

Michael Sandle (born 1936)

CATAFALQUE FOR ANTON BRUCKNER, 1981

Bronze 27 x 91.1 x 43 cm

Presented in memory of David R. Watmough 2014.156



Michael Sandle

Professor Michael Sandle RA is widely recognised as one of the finest sculptors in the world and is also a brilliant draughtsman and printmaker. His work explores the themes of violence, war, death and memorialisation, and his international status is unmatched in his field by any other British artist of his generation. Born in Dorset in 1936, he moved to Douglas on the Isle of Man in 1942, and while on National Service with the Royal Artillery at Saighton Camp in 1954-55 attended evening classes at Chester School of Art, then housed in the Grosvenor Museum. He studied in Douglas, London and Paris, and taught in Britain and Canada. He lived in Germany 1973-99, becoming Professor of Sculpture at Pforzheim and then at Karlsruhe. He has exhibited across five continents and his work is in public collections around the world. A Senior Royal Academician, his most notable public commissions include *St George and the Dragon* 1988 in London, the *Malta Siege-Bell Memorial* 1992 in Valletta and *The Seafarers' Memorial* 2001 in London.

Catafalque for Anton Bruckner

Catafalque for Anton Bruckner is a quintessential Michael Sandle sculpture: melancholy and elegiac, morbid and monumental, brooding and powerful.

Since *A Twentieth-Century Memorial* (Tate; 1971-78) most of Sandle's sculptures have been cast in bronze. "I use bronze because it's the only material for serious sculpture. Endurance has everything to do with it. It

connotes the antique, certainly, but for contemporary treatments it is still perfect. Sculpture is sometimes thought to be about mass, plane and volume, but it's also about ideas. And bronze is the ultimate expressive medium." *Catafalque for Anton Bruckner* was cast by Morris Singer, the oldest established fine art foundry in the world.

Sandle's approach has been described as radical traditionalism, and the artist says: "Art is to do with continuity and from the word go I had a reverence for the past." The art historian Benedict Read noted: "Michael Sandle is an exceptional sculptor in a seemingly indifferent age. What marks Sandle out is a conscious relationship to an earlier great age of British figurative sculpture, the Victorian and Edwardian era." The art historian Richard Dorment concluded: "More than any sculptor working today, Sandle is steeped in the history of art. There is no British artist who can quite be compared to Sandle."

Sandle says: "As a child I was obsessed by death – I was terrified by the idea of death" and "with my own work 'death' is the recurrent theme". His first free-standing sculpture, *Oranges and Lemons* (1963-66), introduced a quintessential subject of his art, the memorial, and even includes echoes of a plumed bier. *Sphingid* (1967) was the first of his many pieces with an overt tomb theme. *Monumentum pro Gesualdo* (1966-69), Sandle's first sculpture conceived specifically as a monument and dedicated to an individual (the composer Carlo Gesualdo), is raised on a tiered platform and was inspired, in part, by his interest in funeral rafts.

Tomb sculptures dominated Sandle's output from the age of forty, giving full rein to his obsession with mortality, what he even calls his 'streak of necrophilia'. "I hate the fact that certain things or events can be swept aside and not remembered. I'm very concerned with Time. I think there are certain things that should be memorialised. All of my work is about memory."

Sandle's first solo exhibition with Fischer Fine Art, London, in 1981, comprised twenty bronzes. All were proposals for monumental memorials, including *Catafalque for Anton Bruckner*. A catafalque is a raised platform on which a body lies in state before or during a funeral. Each sculpture has a platform approached by a stepped plinth, and in most cases the piece is crowned by a draped and seemingly decomposing corpse, its identity disclosed by associative objects scattered about the body or plinth. Sandle's use of this motif culminated in his supreme masterpiece, the *Malta Siege-Bell Memorial* at Valletta (1988-92), which

features a stone catafalque bearing a bronze figure representing all the War dead.

In *Catafalque for Anton Bruckner*, the catafalque supports a raft. This feature, recalling Viking culture and other ancient funerary traditions, is a symbol of passage, from life to death, light to dark. The sheaf of bulrushes complements the watery suggestion of the raft. The disks, inspired by the bracket fungi which grow horizontally from vertical tree trunks, were a recurrent feature of Sandle's art in the 1980s, and are used here to enliven the severely rectilinear sculpture.

Sandle agrees with the long-established notion that art aspires to the condition of music. His own work has invariably been inspired by listening to his favourite composers, mostly from the 19th century, notably Richard Wagner, Anton Bruckner and Gustav Mahler. Sandle's love of grandeur, drama and ecstasy in music has been complemented by his admiration for 19th and early 20th-century monumentality in architecture and sculpture.

Anton Bruckner (1824-96) was a composer whose symphonies are considered emblematic of the final stage of Austro-German Romanticism, with their rich harmonic language, strongly polyphonic character, and considerable length. *Catafalque for Anton Bruckner* is a particularly apposite memorial, considering the composer's morbid fascination with death and dead bodies. His interest was so extreme that when he attended the exhumation of Beethoven he 'lost the glass out of his pince-nez in his morbid curiosity', and he left explicit instructions regarding the embalming of his own corpse.