

Architectural & Garden: Part 3: Sculpture

By Roland Head

There's no doubt that in larger gardens especially, sculpture can be a superb addition, providing a focal point that changes the whole feel of the garden. The term sculpture is used to describe any three-dimensional art, but in this article I will focus on statues of figures and animals intended for display outdoors.

What to expect?

It's important to understand what you might be getting: your mind's-eye image may be of a sculptor hand-crafting a statue from a solid lump of stone, but antique examples of such works by notable sculptors are often of museum quality, and are normally beyond the reach of most private buyers. What's more, even these originals were often the result of painstaking design work in wax or clay, which were then copied into stone once the original design was perfected. Copies of original sculptures were often commissioned by wealthy buyers and are highly desirable today. They were usually produced by the original sculptor, or his assistants, and made from the same material: the copying process would be done using callipers to measure distances, or with a pointing machine. In the middle sector of the market, it's more common to find statuary made from a mould with bronze, lead, terracotta or reconstituted stone.

Materials & Makers

Reconstituted stone is one of the most common and affordable media for statues. This material is known as cast stone in the building trade, and is similar to concrete: a proprietary stone-sand-clay mix is combined with a binder of some sort, such as resin or cement and cast into architectural shapes or moulds. Pigmentation is sometimes added to improve the resulting appearance, which can be surprisingly close to quarried stone, such as white marble, limestone or sandstone. The use of moulds means that multiple copies can be produced relatively easily, although volumes are not usually high. Although reconstituted stone may sound like a modern invention, it was perfected in the UK by mother and daughter partnership Eleanor and Eleanor Coade, who began production of Coade Stone in the late eighteenth century. The firm's name changed several times and it went bankrupt under final owner William Croggon in 1833, but it was highly-regarded at the time, and surviving examples are highly sought-after for their quality of design and finish. The success of Coade Stone led to a number of competitors entering in the market in the nineteenth century. Amongst the best was Austin & Seeley (1840-1872), whose limestone-look cast stone was widely admired. Terracotta was also popular for garden ornaments, and prominent nineteenth century manufacturers included Doulton, Pulham, Blanchard, and Compton Pottery. Other materials used include bronze, marble, lead and, in more modern times, resin. A word of warning: resin can be made to look surprisingly similar to polished stone, such as marble, but is so much cheaper and lighter that there should not be any risk of confusion. Similarly, modern 'bronze' may be aluminium with a bronzed finish, but again, low weight and cost provide clues.

Design Themes

Leaving modern art aside, the style of much garden statuary tends to be heavily influenced by classical Greek and Roman mythology. Bacchus, Pan, Aphrodite, Venus and Hebe are popular, while more modern examples are often a pastiche of such characters, without a specific identity. Figures of children and contemporary adult figures, such as hunters and maidens gathering flowers, were also popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as were sets of four figures depicting the four seasons. Lions appear regularly, but dogs, especially Art Deco-style hounds and deer, are also typical, the latter usually in bronze or another cast metal, which best captures their lithe, sinuous shapes.

Buying Antique Statues

Original, carved garden statuary is out of reach of most of us unless we are willing to spend more than we might do on a car. Figures from the first half of the twentieth century, while not always antique, offer a more affordable and realistic route into classical sculpture, while still retaining much of the quality and finish offered by nineteenth century examples. I've chosen some examples from the mid-range but finer examples routinely fetch five figure sums, while at the lower end of the market, small, modern reconstituted stone figures are available from less than £50. *All prices quoted are approx buyer's price.*



Genuine carved limestone. Female figure of classical form on a moulded plinth, standing 8ft tall overall. Sold for £3,752 in June 2009.



Pomona, reconstituted stone, Roman goddess associated with fruit trees, from whose name the French word for apple, pomme, is derived. Sold for £2,038 in May 2014.



The four seasons are a popular theme. Set of four reconstituted stone garden figures of children, each approximately 116cm high, sold for £354 in July 2012.



Doulton Lambeth terracotta (ceramic) recumbent lion, marked Doulton Lambeth 1905. Large, at 60in wide and 35in high, it sold for £2,462 in September 2009.



Catalogued as 'cast metal', this life-size figure of a stag is presumably not bronze. Sold for £1,475 in June 2011.



One of a pair of Chinese grey marble Dogs of Fo, late 19th/early 20thC and standing 56in high, which sold for £8,990 in May 2014.



20thC, Grecian revival statue of Bacchus. Reconstituted stone giving the appearance of marble. Also incorporates a fountain. Sold for £543 in March 2013.



Pan, Greek god of shepherds and fertility is a popular subject, seen here playing his pipes. Reconstituted stone on a moulded plinth. 39in high. Sold for £342 in June 2013.