

John Foley

British, 1818 - 1874

Caractacus

1860, bronze, 81.0x41.0x30.5 cm
Collection Christchurch Art Gallery Trust



About the work

Caractacus is the name the Romans gave to Caradoc, the King of an ancient British tribe in South Wales from 43 to 50 AD. He fought successfully against the invading Roman armies but, in 50 AD, was finally defeated at Ludlow. For a year Caradoc managed to escape capture but in 51 AD he was taken prisoner, and travelled in chains to Rome. When he was paraded before Claudius, the Emperor was so impressed by the warrior king that he granted his release. He nevertheless remained in Rome until his death in 54 AD.

This type of noble subject, preferably British with classical connections, was very popular in Victorian Britain. At a time when the British Empire was a source of considerable political and economic power in the world, the patriotic use of classical sculptural ideas suited the mood of the times.

This bronze was cast three years after a much larger work of the same subject had been made for the Lord Mayor of London's official residence, Mansion House. This version may well have been cast from a mould John Foley made from some earlier, small-sized studies he made for the Lord Mayor's work. Once the mould had been prepared from Foley's immaculate plaster version several bronze copies could be made.

Foley worked in the classical style favoured by the British and French Academies. Drawing inspiration from the classical sculptures of the Greeks and Romans and the Greek vase paintings, this style aimed at an idealised, unified and graceful beauty. Foley was particularly influenced by the works of the sculptors Antonio Canova (1757-1822) and John Flaxman (1755-1826).

During his art training Foley would have made numerous studies and sketches from plaster casts of Roman classical

works. He would also have sketched from the live model posing in this way for the life study classes.

In *Caractacus*, which is also known as *The Norseman*, Foley pays careful attention to recording faithfully and accurately the model's anatomy and cloak. The overall effect is highly finished and detailed. The almost nude figure allows for an emphasis on the muscles of the warrior, although he is not permitted to become too stocky. Caractacus was a mature man by the time of his ultimate defeat by the Romans but Foley has presented him as much younger. The natural body forms and proportions have been idealised and modified into the formalised beauty that the 5th century BC Greek philosopher, Plato, proposed as the ideal for works of art. This aim of physical perfection became an important element in Academic works in which the highly finished bronze forms would display a consciously high degree of careful craftsmanship or 'finish'.

Foley has *Caractacus* in a pose that was known from classical times as 'contrapposto'. The figure's weight is on the left leg, giving a slight and graceful curve to the main axis of the figure and presenting a more relaxed and convincing stance than a frontal figure standing at attention. The tree trunk at knee height helps to balance the distribution of mass in the sculpture and reinforces the structurally weaker zones around the ankle of the figure. This also was a traditional device, first used by the Greek sculptors working in marble.

Caractacus was gifted by the J.W. Heywood Trust in the early 1900s to the Canterbury Society of Arts permanent collection where it remained until its recent acquisition in 1996.

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About the artist

Foley was born in Dublin in 1818, the son of a grocer. At the age of 13 he studied art at the Royal Society School, Dublin, where he was a highly successful pupil and in 1834 he gained entry to the Royal Academy Schools in London. There he studied under Richard Westmacott (1775-1856), Professor of Sculpture at the Schools. Foley had notable success as a sculptor and soon established a reputation for producing public projects. He executed over 60 statues, busts and monuments and his work is found in England, Scotland, Ireland and India where he produced monuments to Sir Henry Hardinge (1785-1856), one time Governor-General of India, and Sir James Outram (1803-1863) who held the residency at Lucknow for four months during the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and 1858. Foley exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1839 and won the Westminster Palace competitions in 1844. He also took private pupils, including Thomas Brock (1842-1924) and Albert Bruce-Joy (1847-1922).

Foley was a favourite of Queen Victoria and was commissioned by her to make his most celebrated work, the Albert Memorial, in Hyde Park, London. Unfortunately, while he was working on this commission in 1874, he caught a chill and died before the Memorial was completed.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection

Further reading

'John Henry Foley', B. Read, *The Connoisseur*, vol. CLXXXVI, 1974, pp. 262-271.

