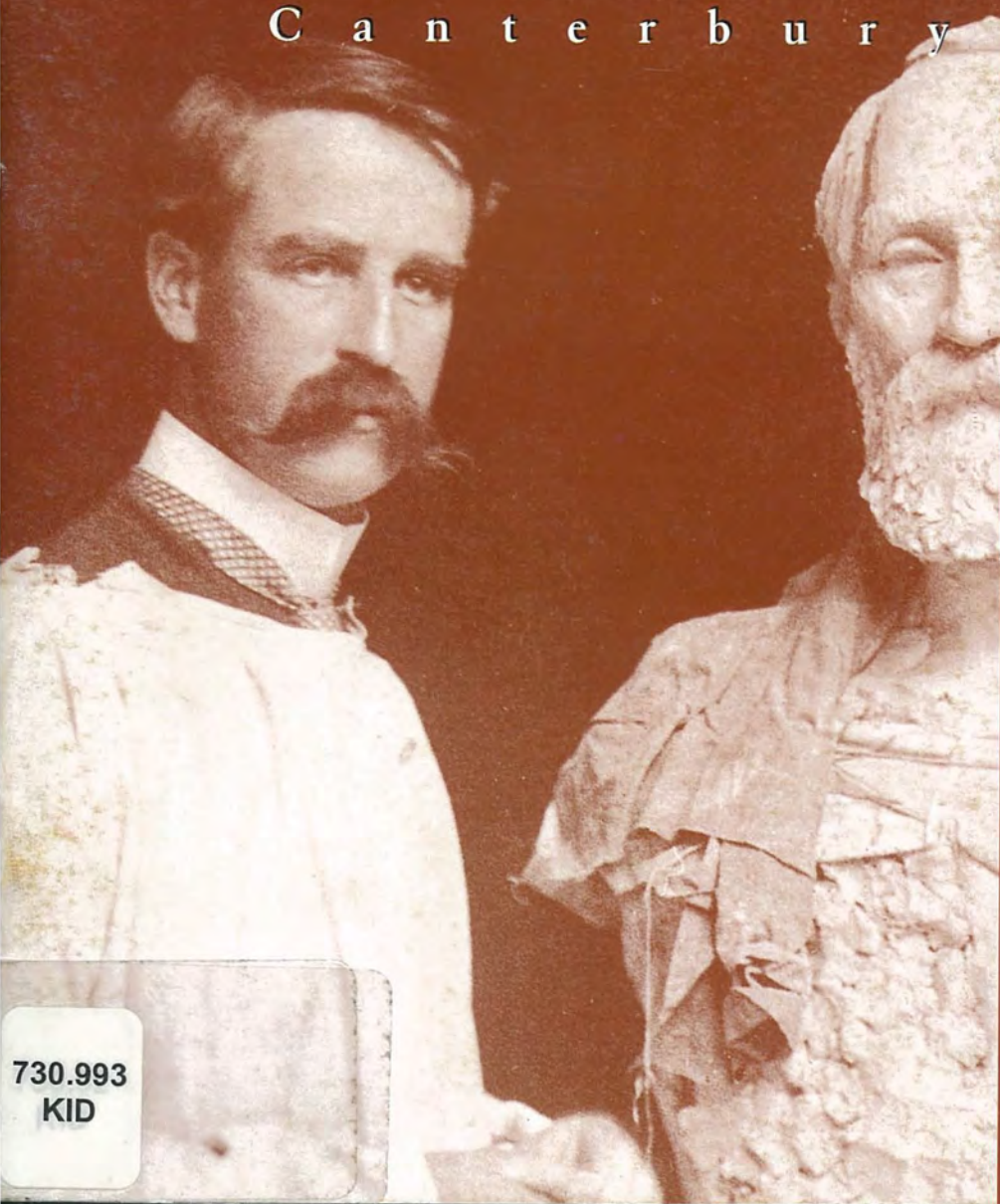


C a n t e r b u r y V i g n e t t e



charles

KIDSON

1867 - 1908

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S e r i e s

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Curator

Neil Roberts

Research Assistant

Peter Vangioni

Editorial Liaison

Merilynne Evans

Photography

Brendan Lee

Design

[**R M A G** inhouse]

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Cover - Charles Kidson modelling the bust of Sir John Hall 1907

charles **KIDSON**

Neil Roberts



Robert McDougall Art Gallery
for Christchurch City Council, Christchurch, New Zealand.



Detail of Grigg Memorial with harvesting relief. 1905.

Today the name of Charles Kidson is not as well known as it was a century ago. His works are held by only one public gallery. Outside of his family there are just two works by which to measure him as a public sculptor. Despite this, Kidson was unquestionably a force in three-dimensional art in Canterbury early last century.

When he arrived in Christchurch, aged just 24 years, he had hopes and aspirations of making his mark as a painter and although he developed a credible facility for handling paint, it was really not his medium. Kidson's true *métier* was in modelling, carving and forming materials rather than applying them to a surface. By 1898 this had been realised and he all but abandoned paint for clay, stone and copper.

His appointment to the staff of the Canterbury College School of Art seems almost providential as it proved to be as

significant for the School as it was for Kidson. Up until the time of his arrival in 1891 there were a few limited classes offered in modelling and carving, but over the next fifteen years he was able to develop this and lay the foundations of a vibrant art craft and sculpture department.

For Kidson, teaching at the School encouraged him to advance his own skills as a sculptor and through his friendship with staff colleague, Samuel Hurst Seager, it enabled him to become involved with two major public memorials and many architectural projects. This in turn contributed to Kidson's acceptance and credibility as an artist so that, by 1900, he was considered a leading sculptor in Canterbury.

Kidson's successful involvement, particularly with the Kaiapoi and Grigg memorials, greatly changed attitudes towards commissioning local sculptors for major public projects. His exhibition of sculpture at the Canterbury Society of Arts Annual Exhibitions from 1897 encouraged the inclusion of that discipline thereafter.

On a more personal level his decision, in 1906, to abandon teaching and live from his work was a courageous move, but proved that it was possible for a professional sculptor in Canterbury to live, even though precariously, as well as a painter could.

As a practitioner, Kidson has been described as 'lacking sculptural innovation', and 'having limitations in technique'.¹ There is substance in such observations. However, it has to be remembered that Kidson's life was very short – just 40 years – and that it was really only during the last nine years of his life that he turned seriously to sculpture. At his death he was still expanding his knowledge of many aspects of his art, continuing to review old methods, explore new techniques plus acquainting himself with, and mastering, new materials. Had Kidson lived another forty years, the observations may have been different. There is no question that he would have been ranked more highly today, but he can only be measured as a sculptor by the few pieces of work that are extant.

Kidson was a traditionalist and quite conventional in his attitude to life, a family man devoted to his wife and children, who had very strong religious convictions. He was, in many respects, more an artisan, the antithesis of the free spirited artist, but he left an indelible impression on the history of Canterbury art that will endure.

Neil Roberts

Curator



Detail of Kaiapoi memorial 1898/99

Early Years 1867 - 1888

Charles Kidson was born on 7 November 1867 at Bilston near Wolverhampton, England, the eldest son of Charles and Christina (nec Oxley) Kidson.² Kidson's father was a blacksmith associated with mining and the family had a tradition of several generations working metal. The Kidson family were Methodists and whilst Charles Kidson's early education from 1873 was at a Dame school, from 1876 he attended the local Wesleyan Church Elementary Day School for a fee of 4 pence per week.³ It was during this time that he showed a certain aptitude for drawing, particularly mechanical drawing, which was encouraged by his mother. When Kidson was 10 he was awarded a first grade prize for geometry in the 1878 annual Education Board examinations.⁴

Charles remained at school until he was 13 after which he went to work for his father, but he had a keenness to study art in Birmingham. At 15 he became apprenticed as a turner with the engineering firm of Tangyes Ltd.⁵ There he gained training, initially in the firm's hydraulic and steam fittings department, then towards 1888 he was working on small parts in iron and steel for small engines.

Soon after his arrival in Birmingham in 1883 he began attending night classes at Birmingham Municipal School of Art in Margaret Street.⁶ Among the classes he took up to 1888 were; Freehand Drawing, Geometry and Perspective Drawing, Model Drawing, Drawing from Casts, Light and Shade and Models. All were taken through the British Education Board's Department of Art and Science at South Kensington and contributed to him being awarded an Art Teacher's Certificate.



Charles Kidson 1907

In 1887 Kidson fell seriously ill with a form of meningitis which caused much concern to his family. By then most of his immediate family were living in New Zealand. Charles Kidson senior had decided to emigrate in 1885 with his wife and family in the hope of better prospects on the other side of the world. When they heard of Kidson's illness, they resolved to get sufficient funds together to secure his passage to New Zealand. At Tangyes' engineering works Kidson's future with the firm was promising but now that he held an Art Teachers Certificate another more appealing avenue was open to him. The decision to leave would not have been made lightly, but his family was successful in persuading him to make the move and that prospects were good. Late in 1888 he sailed for New Zealand arriving early the following year.

New Zealand 1889 - 1903

After his arrival in Nelson, Kidson initially worked with his father, who was by then well established as a blacksmith and metal worker. Kidson's real interest though was to find an art teaching position, but prospects were limited. In 1889 the closest school of art to Nelson was in Christchurch but the staff was small and there were no vacancies. Kidson continued with his work developing his skills in painting and drawing, concentrating mostly on subjects where he could explore his interest in forms such as still life, portraiture and, very occasionally, the landscape.

Nelson had a small but enthusiastic art community that included several professional artists, among them Nina Jones (1871 - 1926), Benjamin Branfill (1828 - 1899), and John H. Nicholson (1855 - 1930) who all assisted in the formation of the Bishopdale Sketching Club, which in 1889 had 14 members. It was a community where Kidson would have easily established a place. However, he was advised to move to Christchurch and in 1891 left Nelson with hopes of a position at Canterbury College School of Art.

In Christchurch he boarded privately in Worcester Street before moving to the home of the Reverend Leonard Whitmore Isitt (1855-1937) who was minister of the East Belt Wesleyan Church from 1892-1895.⁷ He and his brother Francis (Frank) Isitt (1846 - 1916), at that time minister at St John's Wesleyan Methodist Church, Nelson, were fervent prohibitionists and instrumental in the formation of the prohibition movement. Kidson soon became part of the Isitt family⁸ and a member of the East Belt congregation and choir. However, in 1893 he left the Isitt household to live at 102 Gloucester Street with Thomas E. Fraser and his family. Fraser was a commercial printer as were two of his sons, one of whom Kidson encouraged to take night classes at the School of Art and with whom he later worked in a brief partnership. Kidson then began attending the Linwood Wesleyan Church, which was part of the East Belt circuit. His religious convictions and church work were important to him but so was establishing his identity in Christchurch as an artist.

Kidson first exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA) in the April 1891 Annual Exhibition as a Nelson artist, with just one painting titled *No Thoroughfare*, which was a study of a cat and parrot. This work was praised in the *Lyttelton Times* for its care of execution but not for the subject matter. In November of the same year, by which time he had been elected as a working member, he showed a drawing of L. M. Isitt in the Society's third Monochrome and Black and White Exhibition.

He had also been appointed an assistant master at the Canterbury College School of Art. Kidson was one of four staff that also included George Herbert Elliott as Headmaster, Alfred Walsh and Eleanor F. Gee.⁹ In August of 1891 William E. Chapman had resigned to pursue studies overseas, creating a vacancy which Kidson filled. Kidson started his first full year at the School of Art at the beginning of February 1892. The position initially involved taking day and evening classes in painting and drawing but was mostly freehand geometric and perspective drawing, for which he received a remuneration of £100 per annum.¹⁰ Between terms he returned to Nelson to visit his family and fiancée, Kitty Hounsell, a young primary school teacher with whom he corresponded regularly. In 1891 they became engaged but decided to postpone marriage until they had more financial security.

Early in 1892 he sent work to the Auckland Society of Arts for their annual competition and was successful in achieving 2 prizes for his drawings of a head from the antique. Kidson also found time to paint during his return visits to Nelson in the early 1890s. Many of these were landscapes or portraits which he exhibited at either the CSA or Palette Club exhibitions. In April 1893 he showed 3 works at the CSA, all of which received only slight attention in the local newspaper reviews. In late September of that year he showed four paintings with other Palette Club members at the Dunedin Art Club Annual Exhibition. He also exhibited a work in the annual competition at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts.

By 1893 Kidson was also teaching Modelling from Life and Casts. Although classes were small, it was a foundation for three-dimensional arts at the School. An advance occurred in 1894 when Samuel Hurst Seager joined the staff of the art school teaching Architecture and Decorative Design including woodcarving. The arrival of Seager was important for Kidson. As a result of the friendship and mutual respect for each other's abilities, Kidson received many commissions, collaborating with Seager on a number of projects.

Another working relationship that began in the early 1890s was that between Kidson and the Sydenham potter, Luke Adams. Adams threw the body pots on which Kidson worked his designs. Adams then glazed and kiln fired them. Two works from this collaboration, a vase and a tobacco

jar, were exhibited at the Christchurch Industrial Exhibition of 1895. The vase was decorated with designs modelled in low relief based on the plant forms of raupo and pukatea. The neck of this was pierced with traditional Maori motifs. This treatment was also carried out on the neck of the tobacco jar which had the heads of a Maori man and woman modelled on the sides.¹¹ Of the four works that Kidson exhibited at the 1895 CSA Annual Exhibition, the work that gained most attention in the *Lyttelton Times* review was *The Smith* (Cat no 3) which was described as being 'a great advance on anything else by the same artist'.¹² The subject of this painting was Kidson's father, Charles Kidson senior, working in his blacksmith's forge in Nelson.

The following year Kidson completed another painting based on industry titled *The Potter* (Cat no 6) which depicts Luke Adams working at his wheel. When it was shown at the 1896 Annual Exhibition it clearly pleased the reviewer in the *Lyttelton Times* who commented that 'the progress made by Mr C. Kidson is strikingly illustrated in *The Potter*'.¹³

During 1895 Kidson had felt that his financial situation had improved sufficiently for him to marry Kitty Hounsell and during the summer vacation he returned to Nelson where they were married on 7 January 1896. When Kidson returned to Christchurch he and his wife rented a house next to the



The Potter (Luke Adams), oil on canvas board. Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery (cat no 6)



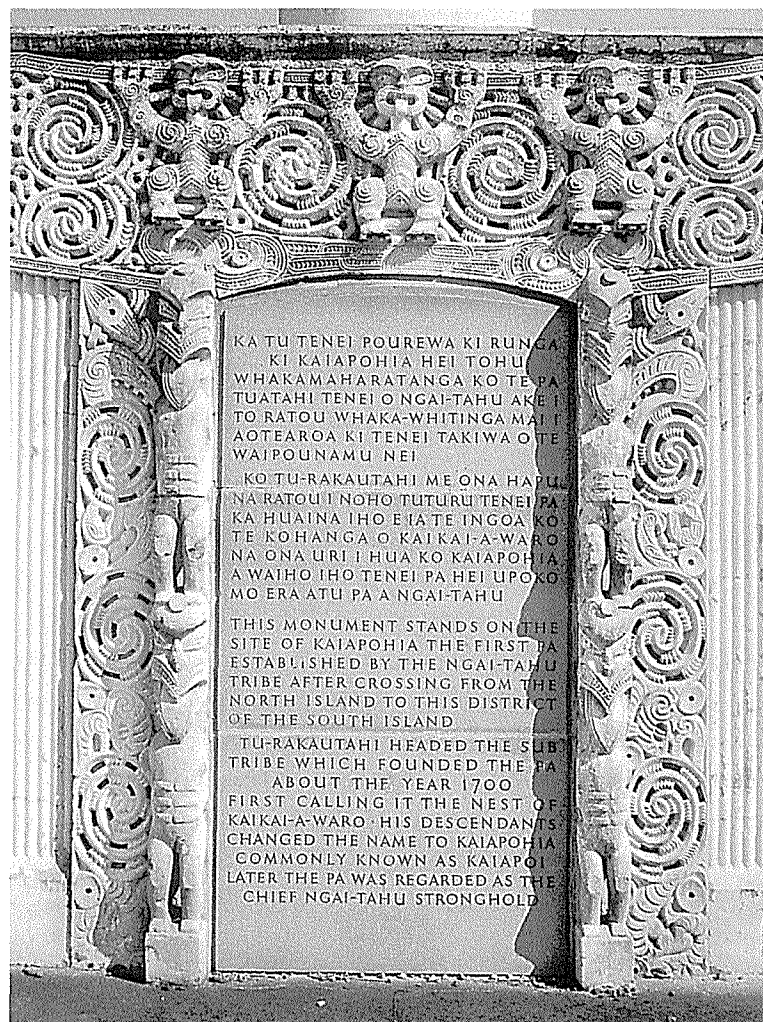
A Nice Catch - Study of Trout, oil on canvas board. Collection: Mr & Mrs Ryder (cat no 7)

in most of the limbs of the statuette breaking off. I went home contemplating suicide, such was my disappointment. However, upon my next visit it was completed even after such an untimely birth".¹⁴ Kidson would have felt the need to increase his experience of modelling, casting and moulding as he was now required to teach this subject at the Art School on Wednesday mornings and Monday evenings.¹⁵ His interest and confidence in sculpture had grown to enable him to exhibit a work of sculpture titled *Thoughts* in the 1897 CSA Annual Exhibition for the first time. The *Lyttelton Times* reviewer remarked glowingly; 'that indeed bears the mark of genius. It pleases one to look upon this; it is like the picture delineated in Roger's *Memories of Italy* -one gazes his fill and comes and comes again, that he may call it up when far away'.¹⁶ Among the other works that Kidson exhibited that year were *Nice Catch (study of trout)* (Cat no 7) and *Fruit* (Cat no 5) of which there was barely mention.

The year 1897 was undoubtedly a turning point in Kidson's career as thereafter he did little painting, focusing primarily on sculpture and metalcraft. There was also a practical aspect in this as there was the prospect of additional work and income to that he received from his Art School salary. Kidson was also desirous to increase his teaching qualifications and began taking the British Education Board examinations

Linwood Wesleyan Methodist Church in Park Road, later Olliviers Road, close to the Cashel Street corner. Being a lay preacher, he often conducted Sunday services there.

In his own home Kidson was able to experiment more, particularly in sculpture, which was becoming a more powerful interest than painting. In 1957 George A. Fraser, a former pupil and friend of Kidson, recalled the first problematic experiments with modelling and casting that Kidson made at his home in Park Road in 1896. "It was a small statuette of a boy modelled in clay and cast in a plaster waste mould" and Fraser remembered assisting to break the casting out of the mould. "I went round to assist in the operation of chipping the cast from the figure. I will never forget that night, as proceedings went very ill. The outer coating was too thick and the attempts to chip it off resulted



Entrance to the Kaiapoi Memorial 1898/99, Mt Somers stone.

through the Department of Art and Science at South Kensington, London for an Art Master's Certificate.¹⁷

Around this time he received his first public commission to carve the decorative details for the memorial to Ngai Tahu to be positioned on the site of the Kaiapoi Pa sacked and burned by Ngai Toa chief, Te Rauparaha in 1832. The impetus for the memorial was the work of local runanga and missionary writer, Reverend Canon James West Stack (1835 - 1919). Stack had been in charge of the Mission at Tuahiwi in the 1860s and in 1893 had published 'Kaiapohia- The story of a Seige'. The local runanga had approached Stack to advise on the memorial. A committee of Kaiapoi Maori was set up and Samuel Hurst Seager was invited to prepare designs for the committee. On 21 October 1898 the foundation stone for the memorial was laid. The following month it was reported that Seager had met with the Kaiapoi Maori committee who had accepted his modified design.¹⁸ His final design took the form of a round column obelisk 9 metres high and a metre in diameter topped by an atua emblematic guardian of the tribe. The obelisk stood over earthworks under which there was a grotto; the entrance to this was to be decorated to resemble the doorway of a Maori meeting house. Flanking the buttressing to the earthworks were two additional tribal guardian figures. The estimated cost of the memorial had originally been £150 but by 1898 had risen to £350.



Kaiapoi Memorial 1998/99. Mt Somers stone.

Subscription fundraising was slow and it did not look as though the project would be easily realised. However, work was to proceed and the building firm of Graham and Greig were contracted to construct the memorial in concrete and Mt Somers stone and Kidson, through Seager's recommendation, was given the task of carving the three guardian figures and the entrance to the grotto. Kidson prepared for his work by studying carefully Maori design and carving illustrated in Dr Augustus Hamilton's recently published book, 'Maori Art'.¹⁹ Over the summer of 1898/99 he worked on the blocks of stone in Graham and Greig's St Asaph Street yard.

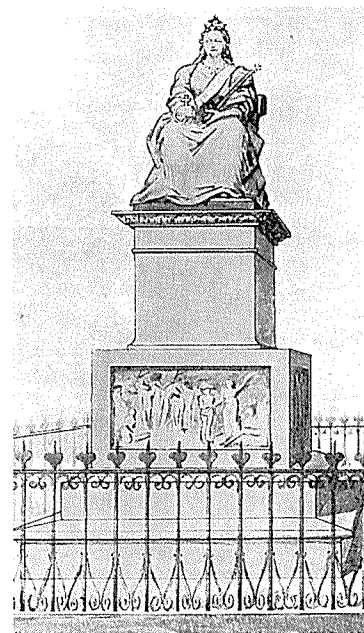
The most intricate piece on the memorial was the grotto entrance architrave. The carving of the lintel and side posts must have presented Kidson with quite a challenge, which he met with admirable success even though the carving had its critics. The memorial was finally completed in March 1899 and was unveiled by the Prime Minister, Richard John Seddon on 3 April.²⁰ Although the proceedings and speeches were reported at considerable length by the local press, no mention was made of Kidson. In a real sense though, this project had been important for him and was somewhat of a test piece as he had proven to Seager that not only was he a very capable modeller but he was also a competent carver. Seager who had taught classes in woodcarving at the School

of Art must have been impressed and from that point on Kidson was to be his choice whenever carving for architectural details was required for new Seager designed buildings.

During the years that Kidson had been associating with the Isitts he had also got to know other members of the prohibitionist movement well including one of its most vociferous campaigners, T. E. Taylor. In 1896 Taylor had persuaded his friend L.M. Isitt and business partner, Herbert Cole, to form a syndicate to purchase a block of land that had become available on Cashmere facing Dyers Pass Road. Taylor and Cole had new houses completed by mid 1897 and were keen that other friends of their persuasion should join them on the hill. Kidson was approached by Taylor and in 1898 agreed to join the community of prohibition supporters. Samuel Hurst Seager drew up design plans for a house that incorporated a studio workshop and by the beginning of the following year Kidson, his wife and their first child, had left Linwood for Cashmere. Kidson made many of the decorative features for the new home including ornamental hinges and copper panels on the decorative fireplace surround.

By then a horse tram service was in place to the foot of the hills but Kidson usually cycled down Colombo Street into the city. On this daily journey he passed the premises of Luke Adams who was still a good friend and often assisted with terracotta firing of his modelled peices and those of students. Among his exhibits at the 1899 CSA exhibition was a terracotta grotesque head which Luke Adams likely fired. In 1899 Kidson was elected to the Canterbury Society of Arts Council and was to continue to be re-elected for the next eight years.

As Canterbury approached a new century there was much discussion about a possible memorial to commemorate the approaching Jubilee. Early in 1900 meetings were held to discuss what form this would take, but it was eventually decided that it should be sculptural and that it should acknowledge, not only the progress of Canterbury, but also Queen Victoria as the symbol of the Empire plus recognise the fallen at the South African War. This tripartite feature was to be fundamental to the design. It is not known how Kidson became involved with this project but on 10 October 1900 the *Weekly Press* published four of his design drawings for the proposed Jubilee Memorial but failed to get his name correct,



*Proposed design for the Canterbury Jubilee
Memorial 1900 (Weekly Press photo)*



Dawn 1902, marble. Collection of Michael Kidson (cat no 13)

ascribing the artist as being Walter Kitson. Two months later when one of the designs was republished they published his surname correctly but not his Christian name. For some reason he was mistakenly referred to on a number of occasions as Walter Kidson, not only in the press but also in exhibition catalogues. The outcome was that Kidson's design was not adopted and eventually the British sculptor Francis John Williamson was engaged to design and sculpt the statue and relief panels for the memorial.²¹

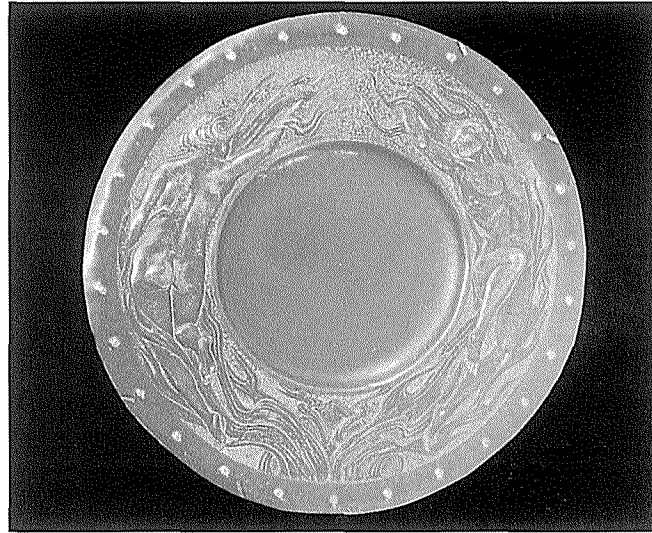
At this time Kidson was developing his skills in repoussé with the result that in 1901 he was teaching this as part of the decorative design course at the School of Art. He was also engaged in preparing designs and making decorative features for several of the homes that Seager designed. One of these was Daresbury Rookery built in 1901 for George Humphreys for which Kidson designed a brass frieze with a rata plant motif.

Although Kidson had mastered the traditional techniques of metalcraft and metal craft design, there were techniques such as enamelling that he was less experienced in and felt that he could benefit from further training. With this in view he applied to Canterbury College for six months leave of absence to travel to Britain to study and talk with various art craft practitioners. His leave was granted and on 9 July 1903 he departed as a third class passenger from Lyttelton on the NZ Shipping Company's RMS *Ruapehu* bound for London. The ship took its usual course across the Pacific, around the Horn, stopping off at Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro and Tenerife.²² Apart from a not uncommon stormy passage around the Horn, the trip was largely uneventful.

Trip to Britain 1903

Kidson arrived in London late in August and went to board with his brother who was then a teacher in voice production.²³ In London he took no time in visiting all the major art galleries and the sculpture galleries of the British Museum. He attended exhibitions of work by decorative artists and examined craft displayed in stores such as Liberty's. At the end of the summer his sightseeing gave way to serious study. Before leaving Christchurch Kidson had been given a letter of introduction to the Keeper of the National Gallery, Hawes Turner. On visiting him an introduction was made to the sculptor George Frampton and Lawrence Turner, a noted architectural modeller and carver. Kidson spent some time in Turner's workshops improving his knowledge of carving, modelling and plasterer's techniques. Frampton, then a leading adviser on art education, spent time in the studio with Kidson offering his help. On Frampton's advice he joined evening classes at London County Council's Central School of Arts and Crafts, in Regent Street studying Modelling under Roscoe Mullin from 7 - 9.30pm three nights a week and Drawing from Life two nights a week under H. Wilson. The response from both of his tutors was good.

At the South Kensington School of Art he took a full day course of instruction in wood carving over two weeks with Herbert C. Grimwood. One of Kidson's prime objectives was to improve on his techniques of art metal craft enamelling. Initially he had some difficulty finding instruction but was eventually able to take classes in repoussé and enamelling at the Camden Town School of Art. As part of his trip he also intended studying art education and began by visiting Education Board Schools in London at South Kensington that taught only applied and fine arts and schools such as the Slade School, which aimed at only training artists. He visited a number of other provincial schools in England including his old school, the Birmingham School of Art where he was greatly impressed by the advance in training.²⁴



Flame Figure Plate c 1904, copper. Collection: Brian Kidson (cat no 9)

Before returning to New Zealand Kidson spent an intense week of gallery sightseeing in Paris. His correspondence home indicated that he greatly enjoyed his visit to England, especially London, but after 3 months there it was soon time to leave. On 22 November he travelled to Plymouth and the following day boarded RMS *Corinthic* for New Zealand. The voyage was via the Cape and Australia docking in Wellington on 6 January 1904. He then boarded the *Mararoa* for Lyttelton arriving home in Christchurch the following day. His trip had been worthwhile and at the conclusion of his report to the Canterbury College Board of Governors he wrote 'I feel that altogether my trip has been of the greatest benefit to me'.²⁵ In the months that followed he was able to exercise more fully the experience he had gained and 1904 was to prove to be a busy year.

1904 - 1908

During Kidson's absence at the School of Art other relieving staff had been brought in. One of these was George Fraser, a friend and former student. Fraser taught the repoussé classes part-time while still maintaining his principal job as a printer. After his return Kidson was keen to advance the skills and knowledge of new techniques, particularly in enamelling, that he had gained while overseas. To this end he asked Fraser if he would work in partnership with him in a small art craft business. Fraser agreed and gave up his job as a printer and turned one room of his Aylmer Street house into a workshop for which Kidson acquired a muffle furnace so enamelling could be done.²⁶

Kidson continued his full-time position at the School of Art. It had become more demanding with the expansion of decorative applied art courses that now included Modelling, Casting, Carving, Repoussé work, Tinsmith's Geometry and Pattern Drawing, and Principles and Practice of Decorative Design as well as classes in Painting and Drawing.²⁷ His schedule of evening and day classes left limited time for his own work. At first the venture with Fraser looked promising and there was no shortage of work for them. One of the projects undertaken was the repoussé relief memorial plaque to Helen Connon who had died the previous year. This was commissioned by Christchurch Girls' High School.

The Kidson and Fraser metalcraft venture lasted only a short time and many years later Fraser recalled the reason for its demise, blaming competition from mechanisation 'about this time machine- embossing work began to come in and the general run of people saw no difference between this and hand-beaten work. The result was that the prospects of a business for beaten work were not too rosy'. The income was also small 'eventually the financial returns from our business proved too slender for me to remain in it, - my share in the venture turned out to be thirty shillings a week, an impossible sum, even at that time to run a home on. Even this sum was only made possible through the generosity of my partner'.²⁸

As well as his teaching and commitments to Fraser, Kidson was also undertaking architectural commissions from Seager. One of the more complex of these projects in 1904 was to carve the decorative detailing for the facade of the new Christchurch Meat Company building in Hereford Street. Kidson also carved part of the pulpit for the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Barbadoes Street. However, by far the most important project that Kidson became involved in 1904 was the Ashburton memorial to the Canterbury pioneer farmer John Grigg who had made a magnificent estate out of swamp. Grigg died in November 1901. A proposal was put forward to the Ashburton County Council and a public subscription list was begun by the citizens of Ashburton to raise the necessary funds for a memorial statue. Initially it had been thought that a prominent British sculptor might be commissioned but that was quickly found to be too costly and thoughts turned to finding someone locally. As a result Samuel Hurst Seager was approached and agreed to design the memorial. He in turn engaged Kidson to carry out the carving under his direction. The memorial design was dominated by the figure of Grigg standing bareheaded, a coat over his arm and a stick in his hand with raupo reeds and drainpipes beneath his feet. The four corner buttresses supporting the base of the statue represented the four virtues, Industry, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice and on the plinth of the statue three bas-relief panels depicting the farming pursuits of ploughing, harvesting, and shearing. A fourth panel bore an inscription. This was to be the major project to occupy much of Kidson's spare time during 1905. By March he had prepared a model of the memorial and had begun working on the relief panels. Both the model and the relief panel 'shearing' were exhibited at the Canterbury Society of Arts in April. Most of the memorial was eventually sculpted from Sydney sandstone with the relief panels cut from grey Westland sandstone which Kidson worked on at his Cashmere studio.



John Grigg Memorial, Ashburton, 1905.



Charles Kidson teaching at the Canterbury College School of Art c1905. (Webb & Bunz photo).

Seager had helped confirm Kidson's position among his contemporaries as Christchurch's leading sculptor and stood him in good stead for future public projects.

At the beginning of 1906 Robert Herdman Smith took up his position as the new head of the Canterbury College School of Art. It is not known how he and Kidson responded to one another but what is evident is that Herdman Smith did not support him in his request to the Canterbury College Board to have his salary raised to £200 per annum, a figure being paid to several other staff. The outcome was that Kidson resigned on the 31 March and left his teaching position.³² Most of the work that he had done in establishing the art craft classes at the school went unrecognised, and in fact, was spoken of somewhat disparagingly publicly by Herdman Smith.³³ Whilst Frederick Gurnsey, who followed in Kidson's place, made some remarkable advances in the years that followed, more credit has to be given to Kidson for laying the foundations on which others built.

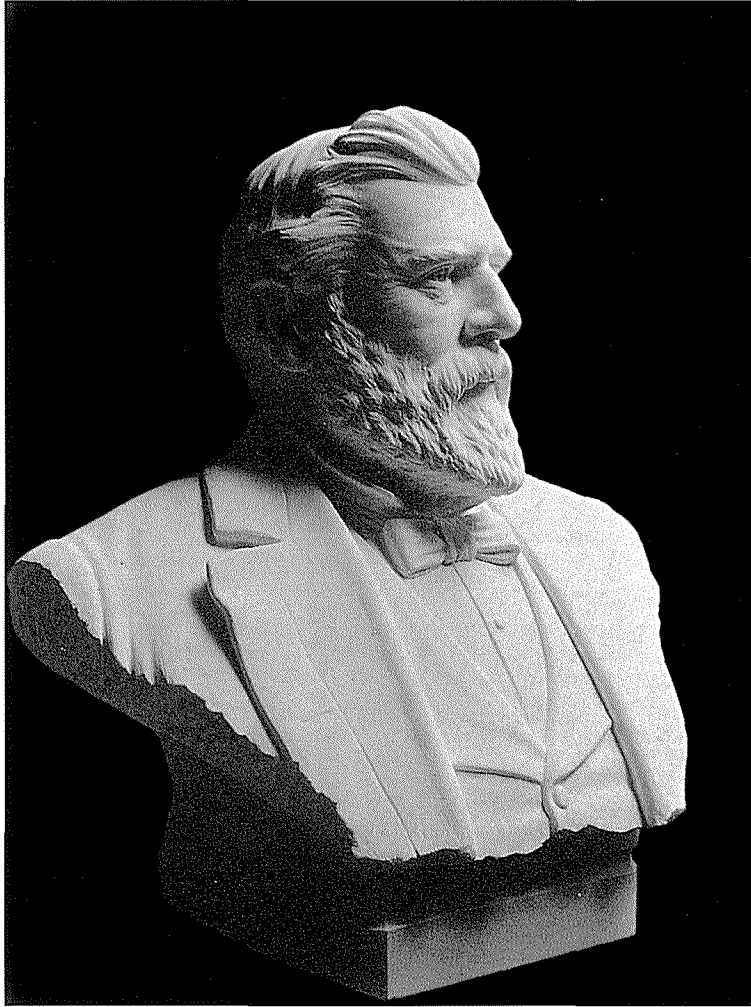
In 1957 George Fraser recalled how the image for one of the relief panels came about: "one of the reliefs for this work, *Harvesting*, was modelled from a photograph I took of Charles Kidson in a field of stooks on the east side of Colombo Street at the foot of Dyers Pass Road."²⁹ He also had recollections of the sculpting of the 2.4metre statue of Grigg; "I have a vivid impression of seeing him chiseling the main figure and using a pointing machine in the studio at the bottom of his garden".³⁰ By the end of September 1905 most of Kidson's work for the memorial was finished and the contractors, Graham and Greig, began its construction in Baring Square. When finished, the memorial stood 6 metres high and had cost £720. At its unveiling on Anniversary Day 16 December, speakers eulogised about Grigg but also paid compliments to the designer and sculptor who had made what was declared to be 'the first important piece of sculpture to have been made in Christchurch'.³¹ There was truth in that remark as up to that time all of Canterbury's public commemorative sculpture had been designed and sculpted in Britain. The success of this work and the collaboration with

The major art event of 1906 was the New Zealand International Exhibition, which had a very strong arts and craft section. But surprisingly Kidson's only work in it was a patinated plaster bust of a Maori chief (cat no 16) thought to represent the spirit of Te Rauparaha which he modelled and cast. It recalled something of the 1899 Kaiapoi Memorial project. Whilst nothing of his own metal craft was shown, it was certainly in evidence among the work displayed by his current and former students. One former student, Alice Waymouth, exhibited 22 pieces, including beaten metal frames, bowls, spoons, boxes, decorated silver vessels, and enamelled jewellery.³⁴ The work shown by students within the Canterbury College School of Art display had a very striking craft art presence, which bore a clear indication of Kidson's influence and success he had had as a teacher over the previous 15 years.

During 1906 Kidson had worked on several portrait busts of his friends which he modelled in clay then cast in plaster. Among them were Tom E. Taylor and the Reverend Frank W. Isitt. The bust of T. E. Taylor (cat no 17) was later sent to Britain and a casting made in bronze for the Christchurch City Council.

For many years Kidson had tried to juggle his teaching with the increasing demands of private work. His resignation from the School of Art meant that he could now focus on the demands of this alone. There are indications that for the second half of 1906 Kidson earned little more from private work than he would have done teaching for the same period.³⁵ However, in the following year the number of commissions increased and his prospects seemed brighter. During the first six months of 1907 he earned £140 from his work.³⁶

Kidson had many orders for domestic fittings such as fingerplates, hinges, panels for overmantels, lead light windows, as well as a full range of other metal craft items that varied from fireplace fenders to napkin rings. In addition he sold work on commission through the company of Ogle and Leach. As well as his work in metal, Kidson continued to make sculpture and early in 1907 he cut, in marble, a small portrait bust of his two year old daughter Elsa, *Daughter of Eve* (cat no 15). When this work was exhibited at the CSA Annual Exhibition in May of that year it aroused much interest. A prominent Wellington auctioneer, land agent and art collector, Thomas Kennedy MacDonald, expressed a keen interest in the piece prior to the exhibition opening on 30 May and in conversation with James Jamieson, who was one of the vice-presidents of the society, agreed to purchase it. Jamieson, in his efforts to secure a sale for Kidson, had not realised that another vice-president, the Honorable E.C. J. Stevens, was also keen to purchase it and present it to the CSA for its collection. MacDonald eventually gracefully withdrew his claim to the work but Kidson, though not responsible for the incident, wrote an apology to MacDonald concluding 'The satisfactory part of it is that a well-known lover of art like yourself should have been pleased by the little bust'.³⁷

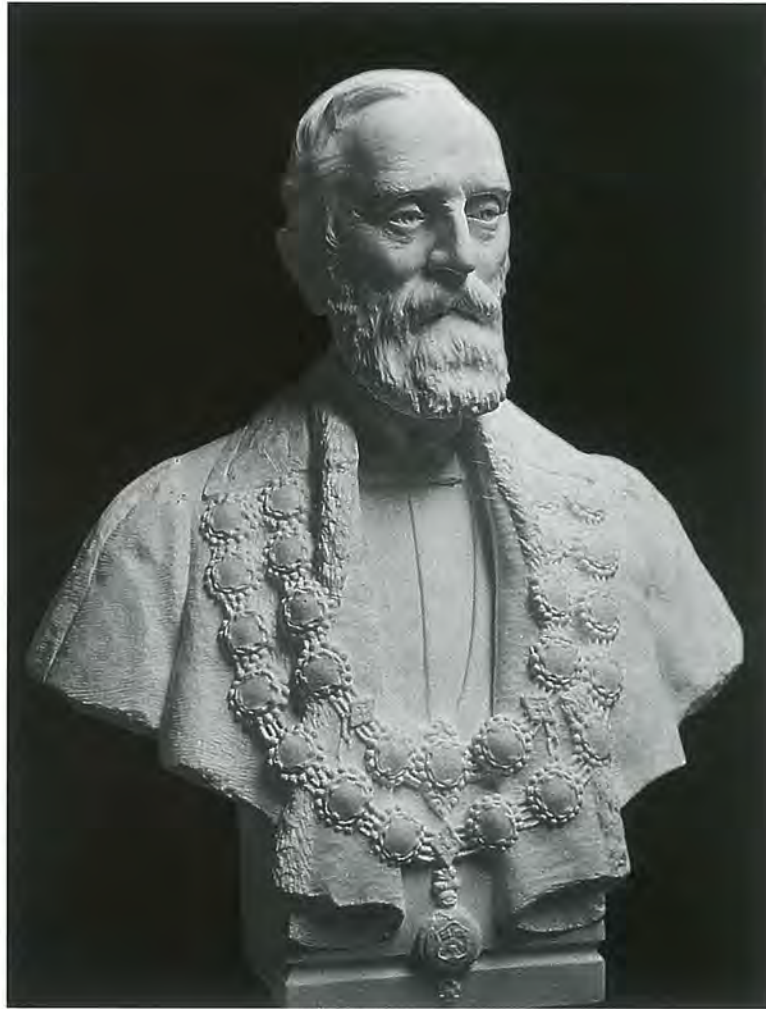


Portrait bust of Richard John Seddon, 1907. Marble. Destroyed 1942.

In June of 1906 the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, Richard John Seddon, died. A number of his parliamentary colleagues were keen to have a bust made of him to join those of other former Prime Ministers in Parliament Buildings. Kidson was keen to secure the commission and had the support of members of parliament. Tom E. Taylor, George Laurenson plus architect Samuel Hurst Seager, wrote many letters to Sir Joseph Ward, the then Prime Minister, recommending Kidson for the project. Working from photographs of Seddon, Kidson modelled and cast a plaster bust that was then sent to Wellington where it was placed on display in the lobby of the House of Representatives for the consideration of Ward and other members. In a letter to Ward he appealed for the commission to go to a local artist. 'I feel strongly that if possible the honour of such a commission should go to those struggling in our little community to make progress in art'.³⁸ Kidson offered to make the bust in marble for £60. Despite Ward's total disinterest in the matter, the project was finally approved. However, Kidson had to wait for marble from Italy and there were delays of many months before he could begin work. The Seddon bust was finally completed towards the end of 1907 and was installed in Parliament Buildings surviving until 1942 when it toppled from its pedestal during an earthquake.

In 1907 Kidson also worked on a bust of the Honorable E.C.J. Stevens, a long time supporter of the Canterbury Society of Arts. Stevens was President of the Society from 1893 – 1901. The Stevens bust (cat no18) was modelled and cast in plaster by November 1907, and was later sent to London for cutting in marble by British sculptor Andrea Carlo Lucchesi. When the modelled study was exhibited at the CSA Annual Exhibition in March of 1908, it was described merely as being; 'a good likeness, well modelled'.³⁹

Among Kidson's other portrait commissions of 1907 was a portrait bust of the Honorable G. Fowlds, Minister of Education and Health in the Ward government. He made this after taking measurements in the station master's office of Christchurch Railway Station while Fowlds was passing through early in May. The clay model was shown with another clay bust of Frank Isitt at the 1907 Annual Exhibition. Neither work received any notice from the press. But by far the most significant commission of that year was from the Christchurch City Council to do a commemorative bust of Sir John Hall, former Member of Parliament and Mayor of Christchurch, who had died on 25 June. As with the Seddon bust, Kidson had to rely on photographs but he achieved a good likeness. Also, as with the Stevens bust, the plaster was shipped overseas for copying in marble.



Portrait bust of Sir John Hall, 1907. Marble. Christchurch City Council collection.

Other projects in 1907 and 1908 included architectural detail work, amongst which was a relief bust of Richard John over the entrance doorway to the new Christchurch Technical College in Barbadoes Street and the Christchurch Press building in Cathedral Square which was built during 1908.

Early in 1908 Kidson began having difficulties with his vision and it was to prove to be a warning of the onset of a more serious medical condition, Bright's disease, which eventually claimed his life on 2 October. He was just 40 years of age. Following his death his Methodist friends gathered at Rhodes Memorial Home, Cashmere to hold a memorial service for him with a sermon delivered by his friend and neighbour T. E. Taylor.¹⁰

Over the twenty years that Kidson practiced as an artist, his output, apart from the last 4 years of his life, was not high and less than 40 works have survived. But during that time his contribution to craft art in particular was considerable and he proved that it was not necessary to call on overseas sculptors to carry out public memorial projects as there was sufficient ability locally. He helped break this lack of confidence in New Zealand artists.

Notes

- 1 Michael Dunn: *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 3 1901-1920 p261
- 2 Certificate of birth
- 3 Elsa Kidson: *Charles Kidson 1867-1908* (unpublished)
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *Wises New Zealand Post Office Directories 1892-1894*
- 8 Quoted in a letter from George Fraser to Elsa Kidson 1957.
- 9 *Prospectus Canterbury College School of Art 1891*
- 10 *Headmaster's Report Canterbury College School of Art 1892 - Appendices to the journal of the House of Representatives 1892.*

- 11 M. Mosely: Christchurch Industrial Exhibition 1895 Record p86.
- 12 Lyttelton Times 16 April 1895 p3.
- 13 Lyttelton Times 29 May 1896 p5.
- 14 George Fraser in a letter to Elsa Kidson 1957.
- 15 Prospectus Canterbury College School of Art 1896
- 16 Lyttelton Times 27 March 1897 p3.
- 17 Examination results of South Kensington Department of Art and Science, London, 1897-1900 (RMAG archives).
- 18 The Press 17 November 1898 p5.
- 19 Elsa Kidson: Charles Kidson 1867-1908 (unpublished) p9.
- 20 The Press 4 April 1899 p5.
- 21 Art New Zealand No 61. M. Stocker: Francis John Williamson. P73
- 22 Elsa Kidson: Charles Kidson 1867-1908 (unpublished) p9.
- 23 Report by Charles Kidson to Canterbury College Board of Governors, 9 May UCSFA archives 1991.1. item [50].
- 24 *ibid.*
- 25 Prospectus Canterbury College School of Fine Arts 1904.
- 26 Quoted by George Fraser in a letter to Elsa Kidson 1957.
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 *ibid.*
- 30 *ibid.*
- 31 Canterbury Times, 3 January 1906 p 38
- 32 Elsa Kidson - Charles Kidson 1867 - 1908 (unpublished)
- 33 Quoted by George Fraser in a letter to Elsa Kidson 1957
- 34 Official Catalogue of the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906 - 1907 Fine Art Section pp. 6 - 7
- 35 Elsa Kidson - Charles Kidson 1867 - 1908 p 9
- 36 *ibid.*
- 37 *ibid.*
- 38 Letter to Sir Joseph Ward 1906
- 39 Lyttelton Times 28 March 1908 p 10
- 40 Obituary The Press 3 October 1908 p 9
- 41 Quoted by George Fraser in a letter to Elsa Kidson 1957

Painting and Drawing

- 1 *Old Tramway Nelson* 1889
Oil on canvas/board
463 x 287mm
Collection: Brian Kidson
(Exhibited CSA 1894)
- 2 *Portrait of a Girl* 1894
Oil on canvas/board
370 x 420mm
Collection of Genevieve Kidson
- 3 *The Smith (Charles Kidson senior)* 1895
Oil on canvas
1036 x 746mm
Collection: Kidson family
(Exhibited CSA 1895)
- 4 *Untitled Landscape c* 1895
Oil on board
289 x 414mm
Collection: Brian Kidson
- 5 *Fruit c* 1896
Oil on canvas
336 x 444mm
Collection: Kidson family
- 6 *The Potter (Luke Adams)* 1896
Oil on canvas
1032 x 732mm
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
(Exhibited CSA 1896)
- 7 *A Nice Catch (study of trout)* 1897
Oil on canvas
497 x 600mm
Collection of Mr G. D. Ryder & Mrs M. E. Ryder
(Exhibited CSA 1897)
- 8 *Sunflowers* 1897
Oil on canvas
675 x 495mm
Collection: Brian Kidson
(Exhibited CSA 1897)
- 9 *Still Life with Violin Book and Manuscript c* 1897
Oil on canvas
305 x 434mm
Collection: Mr & Mrs Currie
- 10 *River Scene c* 1897
Watercolour
250 x 805mm
Collection of Michael Kidson
- 11 *Self Portrait* 1895
Pencil on paper
232 x 187mm (framed)
Collection: Brian Kidson

Sculpture

- 12 *Mrs. Kidson* 1898
Plaster
398 x 154 x 190mm
Collection: Brian Kidson
(Exhibited CSA 1898)
- 13 *Dawn* 1902
Plaster
277x390mm
Collection of Micheal Kidson
- 14 *Dawn* 1902
Marble relief with copper surround
374 x 480 x 70mm
Collection: Mr & Mrs Currie
(Exhibited CSA 1902)
- 15 *Daughter of Eve* 1906
Marble
293 x 276 x 197mm
Robert McDougall Art Gallery
(Exhibited CSA 1906)
- 16 *Maori Bust (Te Rauparaha)* 1906
Plaster (patinated)
410 x 292 x 180mm
Collection: Brian Kidson
(Exhibited at the New Zealand International Exhibition 1906-07)
- 17 *Portrait of T. E. Taylor* 1906
Bronze (cast in Britain)
520 x 230 x 230mm
Collection: Robert McDougall Art Gallery
(Exhibited at CSA 1906)
- 18 *E.C.J. Stevens* 1907
Marble
755 x 625 x 335mm
Collection: Canterbury Society of Arts Charitable Trust, Centre
of Contemporary Art (Exhibited at CSA 1908)
- 19 *Sir John Hall* 1908
Marble
750 x 630 x 310mm
Collection: Christchurch City Council

Metalwork

- 20 *Bas Relief* 1902
 Repoussé copper
 342 x 339 x 18mm
 Collection: Mr & Mrs Currie
 (Exhibited at the CSA 1902)
- 21 *Salver* 1904
 Repoussé copper
 410 x 15mm
 Collection: Mr & Mrs Currie
- 22 *Wall Plaque* c 1904
 Repoussé copper
 260 x 152mm
 Collection: Mr & Mrs Currie
- 23 *Frog Plate* c1904
 Repoussé copper set with paua shell
 342 x 339 x 18mm
 Collection: Brian Kidson
- 24 *Flame Figure Plate* 1906
 Repoussé copper
 370mm (diameter) x 20mm
 Collection: Brian Kidson
- 25 *Door Plate (Adam and Eve motif)* 1906
 Repoussé copper
 240 x 192 x 4mm
 Collection: Brian Kidson
- 26 *Peacock Plate*
 Repoussé copper
 474mm diameter (irregular)
 Collection: Mr R.J. Eltoft

- 1867 Born 7 November Bilston in the English Midlands, son of Charles and Christina Kidson.
- 1873 Begins education at a Dame school.
- 1876 Wesleyan Church Day School.
- 1878 Awarded an elementary school prize in geometry.
- 1881 Began working in his father's blacksmith shop.
- 1883 Joins the engineering firm of Tangyes Ltd., Birmingham as a turner.
- 1884 Begins night classes at Birmingham School of Art.
- 1885 Charles Kidson, senior, and family emigrate to New Zealand and settle in Nelson.
- 1887 Kidson becomes ill. Awarded an Art Teacher's Certificate.
- 1888 Leaves England for New Zealand.
- 1889 Living in Nelson.
- 1891 Moves to Christchurch.
 Becomes a working member of the Canterbury Society of Arts and exhibits 1 work.
 Attends classes at Canterbury College School of Art.
 Begins teaching at Canterbury College School of Art at the beginning of term III as an assistant master.
 Kidson becomes engaged to marry.
- 1892 Awarded 2 prizes in the Auckland Society of Arts student competition.
 Begins boarding with L. M. Isitt and family.
- 1893 Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition.
 Begins boarding with the Fraser family.
 Exhibits at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts.
- 1894 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition.
- 1895 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition including *The Smith* (Cat no 3).
 Works with Luke Adams on designs for ceramics.
 Exhibits at the Art and Industry Exhibition.

- 1896 January 7 marries Kitty Eleanor Hounsell at Nelson.
 Exhibits 4 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition including *The Potter* (cat no 6).
 Living at Park Road, Linwood.
- 1897 Begins taking Department of Art and Science, South Kensington, London examinations for an Art Master's Certificate.
 Exhibits 5 works (including sculpture) at the CSA Annual Exhibition.
- 1898 Exhibits 5 works of sculpture at the CSA Annual Exhibition.
 Commissioned to make the Kaiapoi Memorial.
 Son, Charles Idrys, is born.
- 1899 Moves to live in Cashmere.
 Exhibits 5 works at CSA Annual Exhibition.
 Completes the Kaiapoi Memorial.
 Son, Edward Winton, born.
 Elected to the Council of the Canterbury Society of Arts.
- 1900 Exhibits in the Canterbury Jubilee Exhibition.
 Prepares designs for the Jubilee Memorial.
 Achieves Art Master's Certificate.
- 1902 Exhibits 2 works at CSA including *Dawn* (cat no 14) and Study in Beaten Copper.
- 1903 Exhibits 2 works at CSA Annual Exhibition.
 9 July leaves New Zealand and travels to England on SS Ruapehu.
 Leaves Plymouth on R M S Corinthic on 23 November.
- 1904 Arrives in Wellington on 6 January.
 Exhibits 9 works at CSA.
 Commissioned to do the Grigg Memorial.
 Begins a partnership with George A. Fraser in a small metalcraft business in Aylmer Street.
 Carves decorative features for the facade of the Christchurch Meat Co. building.
 Works a memorial to Helen Cannon for Christchurch Girls' High School.
- 1905 Exhibits 2 works at CSA Annual Exhibition.
 Completes Grigg Memorial for Ashburton.
 Daughter, Elsa Beatrice, born.

- 1906 Exhibits 7 works at CSA Annual Exhibition including *Portrait of T.E. Taylor* (cat no 17).
Resigns from Canterbury College School of Art.
Exhibits *Maori Bust* (cat no 16) at NZ International Exhibition.
Commissioned to make a bust of Richard John Seddon.
- 1907 Exhibits 3 works including *Daughter of Eve* (cat no 15) at the CSA Annual Exhibition.
Commissioned to make Sir John Hall bust.
Last year on CSA Council.
Commissioned to carve Seddon relief for Christchurch Technical College entrance.
- 1908 Prepares a sculpture portrait of E.C.J. Stevens.
Exhibits 3 works at the CSA Annual Exhibition including a study for Bust of E.C.J. Stevens.
Completes carving for new Press building.
Son, John Oxley, is born.
Dies 2 October and is buried in Addington cemetery.



Charles Kidson with his wife and family c 1907.

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The Press (Christchurch) 1891 - 1908 (CPL)

Weekly Press (Christchurch) 1891 - 1901 (CPL)

Abbreviations

CPL Canterbury Public Library

RMAG Robert McDougall Art Gallery

CHRISTCHURCH CITY COUNCIL



C01343865





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