



statues in Centennial Parklands

fact sheet

In the late 1800s, many statues could be found in Centennial Park as sculpture was an important feature of a Victorian park. Reliefs on gates, freestanding sculptures and memorials added an artistic and classical element to the Park.

In keeping with the grand garden designs in Europe, the original design of Centennial Park featured a total of 31 terracotta figures and statues. They were used to accentuate points of intersection and to add interest along the drives and in and around garden areas.

Today, five statues remain: two terracotta statues, 'Sunrise' and 'Sunset', on sandstone columns in the Rose and Column Gardens, two griffins on Parkes Drive and the 'We Won' statue in Cannon Triangle, near the café. Many can be traced through the original records of their purchase and the details of the sculptors. The provenance of others remains unknown.

Probably the most recognised statue in Centennial Park, not only for its prominent position but also for its subject is that of Sir Henry Parkes standing on the junction of Parkes and Hamilton Drives. However, the statue now standing is not the original. The original, made from marble, was the last piece to be placed in the Park in 1897. It was damaged beyond repair in 1971.

In 1993 well-known sculptor Alan Somerville won a competition to replace this important historical sculpture. The bronze replacement was unveiled in 1996 and stands in the position occupied by the original version. About 100 descendants of Sir Henry Parkes attended the unveiling.



Sir Henry Parkes statue on Parkes Drive

In the 1890s, two griffins guarded each side of the main entry road leading down from Paddington Gates. They were damaged and removed in 1971. They have recently been reconstructed and returned to their sandstone plinths. These sculptures were originally manufactured by the Luxembourg pottery company Villeroy and Boch.

For more information on the history and reconstruction work, please ask for the fact sheet on the Griffins.

Vandalism in 1971 led to the removal for safekeeping of any sculptures that were likely to be subject to similar attacks. Very little had been documented on the condition of the statues between 1887-1923, except for incidents of vandalism.

In 1946 when an inventory was made of the statues in the Park, only 19 were still standing and by 1971 many of those remaining were badly in need of restoration and repair. Consequently, only 'Sunrise' and 'Sunset' were left in place as it was considered their position gave them adequate protection.



These two statues which sit atop the sandstone columns in the Rose and Column Gardens are the only statues to have continuously remained on site. Also manufactured by Villeroy and Boch in 1888, 'Sunrise' is a standing female figure with a baby boy on a half orb, while 'Sunset' is a life size female figure draped in a cloak from the back of the head to the feet.

The nine metre high Corinthian sandstone columns on which they stand originally flanked the front entrance to the William Street Wing of the Australian Museum. The fluted columns were dismantled and moved to Centennial Park where they were then used as the base for these statues.

An additional four statues were also located in the Rose Garden. These statues were of women depicting each of the seasons and were also attributed to Villeroy and Boch. By 1946, only Autumn, Spring and Summer were still standing, although in damaged states, with just the pedestal of Winter remaining.

They continued to decay and by 1970 their broken limbs, peeling paint and overall disrepair forced their removal.

In 1959, other statues including the Lincoln, Garfield and One More Shot statues had to be removed and dumped as their extensive decay made them too badly damaged to retain.



Sunrise statue in Column Gardens

Sir Henry Parkes commissioned the bronze sculpture 'We won' (also known as the 'Footballer') specifically for Centennial Park. It was sculpted by the Italian-born, Tommaso Sani and was erected on site in 1893 at the corner of Cannon Triangle overlooking Grand Drive. The unusual subject matter, sport, makes this sculpture unusual. Portrayed in a humorous manner, this 2.1 metre statue of a footballer dressed in the rugby player's attire of the day has the face of Apollo. The bronze pedestal shows four scenes of a match in progress, however the players are not men but rather many tiny cherubs.

The scenes of the match are separated by four large female cherubs who each mock the dignity of the occasion in various ways. The first heralds the beginning of the match on a trumpet, the second records the score, the third invites the attention of the spectators and the last stands victoriously with the lion-skin of Hercules wrapped around her head and shoulders.

The statue is surrounded by eight small bronze lions with rings in their mouths. These originally held a bronze chain which circled the base of the sculpture. Today, the lions remain but the chain is gone. The base of the statue was damaged in the 1940s and removed. However it was later restored and replaced in 1988.

Sani was controversial in Sydney in the 1880s due to his work on the embellishment of public buildings. His most prominent work was the Pitt Street façade of the GPO building with carvings depicting working class figures. Today, such a sculpture would probably be classed ahead of its time.



On either side of 'We Won' stand two imposing cannons from the Crimean war which were donated to Centennial Parklands by the Royal Botanic Gardens. They were placed in their current position in 1920 and restored as part of the Stone Maintenance Program.

Another statue positioned on Grand Drive near the site of the present kiosk was 'Charity' which depicted a woman holding a small child in one arm with the other arm around another child leaning close to her skirt. This statue stood on site until 1946 when it was taken down due to extensive damage.

A marble 'Diana the Huntress', complete with sword and hound and thought to have been sculpted by Hanson, surveyed Grand Drive from her position in Cannon Triangle until she was removed along with the majority of statues in 1971.

A plaster statue of 'Industry' standing on a stone plinth was located at Randwick Gates until 1971. This statue was first recorded in 1890s and was believed to be manufactured by Villeroy and Boch.

In 1889, four terracotta vases on stone bases sculpted by Rohde and Andra were located at intervals along Grand Drive near Parkes Drive. By 1917, they also had to be removed due to extensive damage and decay.

Various structures are being restored under the four year Stone Maintenance Program. The aim of this conservation work is to maintain significant items and decrease their rate of deterioration. All methods and materials used during the work will be documented for future generations.