

BRITAIN, A NATION CASUAL ABOUT ONE OF ITS GREATEST CULTURAL ASSETS

After two high profile losses in less than nine months, Henry Moore's Reclining Figure 1969-70 (November 2005) and Lynn Chadwick's The Watchers (February 2006) – we have to ask whether the press attention will increase public awareness of a significant problem, enough to re-shape government policy in the UK? Such change would come none too soon. A series of further thefts in England this year indicate that a higher level of risk now exists for sculpture in public places including churchyards and cemeteries. A lack of evidence and reporting of crime means that a new domestic level of cultural looting is taking place and because of the lack of co-ordination between a series of national and regional bodies it is impossible to define the extent of this loss. In March 2006 two smaller than life-size equestrian bronzes (one by Henry Pegram) were stolen from churchyards in Semley, Wiltshire and Chedzoy, Somerset – both commemorated individuals who fell in the First World War. These are ubiquitous and their siting is unprotected: it is clear that bronzes from many other memorials are vulnerable to removal quite apart from the many known cases of vandalism. Much still remains unclear about the prevalence and motives for such thefts – the Metropolitan Police have made several statements about the loss of such large sculptural items but for 'operational reasons' it is still unclear how many of these have been stolen from public spaces as opposed to private and garden locations. All understanding of this issue is dependent on the prompt notification of theft by councils and other public bodies yet most theft statistics relate to antiques and sculpture in private hands. The quality and quantity of public sculpture and war memorials in England is only now receiving attention by official bodies and amenity societies. It is estimated that no less than 15,000 sites exist in England alone. Sufficient context is now available from publications by the PMSA, the UK National Inventory of War Memorials (UKNIWM), the War Memorials Trust and English Heritage. Yet less than 20% of this estimated total has been given Listed status and there seems to be little governmental will to extend heritage protection to all free standing public pieces erected prior to 1945 – this despite the widespread public assumption that they are already protected. The problem is compounded by an unwillingness to embrace ownership for public art: councils are reluctant to understand that they are indeed default owners if no clear documentation exists. Why these works are being stolen remains unclear, although two factors must predominate: from the choice of artists, some form of criminal discrimination is evident and the value of copper (the main constituent of bronze) has quadrupled since 2003. It has been suggested that export and criminal collateral are other motives but there is no data revealing the proportions of these possible motives or the extent of recovery. Since 1990 there have been public art losses in Britain associated with the following artists: Henry Moore, Lynn Chadwick, Henry Pegram, Ralph Brown, Sir William Goscombe John, Arthur Fleischmann, William Carrick, Karen Jonzen, David Frampton, Francis Derwent Wood, Enzo Plazzotta, Gilbert Bayes, William Theed, Alfred Turner. Other key losses remain unreported because of unawareness of the artist. Prior to 1990 works were lost by William Earp, David McGill, Austin Wright, Willi Soukop, G E Wade, R R Goulden, L F Roslyn, Albert Toft, Mathew Noble, John Cassidy, William Behnes and yet another by Francis Derwent Wood. In some cases the same piece of sculpture has been stolen twice despite increased security. The compilation of statistics is hampered not only by lack of reporting but by lack of knowledge about the artist/s. Official knowledge of designers and artists for many war memorials and other public art remains unknown precisely because these pieces are not in galleries or private ownership – despite the fact that a significant number have a sculptural value equal to those indoors. In effect, we are the owners of a national collection of sculpture which everyone can enjoy or ignore yet the resources allocated to defining the best free collection in the country remains consistently within the minor margins of any concern by the DCMS. An absence of will to record selected significant memorials in churchyards and cemeteries means that these remain the single most vulnerable 'assets' for unauthorised removal. The only definition of London's cemetery art, an exhaustive survey of monuments and individuals in Kensal Green cemetery carried out under editorship of Professor James Stevens Curl, show most removals to have occurred since 1945. Without further audits of these vulnerable spaces further losses are inevitable and the absence of any record will inhibit recovery or restoration due to lack of evidence. Easy access to images and records must remain one of the best safeguards. You may notice the absence of a piece near you but the loss may never be reported, never recorded.

The casualness of such loss only reflects the casualness of the nation towards one of its most significant cultural assets.