

CHAPTER SIX

THE ALL-ROUND ARTIST



Figure 66. Caldey Abbey monstrance (*h.* 61cm), silver-gilt, enamel, crystal, 1910; transferred to Prinknash Abbey, 1928.

Wilson's move to the country prefigured his distancing himself from professional architecture, but his devotion to architecture in its broadest sense remained undiminished. Incorporating architectural features into particular jewels or pieces of metalwork – always a part of his wide-ranging, architectonic vision – became a means of retaining links with architecture without the need to align himself with the profession *per se*.

In this way, impulses from metalwork and architecture blend instinctively in the silver monstrance he made in 1910 (Fig. 66) for the Benedictine community of the Abbey on the island of Caldey, off the South Pembrokeshire coast.¹ The lightly-ribbed base and eight-sided stem and knop could be those of a silver candlestick, yet the aperture which frames the viewing compartment is like a chancel arch rising from crystal pillars, and its silver-gilt cupola a miniature Byzantine dome. Jewel-like enamel designs – the crucified and risen Christ flanked by doves and set off by bright chequerwork – enrich the threshold of the arch; above, a gable edged with vines encloses a roundel depicting a lamb amidst seven golden candlesticks (Plate 58). Its reverse, with Melchizedek offering sustenance to Abraham,² epitomises the liturgical role of the

monstrance, whose crystal locket serves to display the wafer of the Eucharist.

Even in the smallest-scale creations of his new workshop, the grouping of masses and figures provides ample evidence of Wilson's continuing engagement with sculptural form, an important component of both Birmingham caskets and Aberdeen mace. Along with such miniaturism, 1904 saw him taking on a metalworking commission on a wholly public scale: to devise and execute new bronze double doors – the second of four such undertakings – for the fifteenth century parish church of St. Mary, Nottingham. Here, architecture could make common cause with architectural sculpture, but there was a personal significance, too, for Harry and his wife, Margaret. The raised and pierced inscription of the transom dedicates the work to one who was part of their lives: 'In loving memory of Francis Morse 1818-1886: father, pastor, friend' – Margaret's father had been vicar at the church from 1864 until the year of his death. She had been born in the vicarage in High Pavement, in November 1869, the fourth of the Morse girls, after Clara, Harriet and Winifred; the youngest, Frances, was born in 1873. Repairs to the porch of St. Mary's were put in hand by her older brother the Rev. Sidney Morse in 1898; the new doors (Plate 57), given by him in their father's memory, were used for the first time on Christmas Day 1905.

These double doors are deeply-panelled and square-headed, leaving the tympanum to reinforce, in a powerful Deposition scene, the theme of their imagery. The steeply-cranked head of the doors' stone arch dictated the form of the sculpture within it, which is balanced around a mandorla-shape. The doors themselves are each divided into ten square segments, two across by five vertically. Their five sculptural panels alternate with five plain ones, each of which has a central roundel framing a rosette, a simple device that rests the eye and accents the 'bronziness' of the doors. The central pair bear ring-shaped drop-handles, while the panels' intersections are emphasised down the middle of each door by angel bosses.

Wilson outlined his scheme to his sponsors on 23 October 1904, explaining that the sculptural panels – depicting the life and death of Christ seen 'in relation with the Holy Mother' – aim 'by their general treatment' to suggest 'the idea of pity'. The narrative they embody reads from the top left, the Annunciation, where Gabriel 'appears at the Virgin's window in the early morning'. In the next scene, Mary shares her news with her cousin Elizabeth; beneath, is the Nativity. The Adoration of the Magi (Fig. 67) in the tier below recalls the central motif of Wilson's silver Lady Altar in St. Bartholomew's, Brighton, there finely rendered in repoussé. Ralph Cram thought this new bronze version even better: 'in perfection of line composition it is supreme'.³ The last panel shows the Crucifixion – at the foot of a prophetic cross-shape vine in Eden stand Adam and Eve, heads bowed.

The sequence, though not strict, continues with the Resurrection, which appears at the top of the right-hand door (rather than, as Wilson first intended, as its final panel); in this unusually angular presentation, Christ emerges from the tomb in his grave-clothes, while the Spirit of Life in the form of a dove flies to his breast and 'birds sing overhead'. Beneath, to the left, is the Flight into Egypt; to the right, the Baptism in Jordan. The Entry into Jerusalem (Fig. 68) follows; here, Wilson evokes a reality that defies the scene's frame: Christ rides a donkey through a crowd that extends across – and seemingly *beyond* – the panel itself. In the last scene, the Three Marys at the Sepulchre, Wilson engages the viewer in the shock of the empty tomb with one simple gesture – Christ's mother's hands thrown up in alarm. Throughout the narrative panels, the powerful sense of a story



Figure 67. St. Mary's Church, Nottingham: South entrance, bronze door panel depicting Adoration of the Magi, 1904.



Figure 68. St. Mary's Church, Nottingham: South entrance, bronze door panel showing Entry into Jerusalem, 1904.

unfolding is sustained in fresh symbolism and spontaneous insights. And if that story, told in the panels themselves, does not visibly hinge on the idea of ‘pity’, Wilson supplies this in abundance with the Deposition tableau in the tympanum.

In his Welbeck pietà of the previous year, Wilson had used the semi-circular format to show Christ lying on the ground, his mother cradling his head, and the third figure, Mary the mother of James, giving comfort. Because of the geometry of the Nottingham arch, the scene becomes concentrated, heightening the sense of catastrophe. Now, just two figures are involved: Mary, seated, and Christ, his broken body held across her lap. Mary’s head leans against her son’s in the apex of the arch, highlighting the closeness of life and death, a proximity further emphasised as she holds his hand to her lips in a gesture that radiates the intensity of her grief. Her pose, that of a mother consoling her child, stresses the contrast between the joy of Christ’s birth and the desolation of his death. Wilson had already used the potent symbolism of the touching of brows – a literal meeting in the midst of parting – in his 1903 Barnes memorial for the medieval church at Somerton, Oxfordshire.⁴ There, it appears within a rectangular bronze bas-relief, given an architectural setting by F.W. Pomeroy. In the Nottingham version, the intimacy is all the starker for being in the wasteland outside a city wall, yet the wall is pierced with the Gates of Death and Life. Initially, Wilson had planned to depict a dove ‘that enters weary into the one and issues strong-winged from the other’, but in the finished doorhead, the Gate of Life is filled with bells pealing in jubilation. This resolution dramatically enhances the power of the whole commission; Cram’s verdict on its importance was unequivocal: ‘no work of its kind more perfect than this ... has been done since the cinque-cento’.⁵

Wilson’s emphasis on the essential links between sculpture and architecture represents only part of his refusal to isolate the crafts from one another. With the same conviction he accentuated links between metalwork and painting, architecture and theatre, jewellery and poetry. All interrelate; all are part of the rich complexity that allows a painterly conception of colour to pervade his treatment of enamel and gems, or a sensitivity to architectural drama to inform his handling of space and emotion. His stage and costume designs give more literal expression to his feeling for theatre. In 1899 he not only collaborated in the staging of *Beauty’s Awakening* at the Art Workers’ Guild, but also designed the sets for an adaptation, penned for the Stage Society by the English Symbolist Arthur Symons, of an ancient Indian tale, *The Toy Cart*. This, as a contemporary reviewer suggested, derived as much from Wilson’s *mise-en-scène* as from Symons’s lines:

*We can only hope that Mr. Wilson will do more work for the stage, for this production showed that he can do as well for it as he has done for the church. The cream of the performance was certain groupings, arrangements of colour, stage pictures.... In ‘The Toy Cart’ Mr. Wilson gives us Ajanta living and moving. The distinctive joy of the play ... was undoubtedly the joy of the eye....*⁶

That hope, that Wilson would ‘do more work for the stage’, was fulfilled in 1915 by his scenery and costumes for Lena Ashwell’s production of the children’s musical *The Starlight Express* at the new Kingsway Theatre. Adapted for the stage by Violet Pearn from the novel by Algernon Blackwood, and with a memorable score by Sir Edward Elgar, the show played from 29 December 1915 to February 1916 to glowing reviews.⁷ But there was another project which, if it had progressed beyond long-distance, largely wartime correspondence, could well have established permanent evidence of Wilson’s theatrical flair. In a series of letters and postcards exchanged with his friend Gordon Craig between 1913 and 1918, the pivotal topic was an idea for a ‘new national theatre’⁸ for London. But meeting was impossible: Wilson was in Venice, then in Kent; Craig was domiciled far away in Florence, and the world was at war. In such unpropitious circumstances, the great plan evaporated – and so, with the distance lent by time, Craig alone tends to take the credit for revolutionising



Figure 69. Sanctuary Lamp, commissioned from Wilson for Saragossa Cathedral: bronze, silver, enamel, mother-of-pearl, h. approx. 6m; *The Art Journal*, 1907.

thinking about the future of British theatre.

It was Wilson's sense of the interconnectness of the arts that often led him to transgress their usual compartments. In writing about them, he imbues all with a pervasive symbolism. A deep belief in their underlying oneness is summed up in his description of jewellery's place in his scheme of things:

*It touches sculpture on the one hand and painting on the other, giving definiteness to one and concision to the other; while constructive necessities make of it a miniature architecture sparkling with suggestions.*⁹

If a single piece of work that emerged from the Platt workshop in those pre-War years may be said to sum up this inter-disciplinary, allusive approach, it is the sensational hanging lamp in bronze and silver for the sanctuary of Saragossa Cathedral (Fig. 69), for which Wilson was privately commissioned in 1907.

From the topmost rim of the bronze vine-trellised corona to the crystal globe beneath the well of the lamp itself, the structure measures some 20ft, and comprises five distinct elements: lamp, architectural canopy with saints, Mother and Child, chain with openwork globe, and corona, the latter measuring 5ft across. The heads of Mary and her baby mark the mid-point of the vertical sequence, and form its focal point.

The lamp is a bowl of vine-leaves, borne on the upspread wings of a hovering dove; when lit, its suspension chains disappear from sight as they lead upwards into the wide, bell-like mouth of the bronze canopy. Around its rim is the Latin text of the Ave Maria in raised Lombardic capitals. An undulating, sea-like line, reminiscent of that on the font at Brithdir, encircles the walls of its citadel form, beneath twenty-five lancet windows. Each of its five bastions supports a silver robed saint, gazing up to the Virgin and Child.

The upper bowl of the corona, reiterating the vines of the lamp, returns the eye to Mary and Jesus, and the craning heads of the five great saints below, whose names appear in Spanish on the hems of their robes. All have particular significance for Spanish Catholics: James the Apostle of Spain; Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order; the mystic Teresa of Avila; and two pre-eminent founders of preaching orders, Dominic and Francis.

In the event, the would-be donor fell into financial difficulties and was unable to take possession of the lamp, never even having been required (a reminder, perhaps, of Wilson's uncertain business-sense) to secure the work with a deposit. Fortunately, Wilson's great New England advocate Ralph Cram, who had visited Platt to see the lamp prior to writing his 1908 article for *Christian Art*, had mentioned Wilson's work to wealthy Canadian businessman, world-traveller and founder of the Salada Tea Company, Peter C. Larkin. As a result of Cram's words, Larkin paid a visit to Wilson's Kent workshop. A friendship began with him and his son Gerald, which would bear significant fruit in the 1920s; but, in the meantime, the Saragossa lamp made such an impression on Larkin that he bought it on the spot, giving it a fitting home not in Spain, but in St. Thomas's Church, Toronto, where it hangs to this day.¹⁰

Much depends, in reading the lamp's soaring structure, on the interplay of solid and openwork forms, each illumined by the lamp's own flame and by reflected light within the church, while, as with the Gloucester chalice and Brighton pulpit, Wilson's mastery of proportion and scale finds full expression. Looking up at the lamp-canopy we are tempted to read the turrets as massive architectural features, when in reality, the saints they support are almost twice their height. Again, Wilson uses his already mysterious light-source obliquely, exploiting the quality of light itself to add an extra, intriguing dimension to the work. When the lamp is alight, the citadel's lancet windows reflect the flame below, while the shimmering hemisphere of bronze shields, enamel discs and mother-of-pearl lilies suspended from the corona acts like a baldacchino's inner dome, invoking infinity by means of a half-veiled 'beyond'.¹¹

Cram himself fastened on its jewel-like character when describing the lamp in his *Christian Art* article, judging the delineation of the figures as 'crisp as ... some singularly perfect signet ring', and declaring it 'perhaps the most astounding thing visible when I was at the Thatched House'. Before leaving for its permanent home in Canada, however, the lamp had another journey to make: to the 1907 Exposition of Church Art at Aix-la-Chapelle. There it was seen by the Austrian designer Julius Hoffman, who went to great lengths to have it properly photographed for his journal *Der Moderne Stil*.¹² Cram thought it would be impossible for any photograph to convey its 'richness of colour and materials and their imaginative shaping', the very qualities that won such acclaim amongst the exhibition's reviewers.¹³

In the years to come, Larkin's proprietorial admiration for the Saragossa lamp and its fascinating blend of form and meaning would have important implications for its designer. As founding president of a leading tea company, his thoughts turned – with its Boston headquarters in mind – to a project which in the 1920s would entail Wilson working in bronze on a grand scale in America; now, in 1909, Wilson was embarking on another large-scale sculptural design requiring a similarly complex synthesis, creating the work upon which the architect F.W. Troup predicted his fame would ultimately rest.¹⁴ James Harrower, Professor of History at Aberdeen, had raised the question of a suitable memorial – none had survived – to Bishop William Elphinstone, the founder of the University.¹⁵ Two members of a specially convened Elphinstone Committee, Dr. Kelly and James Cromar Watt, had been instrumental in commissioning the MacRitchie Mace in 1906, and its resounding success convinced the remaining seven members, including the University Librarian Dr. Peter Anderson and the Curator of the city's Art Gallery Harry Townend, to approach Wilson with the proposal. This they did, with two key stipulations, one as to its placing, the other as to its iconography. It must fit conveniently within the choir of the University's medieval chapel; and its starting point must be the description in an ancient inventory, of a lost chest-tomb which had been carved with emblematic figures of the Virtues. The only portrait of the Bishop, whose effigy was to rest on top of the new tomb, was a posthumous one, but it was enough to prompt the life-in-death quality that Wilson would conjure up in his design (Plate 60).

Wilson accepted the brief and a year later, in August 1910, outlined his preliminary ideas to the Committee at a meeting in the chapel. Five thousand copies of his proposal and sketch were made by the craft printer Emery Walker to be distributed, with an appeal for donations, amongst graduates and friends of the University. A quarter-size model was commissioned from Wilson and, this having won the Committee's full approval, a completion date of 31 December 1913 was agreed. These preliminaries settled, Wilson was paid the first third of a total fee of £1,500.

Despite meticulous planning, Wilson's completed memorial turned out so much larger than anticipated that a new site had to be found for it in the antechapel. That, too, in time proved cramped, and so in 1945 the tomb was moved to where it now stands – outside, on the paved area opposite the chapel's West doors. As first presented the scheme was for a structure 9'9" long, 6'5" broad and 4'4" high. By the time of its installation, those dimensions had grown to 16' by 10'6" by 6'4"; and the deadline had been exceeded by some thirteen years, the task protracted by illness, war and the logistics of having to work between studios and foundries in Kent, London, Paris and Venice. No doubt a further contributing factor was Wilson's own obsessive perfectionism.¹⁷

At the heart of the tomb is the recumbent figure of the sixteenth century Bishop laid on a bier whose narrow bronze ends, guarded by freestanding bronze figures – twin angels at the head, twin servitors at the foot – dramatically overfly the tomb's cassone-like stone core. On the two long sides, eight bronze figures, half the scale of the free-standing figures, are arranged in pairs on either side of a crowned and wreathed rosette: this feature, in the work-in-progress photographs, is half-masked by plain shields. Nothing detracts from the primacy of the Bishop on his bier (Plate 60), mitred, coped and sandalled, the long form of his silhouette modelled and cast over-lifesize. However, the quarter-size figures on the sides show how seriously Wilson rose to the challenge set by the University – eight Virtues appear, Contemplation having sprung from his own conviction to join the traditional seven. Vigorous and fully modelled, they actively triumph over eight corresponding Vices that spill over from step to plinth.

Wilson Archive, Royal College of Art



Figure 70. The Elphinstone Tomb, studio photographs of work-in-progress. North Side: (left) Prudence and Justice quell Rebellion and Injustice; (right) Temperance and Fortitude subdue Licence and Undisciplined Energy.

On the North side (Fig. 70) are Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude. Prudence, the bringer of order, is identified by the pair of compasses in her right hand. She is seated on the broken-winged Rebellion; with her left hand she reaches out to touch Justice, a book of laws open on his lap and Injustice trapped beneath his feet. The male figure of the third Virtue, Temperance, muzzles the dragon of Licence, while the fourth Virtue, Fortitude, a serene female figure holding an olive branch of peace, sits on the safely-bound Vice of undisciplined Energy.



Figure 71. The Elphinstone Tomb, studio photographs of work-in-progress. South Side: (left) Contemplation and Hope defeat Folly and Despair; (right) Charity and Faith triumph over Self-Love and the Anti-Christ.

On the South side (Fig. 71) are Contemplation, Hope, Charity and Faith. Her foot restraining bare-breasted Folly, Contemplation instructs her neighbour, the youthful Hope, to aim well when he strikes Despair, the heavy-featured Vice crushed beneath him. Biting the heel of the maternal Virtue Charity, is the scaly Vice of Self-Love. With the brooding eagle of the Anti-Christ pinioned beneath him, Faith looks out across the world. The fingers of his left hand touch the haft of his mallet; with his other he brushes the shoulder of Charity with a money-bag: labour and its reward. In Wilson's iconographic scheme, Faith forms the prime emblematic figure among the Virtues, representing the shared 'creative aspect'¹⁷ of the seven other Virtues. By adding Contemplation and the Anti-Christ to the tableau, Wilson has invoked the comforting associations of the number eight: Rebirth and Paradise Regained. And in organising the tomb's diverse forms, a characteristic Wilsonian balance has been struck between sculptural, architectural and iconographic elements. Every nuance tells: the fold of the Bishop's sleeve drooping over the edge of the bier heightens the immediacy of the Founder's solemn rest, in sleep rather than death: 'I didn't want a dead bishop on the tomb', Wilson explained later¹⁸ – while the four standing figures keeping watch at the bier's head and foot mediate¹⁸ between the effigy and the twin octaves of Virtues and Vices, drawing the eye into a deeper reading of the tomb's symbolic messages.

The smaller sections of the figurative scheme were modelled and cast when the deadline still had a good chance of being met. Some details were worked out at Platt, others in the Paris studio Wilson had rented close to Barbedienne, the founder with whom he had established a close and dependable working relationship. But it was in Venice, with its intense artistic heritage, that Wilson felt he could do himself justice as a figure sculptor. Accordingly, he moved the whole family to the city in 1912 – as well as Guthlac, the Wilsons now had three daughters (Fig. 72). He took a studio at 2778 Calle del Forno, S. Maurizio, and carried out the greater part of his modelling there; it would be cast in Munaretti's nearby foundry. It was there that work was continuing, several months beyond the initial deadline, at the outbreak of war in early August 1914. The hostilities were not expected to last long; nevertheless, with their suddenly increased value as scrap, the cast and finished figures were secreted beneath the waters of a canal, and the Wilsons went home to Platt.

Anxiety and illness and the problems of drawing the threads of the project together pushed the work's delivery back to 1926, and raised the cost to the University far above Wilson's 1910 estimate. In their final report the Elphinstone Committee regretted the size of the account – in excess of £2,800 – but also celebrated the tomb's 'nobility and beauty'.¹⁹ What they had acquired for



Figure 72. Venice: Margaret Wilson with Fiammetta, Pernel and Dione in St. Mark's Square, c. 1912.

the University was a work demanding in its symbolic complexities and richly satisfying in their sophisticated manipulation. The modelling is consistently eloquent, from the quiet modesty of Prudence to Faith's athletic perfection; the trusting innocence in the baby's clasp of its mother Charity, and the cool elegance of Justice's outstretched arm, contrast with the inspired grotesqueries of the Vices – again the music of Elgar comes to mind, the glorious viciousness of the Demons' Chorus in *The Dream of Gerontius*. Despite the travails of its assembly, and the problematic history of its installation, the tomb never loses the human touch of its storytelling; the delicate fall of drapery, or the fleeting lightness of a hand on a companion's shoulder, repeatedly transcend their bronze solidity.

In the long years of the tomb's gestation, it was the historian Professor Harrower who lent Wilson the backbone of support. He understood Wilson's devotion to the task, and, well-aware

of his tendency to overwork, warned him not to take its creative demands too much to heart: 'You mustn't kill yourself over it. It is your own devastating conscience that is the matter ...'.²⁰ His words eerily anticipate what happened to Wilson under pressure from ongoing projects and their frustration, and from his anguished reactions to news from the Western Front. In Coventry, in March 1915, as he was climbing the scaffolding to inspect the possible siting, high above the city square, of his stone figure sculptures for the then half-built Council House, he was overcome by searing pains. He was narrowly saved from falling, and had to be carried down to ground level in agony. Desperately ill with a stomach ulcer aggravated by exhaustion, he was rushed to hospital, and his contribution to this remarkable building unceremoniously postponed.

The Council House itself was the result of a competition held in 1910 for a town hall and municipal offices. The designated site, south of the parish church of St. Michael, faced Earl Street but presented an irregular space, even after the existing shops and houses had been cleared. Two significant buildings would remain – at its north-eastern corner the Police Department (the product of a similar competition fifteen years before), and the building then serving as the Council Chamber, the fifteenth century St. Mary's Hall, which occupied the central portion. The brief stipulated that the new building take its cue from that ancient Guildhall and the two neighbouring churches, St. Michael's and Holy Trinity. Ruminating on the entries in 1911, *The Builder* quibbled with the terms of the competition, fearing that they had been too prescriptive, and that in consequence, the 130 submissions were 'generally ... disappointing'. For all that, the writer conceded that the winners, the Birmingham architects Edward Garratt and H.W. Simister, had provided bespoke accommodation within elevations which were 'admirable', and that the building demonstrated 'sympathetic knowledge of its chosen manner', collegiate or manorial late Tudor.²¹ The required local echoes are effectively combined with features – notably the range of first floor oriels – evidently influenced by one of the most admired late Victorian town halls, T.E. Collcutt's, at Wakefield (1877-80). For the elevations, Runcorn sandstone was deemed a good match for the local stone; for the roofs,



Figure 73. Coventry, the Council House: centrepiece of Earl Street façade with Wilson's sculptures, 1915-26; the spire of St. Michael's Church can be seen to the left.

deliberately paler Cotswold stone slate was chosen. The gabled entrance range (Fig. 73) is crowned with a timber cupola; to the right a square tower turns the corner to Hay Lane. As a late work of the Arts and Crafts in the public domain, what sets Coventry's Council House apart is Wilson's enrichments, both inside and out, though his involvement with the project did not start until early 1915 when, back from Venice, he was brought in by Garratt and briefed by William Grant, Alderman and distinguished local historian, regarding the iconography of the decorative details to be included. It was a blow – not least to Wilson – that its chief architect did not live to see it finished; by then Edward Garratt had been killed in action.²²

Inside, Wilson took charge of furnishing and embellishing the new first-floor Council Chamber. Outside, he adorned all three storeys of the entrance bay, in due course carving statues in white stone for its three niches. The Hay Lane tower he dressed with the shields of civic office, and carved its four patron saints of the British Isles. Surmounting it, keeping watch over the city, is his statue of St. Michael, with fiery sword and gilded wings. Jutting from the corner of the tower is the cantilevered clock he devised, its spandrels the backswept wings of a golden angel – the original 7' copper dials were replaced with white glass following bomb damage in 1941. Clock and stone figures date from 1924.²³ These, like his other sculptural contributions to the exterior, enhance the building's sense of idealism and history.

When the contractors, Wilcock & Co. of Wolverhampton, started work in September 1912, they predicted two years for completion, at a cost of £64,000. However, with war-time limits on hours and materials, both estimates were exceeded. Some parts of the building were usable in January 1917, but the Chamber not till 1920. Wilson's own work, following his return to health in 1915, began with designs for the Earl Street façade. The blazons of the entrance bay were installed to the architects' design in the following year, with the keystone to the main arch carrying the city's arms, and with carved foliage round the jambs and archivolt to evoke the ancient Forest of Arden. A chequerwork of gold emblems spreads from the spandrels to the skirts of the oriel, while in vertical ribbons of carved, (and, unusually in British stonework of the time) painted and gilded vines, are set twenty-four shields bearing the arms of guilds and dignitaries from Coventry's history in their heraldic colours.²⁴

True to Ruskin's dictum that every carving should embody an intellectual meaning, the entire array, including the contributions Wilson would later make in Portland stone, invites contemplation of the city's formative events and characters. In composing his carved 'illustrations', Wilson's thoughts probably turned to E.W. Godwin's Ruskinian-gothic Town Hall in Northampton, which dated from 1860-64 (that is, from the years before Godwin set out on his Anglo-Japanese direction), its arcaded walls studded with sculptures evoking the town's story. Godwin died when Wilson was still in Sedding's office, but his son, Gordon Craig, was one of Wilson's long-standing friends and correspondents. At the Coventry Council House, Wilson created a series of small carved figures spaced round the building at first floor level: Leofric's friend Edward the Confessor; the Black Prince, whose manor of Cheylesmore lay close by; Ranulf, Earl of Chester, founder of both St.

Michael's Church and the annual Coventry fairs; St. Michael again, and St. George, and, at the East corner, Peeping Tom, the young Saxon carpenter who spied on Lady Godiva riding naked through the streets in her bid to shame her husband Leofric into reducing the taxes of his vassals.

Wilson's major sculptures (Plate 32) in white Portland stone, are at second floor level. Earl Leofric of Mercia, the first of these larger figures to be completed, stands to the left of the parapet of the central oriel, leaning authoritatively on his sword. To the right is Godiva, gracefully robed and holding the model of St. Mary's Priory, which she founded with Leofric in 1043. On the parapet between them are smaller figures derived from history and archetype including, on the left, the old man Wisdom. Above the upper window's mullion stands the unifying figure of Justice with sword erect; the openwork lettering identifying all three of the larger figures is picked out in gold at their feet. The delay that plagued their installation was neither of Wilson's making, nor attributable to his 1915 illness. The decision by architects and Council alike to include them was as 'old as the building itself'.²⁵ Once Wilson had been appointed, monies were set aside, and an order confirmed with him towards the end of the War. But by September 1922, when he informed the council that the figures were almost ready, the allotted sum had been used for other things, and he and his family were about to move permanently to France. The Council House Committee enabled him to be paid from the rates, but thought it best to wait until spring before setting his sculptures in place; Leofric was not lifted into position until 1924, and a further two years passed before Godiva and Justice joined him.

Wilson, meanwhile, had been getting on with furnishing the Council Chamber, the richest of the rooms and the last to be finished prior to the building's official opening by King George and Queen Mary in 1920. Entered from the corridor leading from the grand staircase, it is fully panelled with a public gallery on the South side – part of Wilcock's contract – and mullioned and transomed windows to the North, facing St. Mary's Hall. Their stained glass is by Harvey & Ashby of Birmingham; Godiva occupies the central window, flanked by Edward III, who granted Coventry's charter in 1345, and Henry VI, who gave it city status a century later. The chamber has a high coved ceiling with plaster enrichments by Robert Catterson-Smith. The seating, designed by Wilson, was made by his old associate Micklewright in his Somerset workshop – the craftsman responsible, a dozen years earlier, for the oak pulpit supplied during Wilson's restoration of Lynton church. The main arc of seats of Warwickshire oak inlaid with ebony, is carved with forest boughs; Wilson dignified the Mayor's throne and the ends of the aldermen's benches with figure-carvings, introducing among the Muses – Poetry, Comedy, Tragedy, History – the legendary local ghost, the Veiled Nun of Polesworth.²⁶

In its distillation of the core values of craftsmanship, tradition and purposeful design, Coventry Council House is a vivid expression of Arts and Crafts ideals in the second decade of the twentieth century; Wilson's then Presidency of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, a role he filled from 1915 to 1922, was studiously recorded in the programme for the opening ceremony. Significantly, the decorative embellishment of the building's façade, alluding to a venerable civic tradition, coexisted with the most up-to-date facilities of the day: the hollow tile and concrete floors were fireproof, and the Waygood Otis lifts were installed 'with a view to easy working conditions and intercommunication',²⁷ as befitted a complex, practical building at the heart of a modern municipality.

Wilson's physical collapse at Coventry might have floored a man less tough and resourceful. But his recovery, painful though it was, was driven by a determination which meant that within months he was combining work on the final stages of the Coventry and Elphinstone commissions with important new projects in silverwork and jewellery. Not only that, there were examiner's reports to be written for the art schools, and he was brimming with ideas relating to his Presidency of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society; besides which proof of his revived optimism, he was eager to throw himself into

plans for post-war reconstruction, and ready to rekindle with Gordon Craig schemes for a National Theatre. Soon, in this way, his career resumed the essentially interleaving course that had shaped it from the moment the Wilsons first arrived in Platt.

Within weeks of their moving in to the Thatched House in 1902, Henry Wilson had accepted a job offered him by the architect Leonard Stokes, who was counting on him to devise inventive sculptural enrichments for the brand-new All Saints' Convent (now Pastoral Centre) at London Colney. This Anglican community, founded in 1851, was a satellite of All Saints' Church, Margaret Street, caring for the sick and elderly and for orphaned children, but within fifty years it had outgrown its London premises. By 1899, Colney Park, a Regency mansion in wooded grounds to the south of St. Albans, had been purchased and demolished, and soon, Stokes's neo-Tudor structure of red and purple brick banded with stone was arising on the site. Arranged around a cloistered garth, it was thoroughly conducive to communal life, to the nursing of patients, to calm reflection. Wilson's carved entablature-frieze to Stokes's entrance was completed in 1903, uniting architecture, sculpture, text and symbol and giving a spiritual focal point to an extraordinary complex of buildings that in 1927 would be further enhanced by Ninian Comper's elegantly pinnacled chapel.



Figure 74. London Colney, All Saints' Convent: Wilson's carved Procession of Saints, Patriarchs and inscription, with keystone depicting Heaven's Gate flanked by Annunciation and Pietà, 1903.

Stokes's gate-tower steps forward of the building line on giant piers. Within these he sets back the entrance wall between smaller rounded piers of stone, two in the corners, two more widely spaced to frame the arch-headed door. The keystone extends into a broad stone entablature four feet high and about twenty-two wide (Fig. 74). This area, along with the flanking spandrels of the door, was reserved for Wilson's design, while high up on the gate-tower, three niches were also available. For these Wilson carved three female saints, Agnes, Mary and Scholastica, sculptures that add further coherence to the façade.

In a continuous band interrupted only by the keystone, the lowest 9" of the entablature bears an inscription from the responses for All Saints' Day: 'Alleluia, all His saints shall praise Him ... let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Alleluia, amen'. The two lines of raised lettering have a crisp, monoline simplicity reminiscent of Edward Johnston's work as passed down through his pupil Eric Gill, while the words' rhythmic spacing reflects Wilson's characteristic flair for balance and emphasis. The keystone (Fig. 75) is carved with the turreted Gate of Heaven, Lethaby's 'universal temple', with seven stairs leading up to its arched doorway between twin trees in which perch two doves of peace; the 'heavenly spring', the Water of Life, flows from beneath the trees' roots. Wilson continues to enrich familiar Marian iconography with his own potent mythic and mystical archetypes. The left-hand spandrel of the door-arch presents an unusual interpretation of



Figure 75. London Colney, All Saints' Convent: keystone with Heaven's Gate.

the Annunciation story, with Mary stretching forward to accept the sleeping baby proffered by an angel, while in the right-hand spandrel, Wilson disturbs the expected format of the pietà by decisively advancing the body of the dead Christ towards the viewer. Further engaging detail appears in his designs for the inside of the head of the arch, which is carved with Christ on one side and Heaven on the other.

In the main sculptural tableau above the Alleluia text, Stokes's rounded piers seem as if cut into to reveal their figures, pairs of patriarch saints – from Patrick and Augustine before the Synod of Whitby, to Dunstan and Benedict after it – crucial in the formation of the English Church. Under a frieze of vines, they frame three panels filled with gentle yet positive human momentum – shepherds and angels approaching from the right, children and their nurses from the left – to where saints special to the Community (Margaret and Edith, the young David and his mother Mordwenna) bow before the Virgin and Child.

The success of Wilson's enrichment of Stokes's building was highlighted when, in 1905, William Reynolds-Stevens, Townsend's collaborator at Great Warley, addressed the Royal Institute of British Architects; his subject was the need for true integration between building and sculpture. It was Wilson's modern, uncluttered approach at London Colney that, in his opinion, set the ideal standard – his sympathetic work there 'really adds a beauty to the building as a whole'.²⁸

The sculptures for All Saints kept Wilson's new workshops at Platt not just busy, but at full stretch; indeed, the commission from Stokes had to be dovetailed in with a the reordering of the sanctuary of a South London parish church, St. Bartholomew's, Sydenham. Here, too, the impulses of architecture are interlaced with sculpture and symbolism. Another of Vulliamy's 1820s churches, the building was in Gothic style; in 1857 it had been given a new East end with canted apse. Wilson's task was to reconfigure the altar area up to the high-set windows. Hardwoods would be the principal material, polished and inlaid, or carved in low relief and painted and, in the bands of lettering, gilded. In glimmering contrast to these darker tonalities, Wilson created an altar-frontal from a sheet of blue marble, its surface slightly undulated to reveal its inner luminescence, while pairs of silver repoussé medallions high on the altar-wings harmonise with the silver and ebony of the altar-cross and candlesticks he designed as part of the ensemble.

The reredos (Plate 8) reworks the landscape format of an Adoration he had made when finishing Sedding's Cardiff commission of 1889-90, St. Dyfrig's Church. Under a vine-bower growing from the left margin, Joseph leans over Mary and her baby, looking down on the first of the Kings kneeling with his gift; just right of centre, a red-robed angel turns to beckon, with a sweep of his hand, two hesitant shepherds, from the the right-hand margin. The composition is framed between oak piers and separated from the altar by a supplicating text in Latin, and from the East window by a deep border that has the intricacy and surprise of an illuminated manuscript.²⁹ The vine-bower continues upwards in two relief bands enclosing more of Wilson's fine, elongated lettering, gold against a scarlet background, and three roundels, carved and painted with lion and lamb, a ship, and guardian of the world, signifying peace, salvation and divine protection. The simple side-wings concentrate the eye on the altar: tall archangels, a third life-size, their heads level with Mary's knee and painted in Burne-Jones colours, occupy the lower niches, while four silver relief roundels depict the Annunciation, the two Marys at the foot of the cross, the expulsion from Eden, and St. Michael

tending a garden with sword and spear. The last element to be installed, in 1906, was the oak altar-rail, again adopting vine motifs, and for its balusters, crosses within vine-wreaths.³⁰

Involving, as they did, stone, wood-carving and metalwork, the Stokes and Sydenham commissions fully tested the studio and workshops at Platt, as if in preparation for the more comprehensively architectural contract that Wilson signed in 1903. This commission, for the 6th Marquess of Londonderry, would occupy him and his team up to 1910.

Wynyard Hall, a huge neo-classical house near Stockton-on-Tees, is effectively the ‘Waterloo Palace’ that a grateful nation had sought to give to the victorious Duke of Wellington. It was to be built on the site of his Berkshire seat, Stratfield Saye, which would have been demolished to make way for it. Designed in the 1820s by Benjamin Wyatt, the grandeur of the stately new building had seemed eminently suited to the purpose. However, its blueprint was not to the Duke’s liking. The proposed ‘palace’ was therefore shelved, and plans made instead to aggrandise the existing Stratfield Saye. The drawings for the intended ‘palace’ were purchased by Wellington’s friend and former lieutenant, Lord Stewart, ambitious to augment the Durham coal fortune he had recently acquired through marriage, with which had also come the Georgian mansion, Wynyard Hall, in need of rebuilding after a bad fire. Philip Wyatt reworked his brother Benjamin’s ‘palace’ drawings to incorporate that damaged old edifice, and, paid for by his new and highly successful coaling port of Seaham, Lord Stewart ordered work to proceed at a cost of £102,000.

Included within the house was a Chapel, built out to the West of the new North front, itself resplendent with a six-columned Corinthian porte-cochère. It was fortunate that when a serious fire broke out in the Chapel in 1841 and gutted the Western part of the house, Wyatt’s drawings survived; the owner, by then the 3rd Marquess of Londonderry, spent almost £50,000 replicating the original rooms, but with costlier materials: even Disraeli, a guest at Wynyard in the 1840s, felt disconcerted at their lavishness. When the Marquess died in 1854, his widow commemorated him with an equestrian statue by Raffaele Monti in Durham, and a Monument Room adjoining the Western bay of Wynyard Hall’s Chapel – a stone catafalque, offset in the space, is surrounded with battle-honours and bears the Marquess’s recumbent effigy in bronze, presumably by the same sculptor.

It was the young 6th Marquess, a man with strong views on art and design, who approached Wilson in 1903 with notions of refurbishing the Chapel and Monument Room. In 1888, a third major fire, this time confined to the Chapel, had brought the distinguished Gothic architect James Brooks up from London to see what he could do with the shell. Wilson was now being asked to reinvent ‘Brooks’s Chapel’ (often thus named in his correspondence with the Marquess), to produce a fresh effect. His preliminary drawing (Fig. 76) was published in *Moderne Bauformen* in 1910, and with the work nearing completion, gave an indication of the sumptuousness he achieved with his team at Platt, together with Trask’s carpenters, and the glass-maker Louis Davis.³¹ The unusual chancel-beam – with its single lily flanked by Mary and the angel of the Annunciation replacing the traditional rood – was omitted, as was a procession of life-size figures in carved plaster for the South wall, exchanged in the finished scheme for grey Italian marble richly-veined with brown. But, if anything, the barrel-vault of the ceiling, latticed rather than coffered and painted deep blue, is more impressive. With panels of vines picked out in silver and gold and armorial shields, and with gilded and chequered ribs, its vibrant colouring gains added harmony by the care with which Davis matched his glass in the small windows to Wilson’s scheme. One of Wilson’s priorities was (as shown) to move the organ from the window side to a less intrusive site in a new recess in the South wall, and it is with a distinctly Italianate baldacchino, its gold and green mosaic half-dome set on specially imported marble, that Wilson crowns his transformation of Wynyard’s sanctuary.



Figure 76. Wynyard Hall, Co. Durham: Wilson's 1903-04 scheme for redecoration of Chapel, *Moderne Bauformen*, 1910.

For whatever reason, the Monument Room, though enthusiastically discussed, was never actually tackled. Wilson was all for moving the catafalque to a central position, and dignifying it with a canopy; his scheme proposed barrel-vaulting the space to match the Chapel, and giving it a 'living' function as a baptistry. To this end, he submitted two sketches to the Marquess, one of a conventional font, the other a life-size bronze angel, standing against the wall with a marble bowl in his extended palms. So bold an interpretation of an otherwise familiar receptacle would have brought that otherworldly aura seen in the Tinling memorial and the Welbeck pietà. The Marquess was much taken with the idea, declining even to consider the more conventional design.³² However, the contract was terminated without anything being done. The 3rd Marquess's tomb remains, without canopy, in its offset position, under a ceiling by James Lindsay of Sunderland and a skylight by Wailes, recording in its 72 stained-glass panels the campaigns the Marquess had undertaken, but in hues lacking the subtlety of either Wilson's or Davis's work.

In 1909, with the Wynyard commission still a year from completion and work on the Elphinstone Tomb about to start, Wilson returned to St. Martin's Church, Marple to create a new Christopher Chapel in the North aisle. Once again, his skills would unite the impulses of architecture, sculpture and drama. His larger than life-size white plaster figure (Plate 25) seems to break free of the wall behind it. Poised to stride towards us, it recalls in its vital force Rodin's indomitable John the Baptist of 1880. Its effect, emphasised by minimal drapery – cloak and loincloth – is delivered on a scale unprecedented in Wilson's work, while its virtually three-dimensional gestures connect with the viewer through sheer active masculine energy. On seeing it, a fellow member of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers wrote to congratulate Wilson, and to 'agree ... that our conception of Christianity needs invigorating with a much more manly presentation of it than we are accustomed to ...'.³³

With one hand St. Christopher stays his cloak. With the other he steadies the infant Christ sitting on his shoulder. The baby clings to St. Christopher's head with an endearingly child-like clumsiness, captured by Wilson in sketches made of his own children, while with his free hand he points spontaneously out of the enclosing frame. Skilfully exploiting the theatre of space, Wilson has directed our attention beyond the sculpture itself: we must turn round to discover what the child has spotted – Mary his mother, glimpsed, as it were, in a plaster medallion at the top of a nave pier.

The multi-disciplinary nature of Wilson's career was endorsed by the academic world in 1910, when he was adopted as one of that year's candidates for the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Oxford, an appointment lasting three years. John Ruskin had been the first to occupy the role, from 1869; more recently, H.E. Wooldridge R.A., fresco-painter, stained-glass designer and musician had held it, his tenure twice renewed up to 1904, then Sir Charles Holmes, painter, critic and

Director successively of the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery, who served twice. The University's Board of Management had to weigh up supporting statements from distinguished artists and teachers stressing Wilson's range as a thinker and artist, and his authority and attractiveness as a speaker – ideal qualifications for the eight one-hour lectures required, surveying Art and its application from that individual's unique viewpoint.

Richard Norman Shaw, architect and Academician, left no doubt as to Wilson's accomplishments as practical artist and communicator:

Trained as an architect (which I may be pardoned for considering the best of all training!) and in which he is a master, his knowledge of the kindred arts of painting and sculpture is also very great.... His feeling for colour is quite exceptional and he has produced many pieces of jewellery and metalwork which appear to me to be unsurpassed in the whole range of modern work.... He would be an invaluable teacher, with broad views on art in its many branches and ample knowledge of all of them. I consider that it would be impossible to find one more qualified to fill the post.³⁴

Equally enthusiastic testimonials came in letters from two veteran painters: William Holman Hunt, a founder with Morris of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, who recommended Wilson as 'a practical artist in the most extensive sense and a teacher whose sincerity and elevation of ideals are of a rare distinction',³⁵ and Arthur Hughes, who declared Wilson's facility for conveying his experience of the crafts 'learned, lucid, inspiring and useful'.³⁶ Edouard Lanteri, head of sculpture at the Royal College, felt his 'eloquent idealism ... could be of great benefit to the nation',³⁷ while Augustus Spenser, the College's Principal, cast him as a 'man of high artistic ability'³⁸ who would most worthily fill the vacancy.

Auguste Rodin himself wrote from Paris, that

*ses idées sur l'art et son expérience pratique basée, ne pourrait qu'être très utile pour l'éducation des jeunes ... et des amateurs qui pourraient assister aux lectures ...*³⁹

while from German-speaking design circles, warm endorsements were sent by Max Schmid, Professor of the History of Art at Aix-la-Chapelle's Technische Hochschule, and by the celebrated author of *Das englische Haus*, Hermann Muthesius.⁴⁰

Wilson's qualifications for the Slade Professorship appeared beyond question. Nevertheless, some of his friends were privately baffled by the prospect, not least Frank Morley Fletcher, Head of Edinburgh School of Art, and, as one of the original teachers at the Central, a trusted colleague:

I cannot think of it as a compatible or sane arrangement at all. Do you really mean it, or was it just a freak idea? I cannot imagine you wasting your time over the wives and daughters of Oxford dons.⁴¹

Of course, the primary consideration for this particular candidate – Gordon Craig's 'practical idealist'⁴² – would have been to turn a receptive audience, privileged or not, into allies in a good cause. But it was a chance he would not be offered. In June the University chose Selwyn Image, designer, illustrator and fellow-Guildsman;⁴³ and Wilson returned to more familiar bases for the spreading and enactment of his cherished ideas as craftsman, designer and educator. The century had events and challenges in store for design that would far exceed in influence an election to an Oxford professorship.