

Radio Clyde - Benno Schotz at 88

Sheila Duffy 00:00

Hello, everyone tonight, my guest is artist and sculptor, Benno Schotz. He came to Scotland before the First World War as a young Jewish boy from Estonia, and he liked Glasgow so much that he stayed. He trained, first as an engineer at Strathclyde University. This was, of course, in the days when it was the Glasgow Royal Technical College, and long before it was called Strathclyde, and he worked at John Brown's Shipyard for years before realizing his lifelong ambition and becoming a full-time sculptor. This was in the '20s. He's also, by the way, and has been since 1963, Queen's Sculptor in Ordinary for Scotland. In 1938 he was appointed Head of Sculpture and Ceramics at Glasgow School of Art, a post that he held for 22 years, between 1938 and 61. He insists, in fact, he didn't retire in 1961 and at the age of 88 he's still working as hard as ever, as I found out when I went to interview him at his home in the West End of Glasgow.

Benno Schotz 01:35

You know, when one gets a little older, one takes a little longer to do one's work, and becomes much more critical, and I'm always busy.

Sheila Duffy 01:48

What commission are you working on at the moment?

Benno Schotz 01:52

At the moment, I have portrait commissions, some unexpected, some that have been arranged for some time already, one a gentleman from the Midlands and a couple of children from Glasgow.

Sheila Duffy 02:12

It's quite heavy work, though. I mean, I noticed in your studio you've still got a lot of oxy acetylene equipment. Are you still doing all the big commissions?

Benno Schotz 02:20

Well, I hope I might get some. I had some big commissions, but they don't come often, and I'm still quite able to carry on as I did in the past. Yes, age doesn't come into it. One has a knack of lifting things, and you have lifting tackle to help you. And people say, Can you lift this? I don't see why not.

Sheila Duffy 02:53

You tell me you were a bit coy about your age, but you are 88 in fact, aren't you?

Benno Schotz 03:00

Well I will be in a few days.

Sheila Duffy 03:03

Why are you so coy, though?

Benno Schotz 03:05

Well because people think a man of 88, he must be an old doddering man, walking with a stick and hardly able to lift himself up. I knew a friend in Israel, a very important man, and he said to me, you know, when I sit I think I'm a lion, but when I stand up, oh dear.

Benno Schotz 03:39

But no, I stand the whole day. When I work, I stand. I seldom sit down. And it's a habit. You form a habit, and you carry on as you have always done.

Sheila Duffy 03:55

You say you've got three portraits, three busts that you're doing at the moment. Do you approach each new work with as much enthusiasm as you did as a young man?

Benno Schotz 04:05

Usually, I try not to do more than one at a time, because it fills your mind and you dare not think of others. But sometimes our work is done very quickly. At one time, I used to do a fine portrait in one sitting, and sometimes my wife used to say, the less time I spend on the work, the better. The other day, I had to tell a client that he shouldn't be worried that I don't want him back, because the more I will work on it, the more staid it will become. Your work has to be fresh. You have to give it its initial enthusiasm and retain it to the end. And touching up a little here or a little there and smoothing something down here or there, doesn't really help it. Just belabours it. And belabouring a work is of no consequence, the very reverse it. I might begin a fresh one instead.

Sheila Duffy 05:20

Are all heads equally interesting, though? Or sometimes do you groan inwards and think I'll never be able to

Benno Schotz 05:27

I really consider that every person has something in him or in her that is interesting, and it is for the artist to probe and to find out where it is. And often I prefer to model a person I haven't seen before, because I get a fresh impression straight away. You get used to a person's features whom you know well, and somehow it isn't the same, although when I sit a person onto my model stand, they change. In ordinary conversation, in meetings, socially, I try not to study the people I meet. I want to enjoy my life, because all of us, to be at work, so to speak, is no enjoyment, because it goes very deep into you, and you begin to see the person more as a sample, as a case, and as a case it can be interesting, but it can churn you inside out when you begin to think of the person and perhaps build up his whole history, his whole life story. Which one really does when you model a person, because I consider that if you model a person correctly, as you see the outside, the inside will reveal itself, and I don't consider myself a boss of my work. I consider myself a tool, and I just have to accept what comes out from under my hands, under my fingers, because, as I say, I'm not

a judge of a person. The only thing is this. I am never as happy as when I work. When I work, I just, I revel in what I do, and because of that, I feel I always give the person's better side, because my sitter begins to enjoy his sitting, because we constantly talk all the time, and I try, when I find out what the person's interests are, I try to turn the conversation in that direction and make him feel interested and alive and with the result that he or she also show their best side. With children, of course, you have to become a child. Yes, yes, I become a veritable child. Sometimes I say to myself, I've never really grown up. Yes.

Sheila Duffy 08:52

Are the best people to do, though, the ones with the most character in their face, because I know you've done busts, for example, of Golda Meir and Hugh MacDiarmid. Now these are people, obviously with lots of character in their face that one would have thought that was easier to do than say, a conventionally attractive person.

Benno Schotz 09:11

Nothing is easy, if I may put it this way, everything is difficult. No matter what you do, or whom you do, you think a person who has character is easy. It is the very reverse, because you want to catch that character, and to catch it isn't always easy, because some of those people, especially some politicians, some poets, are not very forthcoming. They think a lot, but they don't speak a lot, especially the person who they think won't understand what they are referring to. And I have to work hard to get them to open themselves up and only by talking to them. It isn't so much what they say that affects me. I watch their reaction, facial reaction to my conversation, and then I know whether I'm on the right lines or not, because you have to talk to a to a sitter, and you have to interest him, otherwise they become stuffy. And Hugh MacDiarmid, of course, was a friend, an old, old friend, and with him, we were on brotherly, how would you put it, on a brotherly relationship? Yes, but then many things must have come together just right. You know, I was in the correct mood, my clay was correct, the weather was right. Everything came together at the same time. With the result, I produced one of my best pieces. The same with Golda Meir. Although Golda Meir, I had to remodel, because when I first, she was going to give me two hours and I had taken, in order to save a few minutes, I built up the pear shaped head of clay and decided to take what I thought was sufficient clay with me in a basin. But after an hour and a half I discovered I ran out of clay. So when she saw what was happening, she and I had gotten exceedingly well, she said to me, "Well, what can you expect from a person", perhaps she said, "from a woman with such a nose and such a bun?" and I was put on the spot, you know, I had to say something, because I couldn't just leave it unanswered, especially when she spoke about her nose, and she really didn't have such a big nose, not at all. You know, it was a male nose. So it so happened that some months earlier, I had read an article where somebody was writing about our uncrushed noses. So I repeated that to Golda, so I could see that that pleased very much. And she said to me, "I will give you another sitting". But that other sitting was from nine till 11 at night, and she didn't arrive till half past nine, and probably from Tel Aviv or wherever it was. And she began to apologize for being late. I was modeling her in her home. So I said to her, Madam Prime Minister, I know you weren't at the flicks. So she said to me, "and I wasn't playing cards either". Bridge is a terrific thing in Israel. So this is how it is. And at 11 o'clock, she had another appointment [that night]. That night, yes.

Sheila Duffy 13:58

You are also, of course, the Queen's Sculptor in Ordinary in Scotland, and have been since 1963. Now have you had a chance to do the Queen at all? No.

Benno Schotz 14:11

Commissions come from Royal Societies or companies of that nature. But nobody has asked me to model her, and she has to agree to the to the artist. And so far, I have not, and I don't suppose I will, now.

Sheila Duffy 14:37

Does that disappoint you?

Benno Schotz 14:40

I don't know. I feel she has not been done justice in the portraits that have been made of her, I mean, in the bust, in the sculpture. She has been well presented in painting, but not in sculpture, and I somehow feel I would have liked to do her more justice than she has had, and, but then, who am I? How can I judge that my mind will be better, you know? I don't know, it is a very difficult thing to see. Sometimes I'm glad that I have been spared this test, because not everybody comes off with flying colours, as I have noticed.

Sheila Duffy 15:43

I understand that you're writing your memoirs at the moment. Is this right?

Benno Schotz 15:48

That is quite correct. From where did you hear that?

Sheila Duffy 15:52

I must have read it somewhere, I think.

Benno Schotz 15:55

That is quite correct. I've been at it for the last three years. I've really finished with it, and it is in the last stages of being retyped.

Sheila Duffy 16:06

You see you have lived a long time, haven't you? 88 years.

Benno Schotz 16:09

Yeah that's true enough, and I have to add things at the end, but I would never have undertaken it had I known what I had let myself into, because it is a harrowing experience, having to go through your life and everything that has happened to you, and not everything that has happened to you can you put down. Because, after all, you don't want to open your heart to everybody and not everything is needed. You know, it's like asking a stranger into your bedroom, you know, at night or so, no certain things have to be kept out of out of script, because it isn't gossip. You know, one

doesn't want gossip, and one has to keep it within limits and not fill your book with names that mean nothing to people. I have very few names in it except the people that mattered to me or mattered to my work. It was revealing to me, but certain family? How shall I put it? Family incidents or so, especially in connection with my parents, because I lived here, I was never back. Since 1913 I've never been back. My mother died 1917, my father in 1920. All these things have affected me very, very much, and somehow it is a standing reproach to me because I wasn't in touch with them, etc. It's so difficult to explain, I just touch on it in my book.

Sheila Duffy 18:46

Hello, everyone.

Sheila Duffy 18:46

Welcome back. You're tuned to Radio Clyde and tonight, my guest on the programme is sculptor and artist, Benno Schotz.

Benno Schotz 18:56

Yes, I was born on an island in the Baltic near the Gulf of Riga, but when I was two, my elder brother was already nine, we came to the mainland because our parents wanted to give us a proper education and chose a town on the top corner of the Gulf of Riga where there were two gymnasiums, one for girls and one for boys. And my older brother was the most brilliant student. He got the gold medal and studied chemistry in Riga. And then he had to make himself scarce after the revolution of 1905, 1907 and he went in 1908, he managed to escape to Glasgow, where we had friends. My father managed to get him across the German border into Germany. Then he managed to get to Leith, and there we had relations in Glasgow, and this is how he came here. I couldn't get into a Russian university, so I went to Germany to study. But instead of going home at the Easter vacation, I came to visit him so that I should be able to bring regards back home. But I didn't go back home that summer. I already decided to remain in Glasgow, and as my brother was still the summer here, we spent it together, but I went home the following year in 1913 for my vacation, and that was the last time I saw my parents or my hometown.

Sheila Duffy 20:54

What kind of home did you come out of them? Your father was a watchmaker, wasn't he?

Benno Schotz 20:58

My father was a watchmaker because in Russia, the government had the Pale, the Ghetto, and my father didn't want to remain in the ghetto. And in order to be able to get out of the ghetto, you had to have a trade. So he became a watchmaker, although he was a very learned man and a very, very intellectual person and wrote poetry, etc, but he made his living by selling watches, by repairing watches, etc, and I, being the youngest, was in his workshop very often, and, I would have been able to carry on a watchmaker's business on my own, because I was able to repair watches, turn spindles, you know, make them, etc, the finest spindles. But that was not what I wanted to be, you know. Since a boy, I was modeling at home, having never actually seen anything but postcards, reproductions, in magazines, etc. And when I wrote home from Glasgow that I am going to change from engineering to sculpture, they were very pleased at home, very pleased because my mother

used to say she expected that I would one day become a sculptor. And when she was asked, "", she said "he used to talk about so many things he wanted to be, and I knew that was not the right thing. But when he used to go into his room to change his jacket, I knew he was going to model, he never spoke about it. He just did it, and I knew that was the right thing. And I used to go out and help him dig for clay in the yard", because the clay was just a yard, not paved or cobbled. It was just that there was a little mound at the side, and that is where we used to dig up the clay. It was just a few inches under there.

Sheila Duffy 23:49

Were those very difficult days in Estonia? You talk about the ghetto. And of course, it was a time of turmoil before the First World War.

Benno Schotz 23:56

That is quite correct. It was a time, I grew up during the Japanese war, Russia- Japanese war. I grew up during the first revolution, nineteen five, nineteen seven, but we were so dragooned in our studies and it wasn't easy, because we Jews had to excel in order to get into a Russian university, because of the numerous clauses, 5% of the students were allowed to be Jews, and Jewish people were keen on education, so there was always a scramble, who will get in and who will not? My number was 27 and only 25 got into the University, and I can tell you, that was the luckiest thing that had ever happened to me, because I don't know whether I would ever have become a sculptor in Russia, but when I came to Glasgow, and after a year, saw how all the doors are open that it depends on yourself to become what you want, if you have the ability, the stamina, the tenacity and the willpower, yes, and this is what happened to me,

Sheila Duffy 25:38

You just came to Glasgow on a visit, but did you fall in love with the place right away?

Benno Schotz 25:42

Yes I, because of its freedom, because everything was put on a plate before you. You know, in Russia, really, in Estonia, I was only a student. I really didn't get in touch with life at all. Here, while I was at the Royal Technical College, it was different, I had time to go about, to see, to look and I suddenly realized that here is where I can fulfill my ambition, which was to become a sculptor. What affected me, or what was the bonus that I received was having a friend, architect friend, an elderly man who become friendly towards me and helped me greatly. John Keppie, the architect, he was a great man. My years of development was during the war, where so many had left, and I had a coterie of artists. And in this respect, it was very revealing and very important for me, because we had three or four important artists then only beginning to emerge, Robert Sivell, Archibald McGlashan, James Cowie, the three, the three stalwarts who later became very well known in their own fields. Archibald McGlashan, I'm glad to say, is still with us, the others have died long ago.

Sheila Duffy 27:34

This of course, was the First World War you're talking about isn't it?

Benno Schotz 27:37

I'm talking about the First World War, yes, but that is when I began. I exhibited for the first time in the Fine Art Institute in 1917, and I was always deploring the fact that I don't have a photograph of the work, because I knew I had taken it, but a few months ago, there was brought to me a photograph, and it was in the effects of my elder brother, of the bust of Tolstoy, which I had exhibited in 1917 and when I looked at it, I was surprised, because I didn't think it was so good. Yes, it is a very good work, and I hope it might even be reproduced, you know, as being the first work I exhibited.

Sheila Duffy 28:41

Before you became a sculptor full time, you studied at the Glasgow Royal College of Technology?

Benno Schotz 28:47

Yeah, no. Yes, science and technology. It was changing its name gradually, and now it is Strathclyde University, and my degree was always changed with the change of the status of the of the college, but when it became the university, I always say it was the cheapest degree I've ever received, in order to get a BSc, they asked me if I want a BSc, I will have to send them a cheque for two pounds or two guineas, I don't remember, and I take great pride in it.

Sheila Duffy 29:31

In fact, after college, you worked in the shipyards, didn't you?

Benno Schotz 29:34

Yes, I worked in John Brown's, in John Brown Shipyard, and I couldn't understand why, as soon as I was finished in June, in 1914 I sent two or three letters to various firms asking for a job, and I got straight away a reply from John Brown and only two or three weeks later, did it reveal itself, why they wanted me. They were building the Russian Navy. They will build the Russian Navy in Petrograd, but the material was being sent out from Glasgow. And in Glasgow, in those days, there was a consulate, a Russian Consulate, and they had a girl who used to translate the Russian specifications, but not knowing any technical English or technical Russian, she made many mistakes, which resulted in a lot of steel being rejected. And here, here they have a boy from Russia who has studied engineering, and he knew all the technical terms, and within a few weeks, I was inundated with specifications to translate, and I was even sent to London. John Brown had an office in the sanctuary[?] in London, so near Westminster Abbey, and I used to translate there, even war specifications from the War Office. And there were very few of us who could do it. And as I was earning a salary, not a very big one, in those days, I think I started with 25 shillings a week. I think within a few weeks, it was raised to thirty. And I enjoyed going to London because that gave me a chance to see exhibitions, etc. And with the result, I didn't dilly-dally over them. I did a good deal more than some of those in London who were working probably per hour, you know.

Sheila Duffy 32:19

Did you enjoy those years in the shipyard? Because you were there for a number of years, weren't you?

Benno Schotz 32:23

I enjoyed being in the shipyard because I knew it was only a passing phase, and all the chief draftsmen were very kind to me, because they also knew I was only there pro tem and whenever I needed time off to go to an exhibition or an opening, etc, where it was important I should be, I was given leave. I think they were very kind to me. And when I finally left to take up sculpture as a profession, I was the most envied man in the office, because everybody there was a square peg in a round hole, and here I was going to do what I really wanted to do.

Sheila Duffy 33:16

That must have been a difficult decision to make, to leave a steady job?

Benno Schotz 33:21

It was, and I decided to go to my friend, John Keppie to ask his advice. And he said to me, "Benno, the longer you will wait, the more difficult it will become. Here you have a chance. Take it, but give me one promise. Should you be hard up don't go to a moneylender. Come to me." And it was a very wise advice, because he wasn't thinking just of then, he was thinking of the future, when there might be occasions, as he has met, or known other painters have, that times may come when things will become very sticky. And they have been, on one occasion for two and a half years, I only earned 10 pounds, but my wife, before she married, had opened a little dressmaking business. And whenever I needed money and I didn't have it, I would go to John Keppie, and he was very businesslike. I would always write out an IOU for what I received. But strange enough, I never asked the IOUs back when I paid my money. But he was he was a gentleman. Oh yes, he was in loco parentis to me.

Sheila Duffy 35:14

Hello, everyone. This is Sheila Duffy here. Tonight on the program on Radio Clyde I'm talking to artist and sculptor, Benno Schotz How difficult was it to become established as a sculptor as a young man in the 20s in Scotland?

Benno Schotz 35:35

It was not easy, because being young, I moved about a little more. The press was very good to me, for some reason, I don't know why, they considered that I was carrying the torch of sculpture in Scotland, and gave me a lot of coverage, sometimes to my embarrassment, and it so happened I was able to express myself, not badly, and I was good company, and that always helped. I had a friend, a dealer, Duncan McDonald, who started with Aitken Dott's in Edinburgh and then became a director of the Reid Gallery in Glasgow, Reid and Son. Actually, I helped in that and, without a dealer, I don't think I would have been able to do much.

Sheila Duffy 36:52

When did you realize, though, that you were becoming successful, that you were more financially stable, for example?

Benno Schotz 36:59

Actually, things worked fortuitously with me. My wife always had to carry on her little business, although it did very little, yet it managed to do the very essential things for living. And suddenly, the head of the Sculpture Department in the Glasgow School of Art died in the spring of 1938, before he was able really to complete work he did for the Bellahouston Exhibition, and the students were left without an instructor for their diplomas. And I knew the director very well. And he came to and said, Benno, would you put the students through their diplomas? By then I was already a full member of the Royal Scottish Academy. I was no more just a nonentity. And I rather liked the idea, and decided to take on the post temporarily, and I must have done so well that they all passed their diplomas, and then they offered me the post permanently. I had the whole summer to think it over. Actually, my wife wasn't keen I should take it on, because she felt I was lowering my status that I'm becoming a teacher, which actually it was. But as I told her, I was seeing that war was coming, and the first casualty in war is art. It takes a little time until it takes up again, but sculpture is usually the very last one to come back to its own, with the result, I felt I'd better take on the post. I didn't intend to stay more than five or 10 years, not knowing how long the war would last. But you get used to the idea of receiving a salary, although I began with 300 a year, and then I made them increase it to 450 because 300 really in those days, even then, was nothing. I loved every minute of it. If I hadn't liked teaching, I would have given it up years ago, but I enjoyed being with the students, young people. I tried to be their friend. They used to come, but I used to be their father confessor, you know. And yet, I heard only last year that when I used to come into the class, they all used to tremble. I don't know, I thought I was the most sympathetic of persons. My daughter studied at the Glasgow School of Art in the Design Department and became the best student. Was given that post Dip and then she went to London.

Sheila Duffy 40:56

Your daughter works in London. Your son works in Israel. Have you ever been tempted to go and settle in Israel yourself?

Benno Schotz 41:05

Many years ago, I had an offer. I had an offer to open an art school in Haifa, and I was going to be given a house and everything, but one of the conditions I put is I should be able to carry on with my own work, and I didn't pursue it because it was much more important for me to produce sculpture than to try and create an Art School in Haifa. There is still not one there.

Sheila Duffy 41:44

Do you really, after all these years, regard Glasgow as your home?

Benno Schotz 41:50

I don't know why I settled in Glasgow, except that my brother was here. I had relations here, and somehow I felt I have roots, or I was making roots. As I write in my book, I don't know whether I have roots in Glasgow, that I feel my roots are in the history of art, the history of sculpture, because my whole mind is steeped in my work and in what has been done before, and I consider that I have made a slight contribution to the - how shall I put it, to the scope of portraiture. I have added

another dimension to it, which is rather important, and all of us couldn't understand why everybody considered my portraits the most important part of my sculptural activity, but only when I was writing my memoirs did I give chapter and verse, what I was actually doing. You normally work intuitively, and things become part of your nature. You don't give yourself an answer for certain things because you don't need to. You only know that this is good or that is bad, but when you have to write about your work, you cannot do so unless you state specifically how you do it or what you do it. And in this respect, it clarified itself to me, although it was in my mind all the time, so the last 20, 30 years that I was able to do what I always wanted to do without, so to speak, giving myself a definite conscious answer.

Sheila Duffy 44:31

How would you like to be remembered then? You mentioned the bust of Hugh MacDiarmid. What work would you like to be remembered for?

Benno Schotz 44:38

That that is very difficult to say. I know that Epstein presented a bust of his daughter to Jerusalem Museum, and said that he wouldn't mind to be remembered by that work. And when I was studying it, I say to myself, simply because it is his daughter, but it was not his best work. How am I to know by which work I will be remembered, if I will be remembered at all because posterity has a very keen perception, and no matter what we think, it ultimately decides your place, and you can do nothing about it. Posterity knows whether you are worth remembering or not. Epstein couldn't judge whether posterity will remember him or not. Actually, today he is one of my heroes. I call him my older brother, but he is not ranked terribly high at the moment in the in the auction rooms, but he's probably the greatest portraitist we have had this century.

Sheila Duffy 46:26

Are you going to keep on working then Benno, until you drop?

Benno Schotz 46:30

Of course. Epstein died in his sleep while he was on a big commission. Do I look as if I'm ready to retire? No, I'm working harder than ever. I work from morning till night. There's nothing else for me to do. If I don't do one thing, I do another thing. I might write a poem. I might write a little bit of history, or I might write an incident which doesn't go into my book and rewrite it as a little story. There are plenty of them. No, an artist doesn't retire like old soldiers, I fade away.

Sheila Duffy 47:25

Benno Schotz, thank you very much for talking to us on the programme tonight.