

Obituaries

Sculptor moulded nation's art

TOM BASS

Born June 6, 1916; died
February 26, 2010

Australian art might have been a little different today had a small boy not become fixated on the operations of a blacksmith's shop in Gundagai, NSW, in 1925. The pile of old horseshoes thrown out at the back of the shop became, to Tom Bass, a totem – something more than its component parts.

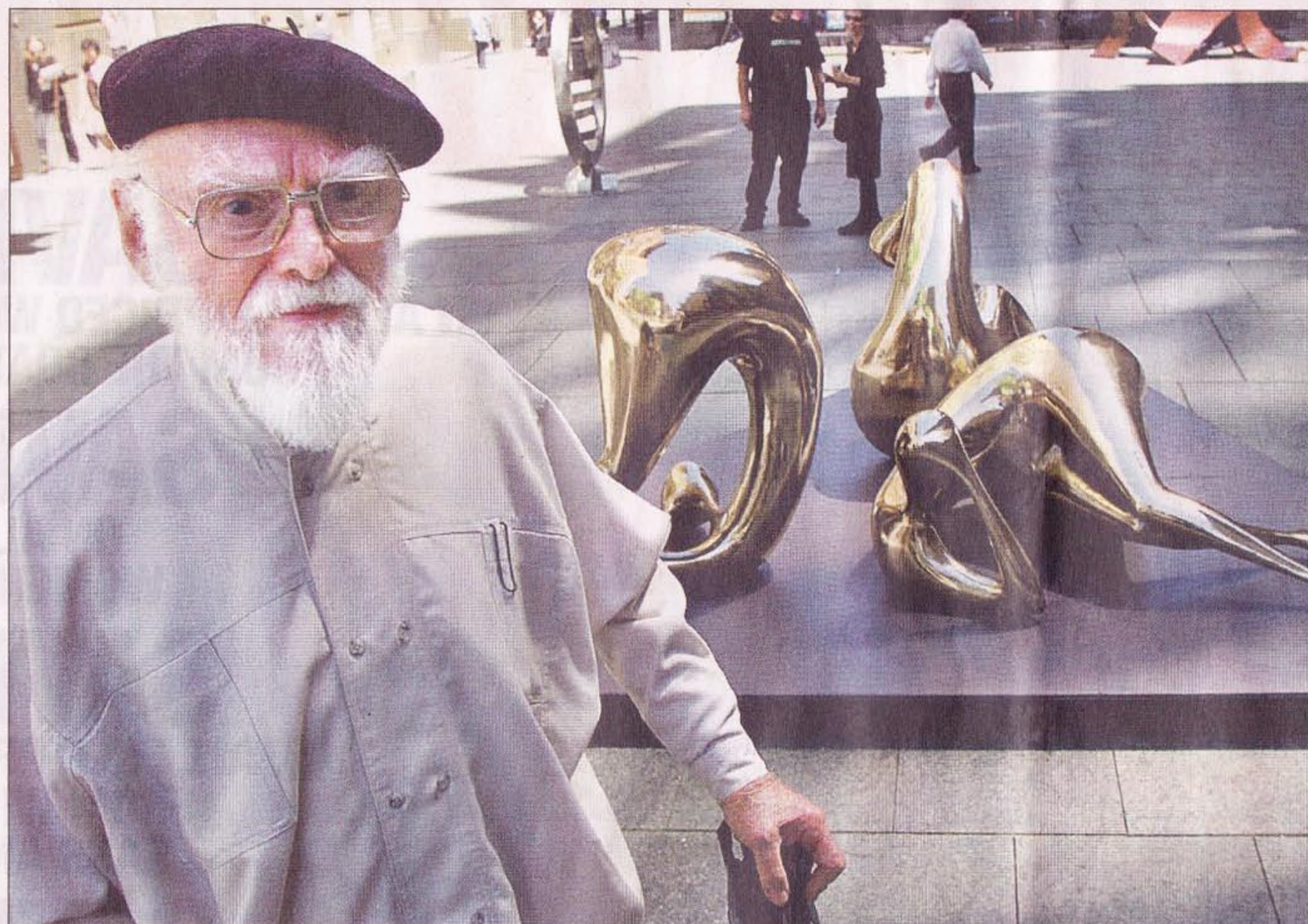
He became more entranced when he watched the blacksmith make a wheel, the hub and the spokes connecting it to the rim representing energy and binding. For a boy born in poverty in Lithgow – soon to be cast adrift in the Great Depression – the spark of a lifetime's artistic journey was lit.

Thomas Dwyer Bass was born on June 6, 1916, the son of Charles Bass, a baker, and Emmeline, nee Bateman. When he was eight the family moved to Gundagai, and it was there that Bass showed his artistic aptitude by drawing anything and everything, including the activities of the scout troop.

A local doctor saw his drawings and rebuked his mother for not fostering his talent. Bass also befriended a local artist, Frank Rusconi, the creator of the *Dog on the Tuckerbox* monument.

Bass left school aged 15 and worked in a sports shop, shearing sheds and on dairy farms, surviving often on rolled oats. In 1937, as a 21st birthday present, he received a copy of Herbert Read's *The Meaning of Art*, which, he said, "opened the door to the history and principles of the development of art". Bass enrolled at the Dattilo Rubbo Art School in Sydney. Rubbo instilled in Bass the idea of reaching inside the subject. He got his students to draw in charcoal, to get the pattern and rhythm of the subject.

Bass's career was interrupted by war service. He served in administration in Australia. In 1941 he married an artist, Lenore Rays. Demobilised in 1945, he studied sculpture at the National Art School



PUBLIC SHOW: Artist Tom Bass is pictured with one of his numerous works, *The Sisters*, in Sydney. Photo: QUENTIN JONES.

under Lyndon Dadswell. Graduating in 1948, now with three children, he worked as Dadswell's assistant. That year Bass created his first major work. He worked for Dadswell until 1950, when he returned to the National Art School to teach.

Bass became a foundation member of the Sculptors Society and decided his work should be in open spaces. "Throughout the ages, sculpture has had a totemic function in society, and through sculpture, people, communities and societies have been reminded of the things that have been most important to them," he said.

Bass became known and was commissioned to do works for schools, universities, government,

companies and religious institutions. In 1955 the founding vice-chancellor of the University of NSW, Sir Philip Baxter, commissioned him to do a work for the Kensington campus to introduce something uplifting to the spirit.

Over 25 years Bass created 60 major sculptures, including *Ethos*, a 6m winged figure in Canberra representing the spirit of the community, the lintel sculpture at the National Library, a 23m work expressing archival and intellectual values and *The Student*, at the main gates of the University of Sydney.

One of his sculptures, a wave-like water feature at the P&O Building in Hunter Street, Sydney, attracted controversy in 1963 when the

magazine *Oz* published a front-page photo depicting it as a urinal. At the subsequent obscenity trial, Bass defended *Oz*, saying it was "fair comment".

Bass started his own art school in Sydney in 1974, and began instilling discipline and inspiration in what would become thousands of students. His works were internationally recognised. One stood at the Australian Chancery Building in Washington.

Bass's first marriage ended in 1981, and in 1985 he married a doctor, Margo Hoekstra, with whom he had been working and studying for three years. In 1988 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia. Bass embraced Catholicism with

intensity, but became disenchanted. It was "like a love affair", he said, but his intention had been to find God and God was now "within me".

In 2003 Bass transferred the running of his sculpture school to a management committee.

A major retrospective of Bass's work was held at the Opera House in 2006. Art critic John McDonald spoke of his "indomitable spirit of perseverance". He said, "No artist has done more to shape the face of public art in Australia than Tom Bass."

Bass is survived by his widow, Margo, his children Tim, Virginia, Anna, Belinda, Marco and Peter, 11 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Malcolm Brown