

RSA Obituary by Vincent Butler RSA, transcribed from the 1984 RSA Annual Report

When Dr. Benno Schotz died in November [1984], the Academy lost one of its most endearing and respected members and Scotland lost its most senior and distinguished Sculptor, who at the age of 93 was still working until a short time before his final illness.

Benno loved the Academy and he loved Scotland, frequently expressing his affection for both during his long life in Glasgow, the city that gave him a home and, in 1981, bestowed on him the Freedom of the City in recognition of his stature.

Benno spent his childhood in Parnu in Estonia where his father was a watchmaker. He studied engineering at Darmstadt in Germany from where he emigrated in 1912 to join his brother in Glasgow, continuing his studies at the Technical College. He had made attempts at Sculpture in his earlier years and he soon enrolled 'with great emotion' as he tells us in his autobiography, at evening classes at the Art School on the very day that he completed his engineering studies.

He found employment at John Brown's Shipyard where his knowledge of the Russian language was highly valued by the company who were at that time building the Russian fleet. He was offered a small bursary to go full time at the Art School but he was unable to accept as he had to have regular employment, but he was already seriously working at Sculpture, exhibiting in 1917 a bust of Tolstoy at the Institute of Fine Art and a carved head of Theo Hurzl which is now in Tel Aviv, and he soon began to receive commissions for portraits, modelling a fine head of Hugh Walpole which he exhibited with ahead of James McBey at the Royal Academy in 1924.

By 1925 he was determined to dedicate himself entirely to Sculpture and gave up his post at John Brown's to become a part-time assistant in Proudfoot's studio. He had his first one man show in Glasgow in 1926 and then in London in 1930 and by the end of that decade he had established a considerable reputation as a portrait Sculptor - and indeed some of his most beautiful works date from that period - his superb past of Pittendrigh MacGillivray, now at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, dates from 1912, his powerful head of Lord Weir from 1924, and a splendid oak bust of his wife Millie from 1927 as well as a sensitive mother and child in sandstone from 1938, and in the same year a head and shoulders of James Maxton, M.P. now in Kelvingrove Gallery, also a very fine bust from 1939 of Keir Hardie of which a cast is in the House of Commons.

This very creative decade in Benno's career closed in 1938 with his appointment as Head of the School of Sculpture at Glasgow Art School, an appointment which he held with dedication and hard work throughout the war years and on until the early 60's, and it was too in this decade that Benno's long association with the Academy began, with his election as Associate in 1933 and Academician in 1937.

It was in this twin role in Public life as Teacher and Academician that he was able to give so much for so many years to so many other young artists. One of the earliest things he did in the Academy was to play a significant part in the election of the academy's first woman member, Miss Phyllis Bone, whom many will remember for her delicate and sensitive animal sculpture.

It was Benno's efforts and his enthusiasm for the work of others that brought to the Academy for the first time, in 1949 as guest exhibitors, the modern Italian Sculptors Manzu, Marini and Viani as well as go Gaudier Breszca and later a whole group of works of Henry Moore to be shown for the first time in Scotland.

Benno enthused warmly about the work of others, especially young and unknown artists and he frequently and openly expressed his admiration for some work seen in the Academy's Annual Exhibition or elsewhere, a generosity which earned him many life-long friends, especially among the young, to whom, it was well known, he would write letters of warm congratulations on their achievements.

Those who are his students at Glasgow recall his teaching with gratitude and his dedication to their well being was legendary. On his retirement from teaching in 1963, although he had only a modest annuity to live on, he established a Sculpture prize for students at the Glasgow Art School, funding it with the money which his colleagues had collected for him as a retirement present.

In 1949 when he went to Italy to choose loan sculpture for the Academy he made great efforts to get the Biennale Commission to permit Scottish Artists to participate independently from England, and in 1965 he had correspondence with Miss Jenny Lee, then Minister of the Arts, with a view to establishing patronage for Sculpture on Public buildings.

The altruism and public spiritedness as well as his energy and dedication to his work enabled Benno to overcome the sad moments of his life, the death of his wife in 1971 and the execution of his sister and her husband in Parnu in 1941 as well the suffering of

German Jews under the Nazi's - which he tried to express in his 'Lament' of 1943, a wood carving now in the Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh.

But it was probably his deep feelings for people which led him to produce above all his many portraits, sixty five of which were exhibited in a retrospective show at the Academy in 1971 and more than fifty at an exhibition in 1978 in Kelvingrove, the opening of which was attended by over 700 people.

In 1963 Benno was made Queen's Sculptor in Ordinary in Scotland, and in 1969 he was made an honorary Doctor of Literature at Strathclyde University and Honorary Fellow at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1981. These honours, he received with grace and modesty and he remained, until the end a man of kindness, vivaciousness and wit and above all a hard working and dedicated Sculptor.