

Notes on The Maid of Morven, a cast aluminium figurine of 2021

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The figurine entitled 'The Maid of Morven' was first designed as a terra-cotta sketch study about ten years ago, for no particular purpose apart for being looked at, which is of course the great purpose of the most serious works of visual art, just as 'being listened to' is the most important thing for works of musical art – or indeed 'being tasted' is the ultimate function of the wine-grower's art, if indeed that is an art. Thus the figurine began its life with no other purpose intended, other than to be seen. But we can still say some things about it.

In the second half of the 18th century an aspiring poet and scholar named James Macpherson (1736-1796) brought to light a body of poetry derived from original Gaelic song, which he had translated, augmented and imitated to the delight of the critical public of Europe and America. The most famous item within this body of 'Ossianic' poetry (for it was traditionally attributed to the legendary Scots-Irish bard Ossian) was entitled *Fingal: An Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books* which tells in startlingly monumental style of the exploits of Fingal, hero-king of Morven, and his warriors including his son Ossian (who would become, in old age, the very poet we mean, blind and alone) and his son Oscar, grandson of Fingal. In a further poem entitled *Temora* we hear of the death of Oscar in Ireland, slain in a treacherous action by his enemies. Oscar's body is carried home to 'Morven' – a territory in western Scotland, now associated with the peninsula known as Morvern, with an added R. When the heroes take Oscar's body ashore it is welcomed and lamented by a host of maidens playing the clarsach. This figurine depicts one of these girls.

Ossian is important in modern art-culture, for it sets up a counter-poise to Homer and the Greek tradition which has been an important influence from the Renaissance onwards. Its discovery inaugurated the great Romantic movement in which music above all came to blossom in the most glorious terms. In this way a body of poetry, sung in antiquity but written and developed in modern times, came to represent a broader scope of cultural endeavour than before. Most famously, sections of Ossian were translated into German by the poet Goethe in his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, through which medium the whole German and European 'songbook' was revolutionised, with settings made by Schubert, Gluck, Beethoven and Massenet, among others who absorbed the culture of Ossian, most notably Mendelssohn, Weber and Brahms. Arnold Schoenberg attempted an Ossianic cantata (left unfinished in 1903) and the modern Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan contributed a concert overture entitled 'The Death of Oscar' in 2012, premiered in Stuttgart. (This work was jointly dedicated to the conductor Stephane Deneve and the sculptor Alexander Stoddart.)

Because Ossian embraces a wide community, both in time and space, it has often been misdoubted – as so many inclusive and sympathetic things in life often are. It is a poetry of nobility, grace and honour; the freeing of those in captivity, the felling of tyrants and of the 'sounding deserts'¹ of the wild Highland extremes. Falling crags, oozy waters, thunderbolts and wan sunshine are its topographical characters. And if we have, today, a desire to visit and wonder at Alpine landscapes, it

¹ 'deserts' is the correct spelling in this context. The definite article before 'Queen' is correctly capitalised. There should be an acute over the first e of Stephane, and a grave over the second e of Deneve.

is because in the late 1700s we first *heard* of them, through these laments of the 'Homer of the North.'

The trophy has two extant preparatory studies; one a three-dimensional terra-cotta figure sketch, the other a small roundel made in relief – as a gift to encourage a young lady harpist in her clarsach studies. The final presentation work will comprise a finished figurine of around 30cm height, cast in aluminium for the sake of lightness during presentation.



Alexander Stoddart with The Maid of Morven

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