

Sculptor's legacy to Church, Vinnies

By Damir Govorcin

Tom Bass

June 6, 1916–February 26, 2010

FOR more than half a century, the sculptures of Tom Bass have been “part of the furniture of my mind”, said long-time friend Fr Edmund Campion.

“It began, I think, in 1953, when the University of Sydney placed his *The Student*, Romanesque in its sandstone mass, at the main entrance gates on Parramatta Rd,” Fr Campion recalled.

“How well this sculpture catches the loneliness of intellectual life. The student’s head down absorbing the wisdom of a book while his right arm supports his head and blocks distractions from the outer world. The next year we put it on the cover of *Hermes*, the university magazine; and I am glad to know that it is still a favourite at the university.”

Mourners filled St Mary’s Church, Concord, for a Liturgy of the Word service for the artist and teacher Tom Bass on March 3. He died on February 26 at the age of 93.

Fr Campion, a friend for more than 50 years, said: “This initial encounter with *The Student* taught me that the work of Tom Bass is all about the meaning of things, not, as with other Australian sculptors, self-expression. So a few years later when a Jesuit magazine published his letters to Archbishop Guilford Young about work the archbishop had commissioned, I hitchhiked down to Yass

to see it for myself. There on the wall of a new church I found a startling crucified Christ, who looks like a survivor from the Burma railway or a POW camp. No gentle Jesus this, the Crucified One lifts himself through the weight of his suffering to offer his sacrifice to the Father. Here is a sculpture in the great tradition, making the central fact of Christianity accessible to all.”

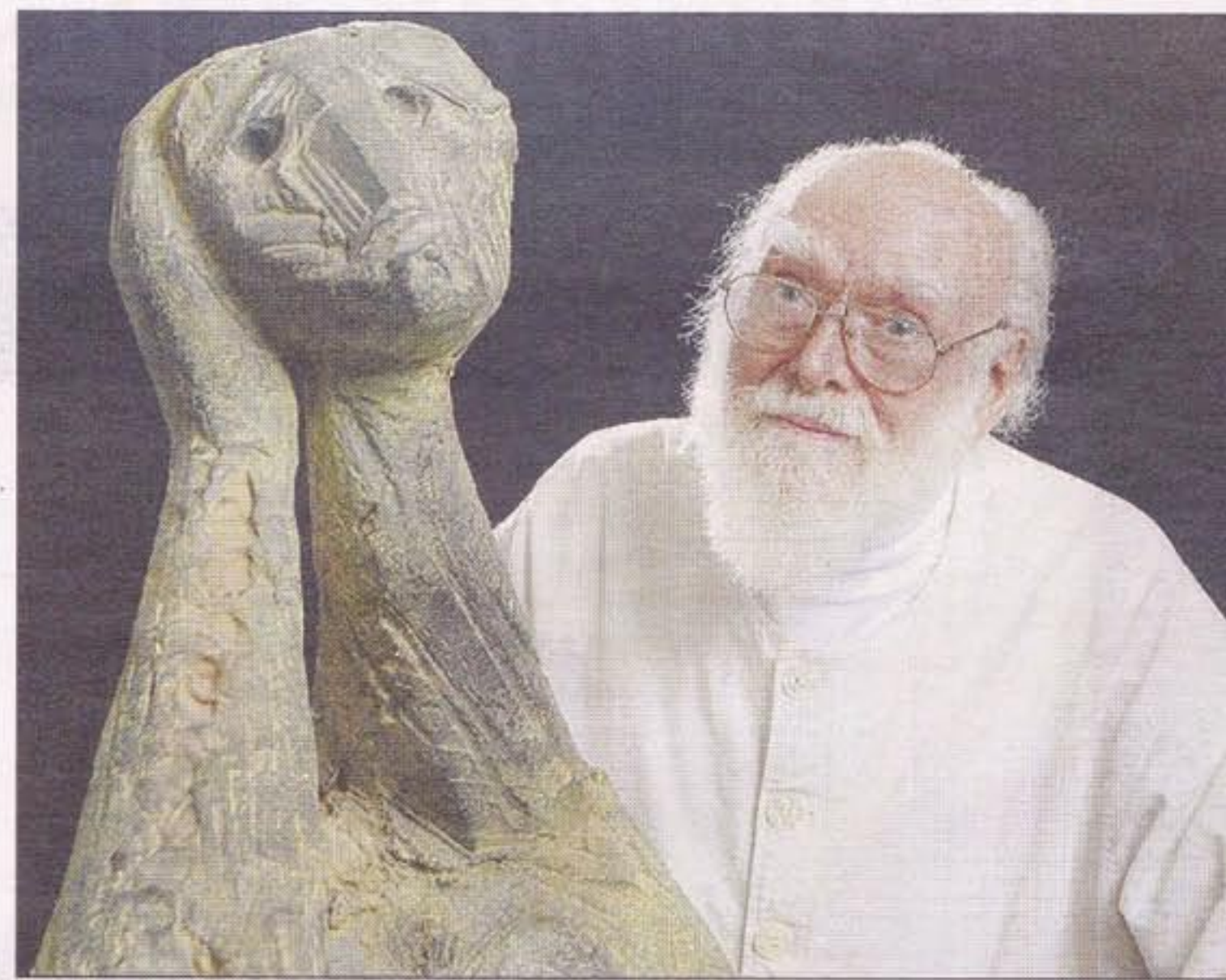
He added: “Inside the Yass church, I found a monumental statue of St Paul. From memory, Bass had discussed this in his letters to the archbishop. He wrote that the family had been listening to ABC radio readings from St Paul at breakfast time and their discussions informed his sculpture. So he showed St Paul working at his trade as a sail-maker, stitching a sail that drapes over his knees. The fall of the cloth resembles the walls and roof of a church, as the sculptor suggests that Paul is stitching together the church with the strong twine of his theology.”

“Here is a virile yet visionary saint; his flowing robes like those of a sculptured 12th century bishop while his sandalled feet recall his missionary journeyings.”

In his eulogy, Tim Bass said his father loved analogies and, in essence, his art was “one long series of analogies for his understanding of the world”.

“Those analogies worked through symbol, form, gesture, the full alphabet of sculptural language,” he said.

“It is a privileged and exacting task to speak of my father. The fact that he was 93, nearly 94, makes it no easier because his life force was as strong at the end as in his youth; in my brother Marco’s words, he had the heart of an ox. Only two weeks ago in a telephone conversation I asked how he was. ‘In rude health’ was his reply. Like the Irishman, he vowed to die healthy – and he did. But his long-protesting body finally forced him to acknowledge mortality. When he went to hospital for the



Clockwise from above: Tom Bass and his sculpture *In That Darkness*; his sculpture of *Edmund Rice*; his *St Paul* in Yass. Photos: Brian McInerney

last time he said to me ‘I am looking forward ...’ He did not need to complete the sentence.”

Tim added: “For such a dramatic figure as Tom, you don’t need a licence for hyperbole, and I’m sure we all have that larger-than-life sense of him. All I can hope is that I point to a few qualities and memories that activate your own, and which today will send him off with a sense of joy that his life’s work meant something beyond a mere career, and was, in fact, an intersection of many lives, traditions and values, a catalyst for something good in our Australian ethos.”

“His final place as an artist is better left to more objective judges than me, though we all know that he literally changed the landscape of Australian cities; one only has to think of *Ethos* in Canberra, the National Library sculpture, his major works in universities, the *Children’s Tree* in Melbourne, and *Circular Quay*.”

Tom Bass was born in 1916 and after various jobs during the Depression and Army service during World War II, began his career as a sculptor after graduating from the National Art School in 1948.

He was greatly influenced by what he had learned from Datillo Rubbo

whose art school he attended in 1937-40 and he also benefited from being taught by Lyndon Dadswell, whose assistant he was in 1949-50. He taught at the National Art School between 1950 and 1953. From 1951-64 he occupied various executive positions with the Sculptors’ Society of which he was a founding member.

Tom’s work as a sculptor has been concerned with communities: schools, universities and government, corporate and religious institutions. His many Catholic works included designing the St Vincent de Paul Society logo (see page 12).

Fr Campion said the Society’s logo is one of the most recognisable Catholic signs in Australia.

“It shows three hands and a cup ... one hand offer the cup, another receiving it and the third, which carries a deep wound, blessing the exchange,” he said. The wounded hand is Christ’s, thus the logo expresses his commission to St Vincent de Paul members ‘As often as you give a cup of water in my name, you give it to me’. This design was done by Tom Bass when he was a St Vincent de Paul man in Minto parish. Now it is everywhere.

“Years later, motoring through Turkey, he saw it on a collection bin

there and he once said that he regarded it as one of the really important things he has done. Each time I see the logo on a St Vincent de Paul shop I am reminded of the sculptor of public meaning who did his work for all of us.”

In the late 40s Tom developed his philosophy of working as a sculptor as being the maker of totemic forms and emblems, that is, work expressing ideas of particular significance to communities or to society at large. Examples of his work include *The Trial of Socrates* and *The Idea of a University* at Wilson Hall, Melbourne University; The winged figure of *Ethos* in Civic Square, Canberra, representing the spirit of the community and the Entrance Sculpture at the National Library, Canberra, representing the idea of Library.

In 1974 he founded his school on Broadway, which was relocated to Erskineville in 1998. His aim at the school was to teach the ideas and fundamental principles of sculpture in a workshop tradition. Over 30 years many people have passed through the school, which has become a unique institution, and his teaching achieved mastery level many years ago.

In 1988, Tom was made a member of the Order of Australia for his services to the arts as a sculptor.

He is survived by his wife Margo and six children.

