

## **Thomas Whalen RSA**

### **RSA Obituary by Esmee Gordon**

#### **Transcribed from the 1975 RSA Annual Report**

To no artist has membership of this Academy meant more than it did to Tom Whalen. His attachment was one of total loyalty for two reasons: belief in purpose and gratitude. Born in Leith on 16th October 1903, he was the third son of the twelve children of James Whalen, barman, and his wife Mary.

Throughout his life Tom never forgot his debts, especially those due to his mother who, exerting the strongest of all influences, in bringing up her family refused to be diverted from high principles by mere poverty. Between the ages of five and fourteen he attended St Thomas School, Leith, his education, with exemplary results, being completed in the harder school of life.

The second great and acknowledged inspiration in the developing life was John Hislop. This good man held weekly Bibleclasses (has it been observed how many of the Sculptor Whalen's works were given scriptural titles?) and each summer conducted his innumerable little charges on "Hislop's Treat."

By train they were taken to some tree-girt green spot where races were run and prizes won that were as sensible as braces and breeks. In years to come the newly elected ARSA was to find that John Hislop had become the father-in-law of Adam Bruce Thomson, RSA. Remaining in Leith, Whalen, during the war years of 1914-18, became a shipwright.

There is a foretaste of a born sculptor: to obtain material from which to whittle little figurines, Tom helped himself in the yard and got into trouble when the pieces of timber he purloined proved to be rather more than waste off-cuts. Peace brought industrial troubles in the 20's that were cruel not only for those who built ships: the young man tramped in vain search of employment to the yards of the North, of the East and of the West.

But Tom had hands and tools that could not remain idle: he continued his carving. One day when the weekly dues were being sought at his mother's home, his figures were noticed. The collector sent her son, an art student unfortunately now unknown, who was sufficiently impressed to take the young carver and his carvings to Thomas Good's benches in the Edinburgh College of Art.

In this way Whalen met the Head of School of Sculpture, Alexander Carrick, RSA, who liked what he saw and spoke to the Principal, Gerald Moira. Not so easy then as now, a scholarship was conjured up which enabled Whalen to attend Classes as a full-time student and so become a sculptor. Faith and judgment were soon vindicated when the very first Andrew Grant Fellowship was awarded to Tom Whalen.

The work he was thus enabled to execute is the fountain that stands in the courtyard of Preston field School. That a new talent was present soon came to be noted. As early as 1930 Whalen exhibited three works in the Academy, including his serene Madonna and Child of which eight in bronze and fifteen in plaster were sold.

In 1932, when the reconstructed R.S.A. Student Competition was inaugurated, the young Sculptor was successful in winning the second of two Carnegie Travelling Scholarships. Twelve months later his abilities were acknowledged when he won the Guthrie Award. Thus Scotland gained a new sculptor of individual distinction, Whalen proving Barrie's contention that it is the artist who alone can benefit from that rarity in life—a second chance.

Throughout his professional career Whalen disdained studio assistance. All he did was his. With the urgency to create—and with scant regard to the world and uninformed opinion—the sculptor never again knew idleness. With his already architectonic outlook, his ability, so rare nowadays, whole heartedly to collaborate endeared him to architects who sought work of individuality to add distinction to their buildings.

Whalen's commissioned work was soon not to be restricted to the privacy of gardens or church furnishings. Sturdy interpretations of stone heraldry stand in Edinburgh, to be found in the Lawnmarket, in St Andrew Square and also on North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board projects.

George Street in the capital carries Portland stone and bronze on the 8.S.E.B. Building, while on St Nicholas, the Children's Church at Sighthill, his stone lowrelief bears the Whalenish title "Lad with the five loaves". Notable also was his massive "Mother and Child", the freestanding group commissioned by the then Scottish Committee of the Arts Council of Great Britain for the 1951 Festival of Great Britain.

Hewn from Leoch, that hardest of all Scottish stones, this 1 3/4-ton work was designed for the exterior of the pioneer Sighthill Health Centre. On the Brunton Hall in Musselburgh there is the gilded sunburst and on the stone gable of Dalkeith High School the bronze Ballerina.

Exceptionally, one minor example of Whalen's work must have travelled far further than any other work of sculpture, to bring comfort and perhaps restore faith in sanity to tens of thousands: wherever our troops went in the course of the last war, they were followed by the Church of Scotland Canteens. Each contained a little Chapel in which stood a muffled gold Communion Table enriched with Whalen's blazoned roundel of the Burning Bush.

This work stood in the Shetlands and fell with the fall of France. It went to the East, the Near and the Far, bearing the appropriate legend "Nec Tamen Consumeatur." When not engaged on commissions—the list, far from complete, also included extensive plaster decorations, the occasional Memorial, portrait heads—Whalen created the smaller pieces in bronze, in lead, in cement, in wood, in glass, in polystyrene which have graced our Sculpture Court.

His tally of these exhibits alone overtops one hundred and thirty: As year succeeded year, his contributions to the Annual Exhibitions gave a pleasure—and at times, amusement—to our visitors and tempted such purchasers as J. B. Priestley and the City of Bolton Art Gallery.

As Sculptor, Whalen had an intuitive regard for his materials whose characteristics he inevitably respected: the soul of the substance played its part in the creative process

always to result in a sharp comment often salted with illuminating wit. Masterly in his direct

stonework, he was probably happier as a carver with his chisel, taking away, than as a modeller with his spatula, adding.

In all he did there was a very real sense of style, exemplified clearly in his virile lettering. More recently, his gentler works in Portsoy marble, rich in colour, now wine dark, now the grey-green of our coastal seas under cloudy skies, may prove to be his most memorable works.

These water-smoothed boulders were found and borne by theerst while shipwright to his Dean Path Studio: how little he then had to prise from the outer surface of each to reveal the inner secrets! Of such is his wryly humorous Diploma work, entitled, not inappropriately for its time, "Clown with Atom Bomb."

Throughout his career, Whalen asked little of life, yet gave so much. He avoided limelight. Yet he and his proud wife from whom he was inseparable, unmistakably were delighted when the Scottish Committee of the Arts Council recognized his achievements in 1973 with a successful Festival Exhibition. Tom Whalen was elected an Associate in 1940, with full membership following fourteen years thereafter.

Of a droll humour and, behind a misleading appearance of abrupt manner, of the warmest of hearts, he was a man of self-reliant independence. When the Academy Secretary approached him to make a grant available that might assist with rehabilitation at the conclusion of the Second World War, he was thanked.

But the offer was declined with the suggestion that the money could be better used where there might be greater need. Of a reticent nature, his few utterances, whether in the meetings of the Academy or on the Board of the College of Art on which he served, were sharpened by strongly held convictions.

Tom Whalen, in appearance of stocky granite solidity as if carved by himself, never forgot his gratitude to an Academy which for him had made the impossible possible. He died after a short illness without recovering consciousness on 19th February 1975, leaving his widow Margaret and his son Carrick and daughter Moira.

The significance in his choice of these names does not pass unnoticed. The Oration spoken at his Warriston Crematorium Funeral Service was delivered from the bronze pulpit which was one of Whalen's more recent works. In low relief it depicts the Seven Ages of Man seen against the very River of Life, which has now borne this loved man from our midst... . It had all been as he would have wished.