

Circe

SIR EDGAR BERTRAM MACKENNAL (Australian, 1863-1931)

Born in Melbourne in 1863, Sir Edgar Bertram Mackennal played a pivotal role in the development of the English New School of sculpture. He initially trained under his father, John Mackennal, a prominent Melbourne sculptor of Scottish descent. Mackennal first studied at the Melbourne National Gallery, then moved to London in 1882, where he studied at the British Museum before gaining a place at the Royal Academy. Disillusioned by the RA's teaching methods, he decided to abandon his studies and set up a studio for himself. Only 19 at the time, Mackennal obtained his varied tuition by visiting the studios of several leading sculptors in Paris.

Mackennal's first major commission came in 1887, when he won a competition to sculpt the relief panels on the façade of Parliament House in his native Australia. He spent the next two years completing the project before returning to Europe and exhibiting *La Tete d'une Sainte* and *Le Baiser d'une Mere* at the Paris Salon of 1892.

It was in Paris the following year that Mackennal executed the model of *Circe* – derived from Homeric myth – the goddess, sorcerer and temptress who was famous for her beauty and known for transforming her enemies or those who offended her into animals.



Mackennal's *Circe*, 1893, The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

Circe first garnered interest in 1893, when the piece received an honourable mention at the Salon. The critic for the *Revue des Deux Mondes* remarked that “the tense, restrained, but triumphant beauty of the sorceress bears itself with a firm and elegant alertness, which is free from every trace of vulgarity”. (Joep Slade, 1895. p. 390)

The following year, *Circe* appeared at the Royal Academy and caused a sensation. The Hanging Committee of the Royal Academy considered the scenes of Odysseus’s men being enslaved, which decorate the base of the sculpture, too graphic.

“[The Committee] recognised the brilliance of the sculpture, but its frank sexuality went well beyond anything they had previously accepted. Furthermore, the intricate swirling plinth of the statue depicted Circe’s bestialised victims in a manner that was far too forthright for the Academy.” (James, 2013. p. 69)

Fortunately, The Committee and Mackennal negotiated a compromise, which allowed the sculpture to remain in place of honour but required the base to be covered from public view with a swathing red baize.



Detail of Base

This unprecedented exhibition heightened the public’s curiosity and led to considerable comment by the press, who reported that Mackennal’s sculpture “drew wondering and admiring eyes”. Mackennal imbued *Circe* with a confronting sexuality, mesmerising beauty and an undeniable sense of power. It was perhaps, “the irresistible supremacy of her nudity” and her expression “of scorn for her victims” that attracted the most attention. (Joep Slade, 1895. p. 390)

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

The success of Mackennal's allegorical figures in the 1890s was the result of his masterful ability to synthesise the major artistic tendencies both in England and France, revealing the distinctive influence on his work by masters, such as Auguste Rodin and Alfred Gilbert. Mackennal was also greatly inspired by Florentine Renaissance traditions and the eroticised body, which was prominent in French sculpture at the time.

Graeme Sturgeon notes that *Circe* is “a careful composite of all the influences to which [Mackennal] had been subject since arriving in England in 1882. In his treatment of *Circe* as a proud and self-sufficient individual, French influence can be detected, although the pose of the figure itself owed something to Alfred Gilbert.” (Sturgeon, 1978. p. 63) Sturgeon also states that the intertwined figures around the base of the sculpture “could only have been conceived by someone who had inspected Rodin's models for *The Gates of Hell*”.

Mackennal's *Circe* is considered “the best-known rendition” of the goddess in sculpture. *Circe*, the daughter of the sun god, Helios, was capable of turning men into wolves, lions and swine by means of drugs and incantations. (Grafton, Most & Settis, 2010. p. 201)

In Homer's eternal work, ‘*Odyssey*’, legendary Greek hero Odysseus and his crew encounter *Circe* on her island of Aeaea. *Circe* drugs Odysseus' men before turning them into pigs. Before rescuing them, Odysseus is given a powerful herb by Hermes. This herb protects him from *Circe*'s drug, enabling him to overpower *Circe* and force her to return his men to their human forms. Odysseus later becomes *Circe*'s lover and remains with her and his crew on Aeaea for one year.

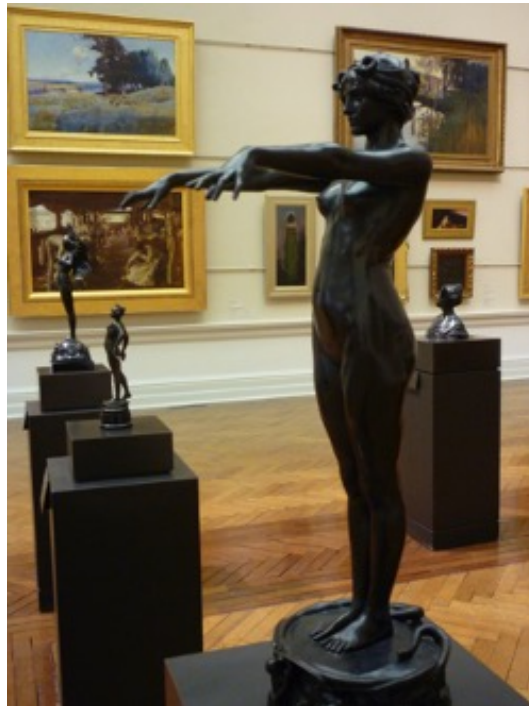
Mackennal's rendition vividly depicts *Circe*'s intoxicating power and sexuality as described in Greek mythology. She stands perfectly upright in a commanding pose, arms fully outstretched and hands poised to administer her will. Beneath her feet, figures cower in both fear and servitude, lured by her enchanting beauty and enslaved by her witchcraft.

Described as “*haughty, imperious and sexually charged*”, *Circe* is an iconic example of Mackennal's expertise at blending the expressive surfaces and sexualised subjects of Rodin with the style and ideals of English New School. (Gray, 2004. p. 194) This piece is also the reason why many consider Mackennal the “Australian who changed the British concept of what was sexually acceptable in sculpture”. (James, 2013. p. 69)

BOWMAN SCULPTURE

Mackennal's reputation as a sculptor spread around the world after his exhibition of *Circe* at the Royal Academy. He completed two commissions in Australia in 1901 before returning to London, where he designed the Coronation Medal for King George V, among other prestigious works.

As the Art Gallery of New South Wales's important 2007 exhibition showed, Bertram Mackennal is arguably the most successful Australian artist of the early twentieth century: the first Australian to be elected to membership of the Royal Academy, the first to have work purchased by the Tate Gallery and the first to be knighted.



Mackennal's *Circe*, 1893, The Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

Literature

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