

AGECROFT

I had done a maquette of the *Leapfrog Children* in the attic of Marwood during the winter and was dying to enlarge it into a life-size sculpture. As soon as we were all settled back into Agecroft and the boys had returned to school after our Australian holiday, I started to build the armature for the sculpture. It was by far the hardest one that I had done, as it had to be assembled with mild steel rods and welded together. Thank goodness I had taken a course in welding all those years ago in Melbourne so was able to ask our village garage man if I could hire his electric welder for a couple of days and luckily found I still had the knack of using it. It wasn't very professional but was strong enough for the job. I attached the whole structure to the ceiling of my new studio although this would mean that I would have to stand on a box to sculpt the top figure. However, the jumping up and down would be very good for my still very skinny legs from the accident!



'Leapfrog Children' maquette

When the sculpture was ready Roy drove down to Agecroft for his first visit to our new home. I had warned him that the mould was going to be tricky so he should bring plenty of steel rods and plaster as the top child was only attached to the bottom one by her two wrists. He examined the clay sculpture and announced, as always, that he foresaw no problems! Thank goodness for Roy and his skill as a master-plasterer. Apart from being one of the nicest people I have ever met he was always a joy to work with.

When he had finished I collected the positive plasters and brought them back to Agecroft. I had developed a technique of working on the plasters with fine sandpaper before sending them to the foundry for casting. Before, when we were casting in resin bronze, the finished surface could only be as good as the surface of the original clay sculpture. Now I was able to have a second go at working on the surface before a rubber mould was taken for the lost-wax casting. It made a world of difference to the finish as I was able to get it as smooth as skin, which made it much more life-like.

I had found a new foundry in the Midlands and I decided to give them the job of casting the *Leapfrog Children*. The foundry was run by Lloyd Le Blanc and it turned out to be a good choice. He has continued to handle my children sculptures and has produced many wonderful bronzes.



'Leapfrog Children' life-size in Agecroft garden

I was thrilled with the sculpture and submitted it to the Royal Academy for their Summer Exhibition, which is a bore, as you have to take the sculpture physically to the Academy in Piccadilly for judging. However, once again Roy kindly gave me a hand with both the transport and carrying it into the building. Then came the month of waiting to see if it would be accepted or not. I had so enjoyed doing the interactive children sculpture I decided to start on another action pair straightaway. When I was working on the *Leapfrog* I thought of the children as a typical brother and sister at play. Siblings also occasionally war against each other so I did a maquette of a *Pillow Fight*, and decided that would be my next sculpture.



'Pillow Fight' maquette

I set to work again on an armature with the borrowed welder. This was going to be an even more ambitious one than the last. To get the action right I would have to do both figures at the same time and have the pillows in mid-air. By the time I had it finished the armature looked like a Heath Robinson contraption! I thought Roy would have a fit when he saw it, but of course when he came down he just hummed and hawed a bit and then made the usual announcement, "No problem."

Eventually the letter arrived from the Royal Academy. Had the *Leapfrog* been accepted or rejected? What a moment! Opening the letter set my nerves jumping. I read the letter with disbelief as the *Leapfrog Children* had been accepted and enclosed was a ticket for Varnishing Day. This day is so named because in the times of Turner and the like, the day before the Exhibition

opened to the public, the artists were allowed to give their oil paintings a last touch of varnish.

With great excitement I went along to the Royal Academy with my duster to give the sculpture a final polish and see where it had been placed. I arrived feeling extremely nervous and climbed up the grand staircase to the galleries on the second floor. How would the *Leapfrog* look with all the other sculpture exhibits and would it seem terribly amateurish? At the head of the grand stairway there is a large foyer from which you can go left into a painting gallery, right into the shop, or straight ahead into a circular room, which also has exits to the left and right into other galleries. The circular gallery is probably the best place to have an exhibit so I was bowled over when I saw the *Leapfrog Children* straight ahead in a prime position.

The Opening Day is for Members only but the artists are invited and allowed to bring a guest. Margie and I trooped along to mingle with the great and famous. I had not told Margie where the sculpture was placed so she could enjoy the surprise of seeing it in such a prime position.

When visiting a gallery like the Louvre or Tate we have always played the game of choosing one sculpture and one painting that we would like to take home. Unashamedly we both decided that we would take the *Leapfrog Children*, as they really did look well and the Committee had been very kind to me.



'Pillow Fight' on my mother's roof garden

When the *Pillow Fight* was finished, Lloyd brought it to London and together we erected it on my mother's garden roof in Cadogan Square so I could show Joanna Harding, as it was a bit big for the Harrods Gallery. If a client was interested in the photograph she would be able to bring them around to the flat which was only just round the corner.

Fortunately the public liked the *Leapfrog Children* and the Summer Exhibition brought me many commissions. It also led directly to Damon de Laszlo getting in touch with me and asking if I would be able to visit him to discuss my sculpting his three children, Lucy, Robert and William.

I consider myself to be one of the luckiest men alive, not only because I am fortunate enough to live the life of an artist and enjoy the freedom that it brings, but because I have two Patrons who are also my closest friends. One of these friends is Damon de Laszlo.

I first met him when he had an office in Montague Square. I was really excited as it was the first time that I had ever been approached by the father and not the mother of the children. I felt something special was about to happen and I wasn't wrong. Damon met me at the door, introduced himself and then led me through to his sitting room. He asked me if I would like a cup of coffee and we sat down in comfortable armchairs and started to talk. The coffee arrived and I was introduced to Chris, Damon's secretary. Little did I know at that moment how great a part Damon would come to play in my life and what friends he and Chris would become over the following years.

Damon showed me some paintings by his grandfather, the famous portrait painter, Philip de Laszlo. This was my first introduction to the incredible works of this painter and, looking at them, I knew that I was going to have to do the best I could with his great-grandchildren if I got the commission. The outcome of our conversation was positive and Damon said he would like me to sculpt his eight-year-old daughter Lucy, and his son Robert, nearly seven, and young William just five. He asked Margie and me to come and meet the children and their mother at his country house in Hampshire so we could take the photographs and measurements.

I can't remember when Damon told me his grandfather's story, but here is probably as good a time to record what I have since learnt about this remarkable man, who in his day was recognised as being one of Europe's leading portrait painters. From a very humble beginning Philip went on to paint many of the Crowned Heads and their Consorts. His fame spread and during his lifetime he painted four American Presidents.

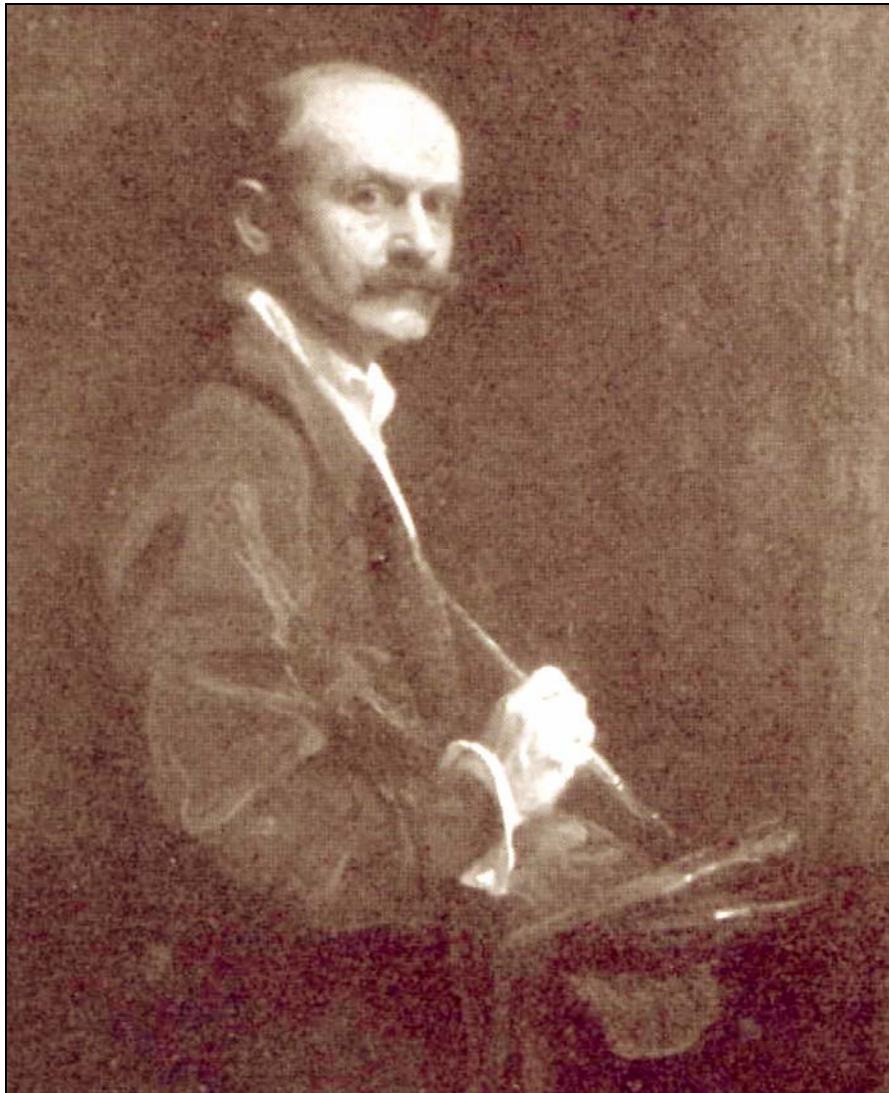
Philip was born in Hungary and from childhood he had loved to draw and because of his skill he was awarded a place at the Budapest Art Academy. When he moved away from home to earn enough money to keep himself he began teaching foreign students as they made the Grand Tour of Europe.

It so happened that two young Irish girls arrived in Budapest and decided to take a painting course. The young man they chose to teach them was Philip. One of the girls was Lucy Guinness. Well, of course the student and teacher fell in love and on returning home she told her parents that she wished to marry a poor Hungarian artist, which did not go down very well with her father! His answer was an emphatic "No!" In those days children did what their parents told them to do so no doubt Lucy must have been broken-hearted. However, she and Philip stayed in touch and he worked hard at his

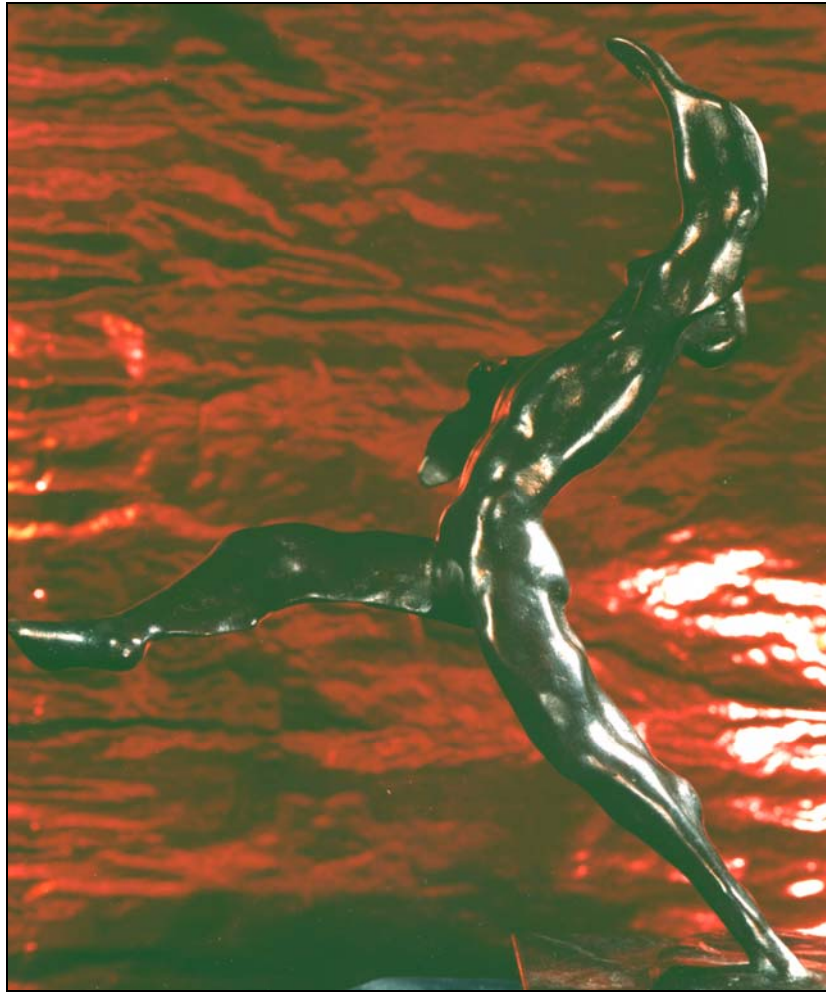
profession until his natural talent made him famous. Philip became well known in Budapest, but soon his fame spread across Europe to England and he became the painter of the hour.

To soften the blow of his outright refusal to the marriage, Lucy's father had added one condition. If Philip became successful and could support her in the manner to which she was accustomed, he would agree to the marriage. The King of Hungary rewarded Philip with a title in appreciation of his artistic skill and father Guinness gave his consent to the marriage. In Damon's house there is a black and white photograph of the wedding group at the ceremony in which Philip is wearing his full Hungarian Court dress of cloak, sword and a hat sporting long peacock feathers in it. The seven-year courtship ended and a blissful marriage began. Several sons were born, one of whom was named Patrick, Damon's father.

Damon inherited Patrick's elegant chambers in Piccadilly that had once been occupied by Lord Byron, and very kindly allows us to use the bedroom when we are in London. The sitting room is hung with Philip de Laszlo's paintings, one of which is a wonderful self-portrait.



Philip de Laszlo



Le Corsair

While all this was happening I had started another large figure to match the *Acrobats* and the *Hammer Thrower*. The sculpture was based on the famous Russian dancer, Rudolf Nureyev, partner of Margot Fonteyn. Margie and I had seen them dance together in Melbourne the night before Peter had been born, and I wanted to try and capture the incredible performance we had seen. Again the armature would have to be attached to the ceiling, as I wanted the dancer to be supported only on his left toes.

While I was working on *Le Corsair* the telephone rang and a very broad Australian voice asked, "Is this John Robinson? Are you the artist that shows work in Harrods? I like your *Acrobats*, but I am not buying them from Harrods. Give me a good price." *My God*, I thought, *it is another Fred Kobler!*

The voice belonged to a man called Lindsay Fox and the explanation he gave for calling turned out to be the beginning of an amazing story and one of the greatest adventures of our lives. Lindsay had been in Harrods that afternoon with his friend, Chris Hemmeter. They had been looking for old furniture and had stumbled across the fine arts gallery. They had seen some of my bronze children and at the same time had looked through the catalogue of other works and seen the *Acrobats*, and the prices. They had really liked the sculpture but thought the price was ridiculous, but as Harrods doubled my prices he wasn't wrong about that. For fun, over a drink before dinner, the two men had tried and found my telephone number and decided to give me a call.

When we had moved to Agecroft I had rung British Telecom and asked to have my name and profession added to the local book. The operator had agreed to do this and then asked if I would also like my name included in the London book. I thought, *Why not!* Lindsay had picked up the book and found a whole page of John Robinson but only one had sculptor after his name. I silently blessed the BT operator for making the suggestion.

"The very best price I can do is half of the Harrods price." "Done," he said. "Give me your address and you will receive a letter of confirmation in about two weeks when Chris returns to Hawaii." Hawaii not Australia! I was becoming more and more bewildered and wondered if I would receive the promised letter or was this just a hoax. I do have a friend in Sydney called Philip Gibson who plays those kinds of pranks. I once had a call from him pretending to be an Arabian Sultan wanting a sculpture!

I returned to *Le Corsair* to keep me from thinking about *The Acrobats*. It was soon finished and Roy came down to take the mould. How we were going to keep the sculpture from falling over was quite beyond me, but Roy said he would insert a steel shaft in his leg and out through his foot down into a heavy concrete plinth to act as a counterweight. It worked!



Le Corsair

One day a very smart looking envelope arrived from Hawaii heavily embossed with the words Hemmeter Center. With a great amount of trembling I opened it and took out a letter ordering the *Acrobats* and a cheque! I was completely overcome, as now the *Acrobats* could be cast in real bronze. I don't think I have ever been so excited. It was all way beyond my wildest dreams.

Such a large job could only be done by a really big foundry. I had already visited Morris Singer Foundry, famous for doing large pieces by Henry Moore. The foundry was on the road to London so I had called in to get a casting cost for the *Acrobats* on the off chance of a Harrods sale. It had been quite an experience to see Moore's sculptures being worked on in the enormous sand-casting workshop when the manager, Dave Vallance, showed me around. Having received the order I rang Dave and asked him to come and inspect Roy's cold-bronze edition I had set up in the Agecroft garden. Dave confirmed the price he had given me from the photograph and sent a truck to collect the *Acrobats* the following day. Watching them leave was like waving goodbye to old friends setting off on a voyage around the world.



Agecroft

When we arrived at Agecroft in 1972, the first thing we did was to plant some trees in the old apple orchard. The property was about two acres, one of orchard to the west and one of garden around the house and studio to the east. The thatched cottage runs along the road but was protected from it by a box hedge. The house used to be the village bakery and the bow window in the sitting room was the shop front for displaying the loaves. Previous owners had closed off the shop door and replaced it with a front door in from the garden on the opposite side away from the road.

The orchard was fenced off from the garden and used for grazing cows. The apple trees were old so we decided to plant some new specimen trees amongst them and create an arboretum and ban the cows. We went to a garden centre and met Mr Kean, a truly remarkable old man. When he came to see us we staked out positions for the many trees he advised us to plant. Several weeks after his first visit, when he considered the ground was warm enough, he returned with two workmen and the planting began. All the trees grew, except

out of the 40 eucalyptus trees we planted only one survives today, a snow gum!
 One day in Sydney I could not resist buying two toy koalas to climb in it during
 the summer. They are very happy and have had a baby!



Our one surviving gum tree and wildlife



Peter told us that all he wanted for his tenth birthday was a puppy in a
 box. Margie found a Border collie Springer spaniel cross and gave her to him in
 a cardboard box, as requested. She paid the grand sum of £1 for Lassie. It was

the best pound we have ever spent as she turned into a marvellous companion, loved by all for 16 years.



Peter and Lassie

Lassie grew into the most intelligent dog I have ever come across as she could not only open the back door, using her paw to push down the lever handle, she would also close it on command by standing on her hind legs to push it shut! When we went camping she would happily come along and sleep in the boys' tent. She loved travelling in the car so came on trips to London and once we even took her to Ireland. When she died we were all heartbroken.

We had the 12 giant 100-foot high elms that grew along our western border felled as they had the dreaded Dutch virus. We were very upset about this, but Mr Kean said that we should do it as there was no way of saving them. He was right and within five years millions of elms had died and needed to be felled, changing the English countryside for ever. The removal of our trees made the orchard even barer, so planting our seven-foot high saplings turned out to be a blessing.

For the summer holidays we invested in two tents as we planned to introduce the boys to camping. We put them up in the orchard to try them out for a night. It was a great success and later led to many happy camping trips into Wales and Scotland. The tall tree between the tents in the photograph below is an elm and the year after we camped on this spot it came crashing down during a storm right where the tents had been!



Camping in the 'Agecroft' orchard 1973



Lassie

Over the last 35 years we have had the enormous pleasure of watching our trees grow from saplings to monsters so that now we have a forest. The poplars that we planted to replace the felled elms, are now 100 foot tall.

Actually, I think they might be even taller than that, but I might be accused of exaggerating if I said so. Unfortunately the Electricity Board has told us that they are so tall they are a danger to the power line that passes nearby and have to come down!

When we arrived Margie planted acorns for each of the boys and these have already become 25-foot high trees. Unfortunately over the last 35 years the American Grey squirrel has driven the English Red ones almost to extinction. However, the grey squirrels hide acorns in the ground for the winter so we have several free young oaks and even a walnut tree. Margie has planted climbing roses in the old apple trees making a stroll in the orchard on a summer evening a delight as the blooms cascade down in their hundreds.



Agecroft garden

To begin with I used to mow the whole area so the boys would have a football ground. They also used it for their engine-driven go-kart I built from a kit. Racing around the lawns trying to avoid being hit by apples that are thrown by one's brothers was a good way to learn how to drive a car. Now that the need for acres of lawn has gone and we are travelling a lot I have allowed the wilderness to return under the trees to encourage the birds. We mowed a network of paths though the jungle so we could still enjoy walking the orchard.

The bird life includes a resident buzzard, woodpeckers, flycatchers, blackbird and a robin who feeds from Margie's hand. The orchard has become an animals' haven as well as an arboretum of specimen trees. Walking beneath the canopy in the summer it is hard to believe that all the growth has happened in so short a time. England is a very green and pleasant land if you can escape from the traffic noise and cities.

Several of the wilderness areas have reverted into large stinging nettle beds that we explain away to tidy gardeners as designated butterfly areas. I had been told that Red Admirals bred on nettles although I had never seen any in our wilderness, as they seem to prefer feeding around the house on Margie's buddleia. I decided to rectify this situation and purchased ten caterpillars that were guaranteed to turn into Red Admirals. I fed them on nettles in a special cage where they soon changed into chrysalises. Eventually one beautiful Red Admiral hatched and with great excitement I took it up to the back of the orchard so I could release it in the middle of the largest patch of nettles.

I gingerly opened the netted cage and the beautiful creature walked out onto my hand and did some wing exercises, but refused to fly. Getting impatient I made an upward flip of my hand, which forced it to take off.

SNAP. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the four beautiful wings flutter to the ground. The poor thing had only flown about a foot when a flycatcher grabbed him and zipped away to feed it to one of her babies. None of the other chrysalises hatched so I didn't have to worry about other butterflies surviving in the big cruel world. Lesson – never interfere with nature!

Our flycatchers are so precious I couldn't be cross. Every year we wait for the tiny birds to arrive from Africa, which they usually obligingly do around May 4th for my birthday. To think that they have come all the way from the Sahara and have returned to nest within a couple of feet of where they were hatched is truly amazing. Our pair have two broods every year, always building a new nest for the second family on the opposite side of the house!

While the trees were growing I was sculpting. Every morning of the first 20 years of our life at Agecroft I used to walk across to the studio and sculpt. Lunch was a fast-food affair around one o'clock and then I would work through to a good stopping place, which sometimes meant not shutting up shop until nine in the evening. I would often come in cold and tired and find the boys ready for bed. Thankfully Margie understood about the need for me to press on when things were going well and kept my dinner hot waiting while I had a hot bath.



Fred

Fred is now a grown man and lives in Seattle with his wife and children. The *Squirrel Children* were two of Mr Taylor's grandchildren and were commissioned by his wife to place over her husband's grave in the cemetery of a beautiful old Somerset Church at Cricket St Thomas, famous as the setting of the TV programme called *To the Manor Born*. The *Squirrel Children* were so popular at the Safari Park John Taylor purchased several bronze children.



Squirrel Children



Jigsaw Puzzle

The *Jigsaw Puzzle* boy's name was Kerr and he came from America wearing OshKosh dungarees. Kerr was one of the bronzes bought by John Taylor. I welded the last piece of the puzzle into his right hand but it didn't stop people taking it for a souvenir. The problem was solved when a souvenir hunter decided to take the whole sculpture instead of the puzzle piece!



'Girl with Puppy'

Nearly all of the 100 or so children that I sculpted were original commissions. The child's parent had Number One of the edition and I had the right to sell a further eight, making a total of nine. Of course I didn't sell the full edition of all the children, but by the time I gave up my figurative work there must have been children all over the world! The *Girl with Puppy* was one of several bronzes that ended up in a Disneyland hotel in Orlando. She was the first who had an Elastoplast on her knee, but after that I put one on all the children's knees and it became a trademark.



'Flute Player II'

Margie and I were asked to fly over to Florida and see the sculptures as there was talk of building another hotel and buying more bronzes. The hotel never happened but we did have a marvellous trip, and visiting Epcot was an incredible experience, as was eating alligator, which tasted a lot better than crocodile had in Kimberley way back in 1955!

The *Recorder Player* was the daughter of the couple who bought Marwood Hill House from Jimmy Smart after we had moved to Agecroft. I wish we had kept a copy, but the edition sold out within a year.



Genevieve

Genevieve is the granddaughter of Geo and Pam who live in Geneva. I did a head of Genevieve and a life-size sleeping child for their garden. She was their first grandchild and is now nearly 20 years old. She also sleeps in the Agecroft garden giving us enormous pleasure.





James



Umbrella Children

The *Umbrella Children* began with my finding a photograph in which my father was spraying water from a hose over my elder brothers, Pat and Michael, as they sheltered under an umbrella. I thought it was a charming idea and would make a great fountain. I sculpted a couple of new children and used Mark again as the aggressor with the hose. When we put the whole thing together it worked well, the water dripped off in all the right places. It was fun and makes people laugh.

One day I had a call from an Irish surgeon asking if we could meet in London as they were looking for a fountain to go in a clinic he was building in Dublin. I met him at my mother's flat and showed him a photograph of the *Umbrella Children*. He said it was just what he wanted and immediately bought them without even seeing the bronzes.

During the Irish Troubles one of the punishments the IRA would inflict was to shoot off their victim's kneecap. This had so appalled the surgeon that he went back to university to study engineering and then applied the knowledge to inventing a mechanical knee that became so successful he decided to build the Black Rock Clinic in Dublin. The clinic was built around an atrium with a pond in the middle and it was here that he decided he needed a fountain.

Some time after the clinic was finished and the sculptures installed, Margie and I made a trip to Ireland to deliver a bronze and went to see what the fountain looked like. A café reception area for the patients was on one side of the pond and the consulting rooms were across on the far side. The surgeon said that it all worked very well as by the time a patient had drunk a cup of coffee and listened to the fountain there was never any trouble in obtaining a urine specimen!



'Roller Skaters'

The *Roller Skaters* was a private commission for a charming Dutch family who lived in a suburb of Rotterdam. The house was on a bend in the road and they told me that it became known as Roller Skater corner.

Some parents would know the position they would like, usually because they had seen one of my other sculptures. This became a problem as it meant that I did the same sculpture time and time again with only the size, sex and face being difference. I soon learnt that it paid to suggest a visit to the site chosen for the sculpture and a meeting with the children, as this left me free to suggest poses that I wished to do, but which also suited the landscape.



Taking photographs of children in Sussex before sculpting them



Finished bronzes on show at Crowthers of Syon Lodge

I would talk to the parents and quickly learn what their interests were, and then suggest a pose for the sculpture. I have always tried to make my children sculptures active as it makes the subject come alive. The action creates a story, and we all love stories. One of the fun commissions was to create a water fight in a ravine that the parents had built in their garden. Getting the water pressure exactly right so that it hit the boy's shield was a real challenge.



Boys playing in a ravine

There are as many positions as there are children. Varying the positions kept my job challenging, like standing a boy on a stool to feed parrots!



Occasionally I would be asked to sculpt only the head, which I enjoyed doing but found it a time-consuming and non-commercial exercise.



Jill

In trying to work out when it was that I began to see the limitations of only doing figurative sculpture, I keep thinking about *Watts Towers*. I had read about them in *Time* so when passing through Los Angeles on our way to Hawaii to see the *Acrobats*, I grabbed the moment and a cab and asked the driver to take us out to see them, and wait, it being a problematical area.



Watts Towers

Simon Rodia built the three towers single-handedly between 1921 and 1955. One of the towers has the longest concrete column in the world, standing 90 foot high. Truly they are a *tour de force*. Rodia used scrap metal, broken pottery and bottle bottoms, just like Dorothy's Bottle Cottage!



I am sure that seeing the *Watts Towers* challenged me to do my own unique thing and sowed the seed that eventually germinated and grew into my Symbolic Sculptures. If Simon Rodia could do it, so could I.