

The Ballarat Statuary House

The Ballarat Botanical Gardens statuary house is home to a collection of classical sculptures purchased with a bequest from James Thomson and sculpted by Australian artist C. F. Summers (1858-1945). This fact distinguishes these works from other European imports in the outdoors display donated by Thomas Stoddart. Carved from white marble, and displaying exquisite craftsmanship they are worth more than a glance. Spring light through the special top-lantern and curved roof design of the pavilion displays this collection at its' best. The fine chiselling and polishing of the marble display details the fine grey veining, in the pale marble. The subjects are biblical or classical, and are displayed on white marble pedestals featuring bas relief, or black marble and brass pedestals.

The statue named *Modesty* has always intrigued me. It is a representation of a virtue highly prized in the 19th century, and the veiling over the face of this marble maiden is an aspect of the craftsmanship that fascinates me. 'Under' the veil, as this is a fine example of an illusion created by the fine use of perspective and craft, her features are well formed with eyes slightly downcast. The figure wears a cloak with a delicately carved tasselled fringe. Unlike



some of the other depicted figures in the statuary, *Modesty* is fully clothed.

This gave the artist Charles Francis Summers, described by the Australian dictionary of biography as a ‘minor’ sculptor, son of the famous sculptor Charles Summers (1825-1878), the opportunity to show off his skill in creating the finest ridges of marble, to imitate the draping and folds of clothing. I have a personal interest in this statue, and once wrote an Ekphrastic poem on it for a writing project performed at the Begonia festival in 2015. In the poem I reflected on the fact that while the subject of this statue is modesty, no modesty was required by the sculptor, and he has ‘shown off’ his skills well in this piece that has become part of the lauded tradition of Ballarat Art.

Modesty is arguably the least impressive of the statues in the Botanical Gardens Statuary house, especially designed by T.E. Molloy in 1888. *Modesty* shares this space, a delightful example of architecture from the period with a restored tile floor, with *Susannah*, *Rebekah*, *Ruth* and *The Flight from Pompeii*, a famous depiction of couple and child fleeing in terror. This large-scale work was designed by Professor Carlo Benzonì, and carved by Charles Francis Summers.

The Botanical Gardens contain other examples of public statuary, including the famous prime ministers walk lined with the contemporary bronze heads of past leaders. All the statuary are notable examples of the commitment of the community to preserving history through public artwork. While this motive is admirable, the beauty and craftsmanship alone make the Ballarat Botanical Gardens statuary house with all its modesty worth a visit.

The Statuary House is open from 9am to 5pm every day of the year, except Christmas day.

I acknowledge the following sources used for this article

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