelve original drawn images (three for each of the four ideograms - a "title" image, and an image relating to a positive and negative choice respectively, which would all take the form of bas-reliefs). In addition to these twelve images I found it necessary to blend each of the three *corresponding* images into one comprehensive image. What developed from this was four, three dimensional sculptures, one for each ideogram. Each of the sculpture now had three bas-reliefs that related directly to them and which would be placed at specific places on the sculptures and have a mnemonic function. The actual visuals of the bas-reliefs and sculptures were heavily influenced by Irish history and politics, as well as by my readings of the Divine Comedy, Catholic imagery, and ultimately by my own art practice.

The research to the sculptures and reliefs took place between 1998-2000. These original works were created by my hand out of plaster, wax, or polystyrene and cast in bronze by myself at the Millfield Foundry in Belfast around the year 2000. They were first exhibited in the Gerrard Dillon Gallery (An Culturlann), and in the SPACE Gallery in the Conway Mill in 2001, as well as other places. At the date of this writing, all the sculptures and reliefs are in the hands of private collectors in Ireland and Canada. I am now in the process of redeveloping all of the works in order to come to terms with the nature of my present art practice. However these four new sculptures are maquettes of what I will one day hope to create as full sized works of site specific public sculptures.

Description of Works.

“Wu”- (War)

The Chinese ideogram for “war “, broken down into its component parts contains two meanings, firstly “ spear" and secondly “to prevent”. The twin meanings describes a dialectic which could point towards the possibility of peace being contained within a state of war. I have adapted this idea to fit an Irish context in both a historical and modern sense. To do this I have used the figures of Cuchullain, Ferdiad, and the Morrigan. The story of the two heroes of Ulster and Connaught, taken from the Irish mythological text “An Tain”, were close foster brothers yet proved to be the others bane in the war which claimed both their lives. Cuchullain killed Ferdiad in single combat and was later killed himself. Gloating over all is the dark figure of the triple-goddess An Morrigan in the form of the raven. In this sculpture I have the figures of the two warriors- their hands joined over the pommel of a sword. This gesture of comradeship is contrasted with the fact that Cuchullain is running Ferdiad through with the Gae Bolga- his mighty spear. Cuchullain himself is missing one eye- foreshadowing his own death and treatment by the Morrigan. The Morrigan herself- in the form of the Raven cradles both of the warriors in a “loving” embrace and indeed they seem like children compared with her overall power and presence - she is the only victor in war. However, the filial love between the two foster brothers is long remembered and perhaps points to a place away from conflict.

Memory images for the sculpture “Wu”.

Title Memory Image: To be placed upon the sword both warriors are holding. Two stylized warriors grappling; one holds a spear and the other trying to prevent the blow. “Wu” ideogram.

Ferdiad Memory Image: To be placed on Ferdiads shield. Image of the Two Bulls and the temptation of Ferdiad by Queen Mebh to challenge his foster brother Cuchullain. “Wu” ideogram.

Cuchullain Memory Image: To be placed on Cuchullains shield. Cuchullain holding a spear, his face merging with that of the Raven (Morrigan); one of his eyes missing which has been plucked out by the Morrigan. “Wu” ideogram.

“ Yao “ – (Fundamental importance)

This ideogram refers to something of supreme importance. However, broken down into its different parts means: “a woman from the west”. The ideogram has phonetic similarities with a western Chinese province where many Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived and still live today. Ricci use this ideogram to create an image which to describe anti-monotheistic discrimination suffered by China’s religious minorities in his day. Religious/politics problems plague this region even today. At that time, many considered these minorities the “foreigners within”. As mentioned, this ideogram is used to describe something which is of fundamental importance, and some Jesuits used the ideogram to explain the first of the Ten Commandments. What a contrast between the two uses of this ideogram, and yet one which lent itself to me magnificently in trying to create a sculpture which referred to the issue of intolerance in Ireland’s past and present by referring to Irish immigration and emigration and the causes of each. Irish emigration, the result of colonialism and its “children” racism and poverty, has dropped off in recent years but immigration has dramatically increased. The treatment of these new arrivals by elements of the media, government and society could not in many cases be characterized as Christian and has ranged from suggestions to restrict “colored” immigration to plans to put all such immigrants on off-shore barges or “flotels”. This was my perception of things at the time of first writing (eight years ago), and perhaps things have changed for the better since then. The original tile for this sculpture was “ Coffin Ship-Flotel”. In this sculpture two women- one Irish and one Asian, are fleeing Ireland (represented by a standing stone). Their hands are joined but the two are being forced apart by a demon (representing colonialism and intolerance) which has coveted Ireland by sitting on top the standing stone. The demon has pulled one of its own eyes out- signifying the blindness of the racist. The other eye has been covered by a gold sovereign - greed blotting out its vision. Even as the demon is a symbol of violence and division, it itself has been split in two from neck to crotch and its entrails have spilled out to defile the very standing stone (Ireland) that it covets.

Memory images for the sculpture “Yao”

Title Memory Image: To be placed upon the standing stone. The image presents Ireland as a ship with the Demon filling its sails. Two women; one trying to board the ship and being prevented by the Demon, the other fleeing the ship in terror of the Demon. “YAO” ideogram.

Immigrant/Emigrant Memory Image: To be placed upon the breast of each women. The Woman in the image combines both the Irish and Asian aspect. The sun shines equally upon both of them. Behind the Women is the image of a ship-representing their respective fates of exile the search for a better place. “YAO” ideogram.

Demon Memory Image: To be placed in one outstretched hand of the Demon. The Women who form one persona are being split apart by the presence of the Demon-a symbol of violence and discord. “YAO” ideogram.

“Li “ – (Profit)

This ideogram meaning “profit”, broken down into its component parts means “grain” and “blade”. From this Ricci created an image of a farmer holding a sickle, ready to harvest the crops. Christian morals illustrated by this image could be described by the phrases “you reap what you sow “, and “what is it for a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul”. There is a moral choice to be made. I have chosen the figures of Jesus and Judas to illustrate the choice between good and evil in deciding how one decides to “reap the harvest of life”. A central stalk of wheat is being pulled down on one side by the figure of Judas who has committed suicide by hanging himself from it. From his hands spill those pieces of silver, the symbols of his betrayal. Judas is contrasted with the figure of Christ who is crucified upon a sickle, which in turn is attached to the stalk of wheat. In this image Christ is the farmer who has gathered the harvest to His own cost-but with no thought for Himself.

Memory images for the sculpture “Li ”

Title Memory Image: To be placed on the stalk of wheat. A figure holding a sickle is harvesting the crops. Underneath is a figure being hung from the Tree of Profit. “Li” ideogram.

Judas Memory Image: To be placed upon the chest of Judas. A bloated figure breaks the sickle and defecates on the crops. The life giving Sun (Son) has been eclipsed by a Roman Coin. “Li” ideogram.

Jesus Memory Image: To be placed upon the chest of Jesus. The farmer, sickle in hand, has reaped the harvest and is offering it up. “Li” ideogram.

“ Hao “ – (Goodness)

The ideogram for goodness literally means “mother and child”. Spence mentions in his book that the first Jesuits in China found that trying to explain the concept of the Trinity to the Chinese difficult, so instead they attempted to explain the relationship between Mary and Jesus . Ricci chose to use the “HAO” ideogram to explain this relationship- changing the “mother and child” to the “Madonna and Child”. From this image I have focused on the notion of the creator and the created, and drawn from this three sets of relationships. The first is Mary and Jesus. The second is Christ and His “child” - redemption. The third is humanity and its “noble “children” - symbolized by the endeavors of science, art, philosophy, and labour. Mary is the vessel through which Christ is born into the world; Christ is the vessel through which salvation is achieved, and humanity’s positive endeavors are “vessels” through which enlightenment can be obtained to a high degree. The entire sculpture takes the form of a door. The interior of the doorway is filled with an image of Mary, surrounded by the Tree of Life. With one hand she points to the earthly paradise- in reference to her own immaculate conception, and also points to her son, Jesus. Christ is seen crucified upon the seven leveled hill of purgatory which is also the “trunk” on the tree of life. This is a reference to the theme of Christian redemption- all souls must pass through Christ to achieve what is at the top of the “hill/tree”- the earthly paradise (a state free from sin) and thence onwards to Heaven. The tree trunk/hill is seven layered to represent the seven sins and virtues. The decision to use this medieval and very Dantesque image was my own, and one which I felt to be very powerful. Christ is crucified upon the trunk of a tree, which in this case represents both a creation of sin and the release from sin through His sacrifice. Once souls pass up through the tree/hill they reach the earthy paradise. Above that is a rose with a point of light in its centre. I have borrowed Dante’s use of the mystic rose as a symbol of heaven, and the point of light at its centre as a symbol of God. Bordering the central image are four women, two to the left and two to the right. These four women represent what I call “humanity and the children of noble endeavour”, shown forth in the women’s poses which illustrate the arts, science, philosophy, and labour. Robert Bellarmine, the Jesuit writer, pointed to the above fields of endeavour as things which in themselves can give enlightenment in his text “Ascent to the mind of God by the ladder of created things”. I believe this to be true, but at the same time the primacy of faith is a greater factor in my mind as to whether one believes that salvation exists and can be attained. Therefore I have given the four women a place outside of the central image whose subject matter is, of course, a matter of faith. Above the doorway are three women which represent the principal muses of this work. They represent Self- Awareness, Memory, and a Recognition of the Spiritual.

Memory images for the sculpture “Hao”

Title Memory Image: To be placed in the hand of Mary. Mary is seen sitting in a doorway, pointing towards the earthly paradise in one hand and towards Jesus in the other. Jesus is below Mary, holding a cross and pointing to the Hill of Purgatory-representing Christian redemption