

# BOWMAN SCULPTURE

## SIR ALFRED GILBERT (British, 1854-1934)

*'I was born ambitious. [...] I cannot remember one moment of my life from my earliest childhood, when some sort of aspiration did not inspire me'* - A.Gilbert, *Confessions*, 1907

Alfred Gilbert was one of the leading sculptors of his day and a key figure of the New Sculpture movement. Born in London in 1854, he was admitted into the Royal Academy Schools in 1873. In 1875, he moved to Paris where he studied at the École des Beaux-Arts under the sculptor Jules Cavelier.

Studying abroad was a great privilege for English artists at the time. Gilbert's move opened the path for a later generation of sculptors and was fundamental for the development of his artistic language. He travelled and worked in Italy, settling in Rome in 1878, where the influence of the Italian Renaissance had a lasting impact on his production.

Gilbert's first publicly exhibited bronzes at the Royal Academy and Grosvenor Gallery were sent to London from Rome, causing great sensation among the British public. These included *Perseus Arming* (1882) and *Icarus* (1884), which cemented the young sculptor's reputation and contributed to the development of New Sculpture aesthetics.

Returning to London in 1885, at Frederic Leighton's request, the artist was commissioned to design the Fawcett Memorial for Westminster Abbey. This was to be the first of many Royal commissions, including the design of the Queen Victoria Winchester jubilee memorial, exhibited in 1887 and now installed in the Great Hall at Winchester Castle.

In 1886, he began work on the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain for Piccadilly Circus, London, a year later gaining the title of Associate of the Royal Academy. The iconic monument features a giant model of *Anteros* (now commonly known as *Eros*). This was the first ever statue to be cast in aluminium in England.

Gilbert contributed greatly to the development of casting techniques in the United Kingdom. The artist re-introduced the lost-wax process of casting into the country, which he had learnt during his time in Rome and which became one of the distinguishing features of his sculptures. In addition, his taste for polychrome and mixed media work led him to experiment with alternative metal alloys to cast in bronze.

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In 1892, Gilbert embarked in the most important of his Royal commissions – the Memorial to the Duke of Clarence, Prince Albert Victor, for St George’s Chapel, Windsor. The sculptor’s perfectionism, high studio costs and lack of business acumen led to increasing delays in the production of this and other commissions. Eventually Gilbert was forced into bankruptcy in 1901 and went on self-imposed exile to Bruges, halting his work on the Windsor Memorial and leaving a public relations disaster in his wake.

During his time in Belgium, Gilbert continued to produce and cast his most famous statuettes, which were sought after by both European and English collectors. His rift with the Royal family over the Clarence Tomb was finally resolved in 1926, and Gilbert was able to return to England to finish the work. In England, the artist also produced the Queen Alexandra Memorial (1932), on Marlborough Road, London – the last of his major public commissions. He was knighted in 1932 and died two years later, in 1934.