

George Tinworth: an Artist in Terracotta

Miranda F Goodby

George Tinworth, Doulton's premier artist at the Lambeth studios between 1867 and 1913, devoted his life to large scale religious and memorial sculptures. Today he is better known for his small humorous animal figures and vase designs – but this was not always the case.

At the height of his career in the 1870s and '80s, George Tinworth's work was bought by royalty and major museums in Great Britain and North America; he was receiving commissions from important churches and other institutions for sculptural work and he was popular with both the public and the critics. He was described by John Forbes Robinson as, 'Rembrandt in clay and unquestionably the most original modeller that England has yet produced'.¹ Edmund Gosse called him, 'a painter in terracotta'² and likened him to Ghiberti, while John Ruskin described his work as, 'full of fire and zealous faculty'.³ He won several medals during his time at the Royal Academy of Art and later, when working at Doulton's, his sculptures for the great national and international exhibitions were regularly singled out for praise and prizes. In 1878 he was made a member of the French Academie des Beaux Arts, and in 1893 Lambeth Parish Council named a street in his honour.⁴

By the time of his death in 1913, critical taste had changed. Tinworth's obituary in *The Times* described him as 'a craftsman' and said of his work, 'there is a kind of primitive simplicity in some of his groups which makes them at least amusing',⁵ while another writer alluded, rather patronizingly, to 'his peculiar place in popular affection'.⁶

Such swings in critical judgement are commonplace for those whose careers, like Tinworth's, cover nearly half a century. Happily, he retained his popular appeal and an exhibition of his work held just before his death attracted great crowds, as similar exhibitions had done during the previous 30 years. Yet, despite his popularity and his prodigious output, which was probably greater than any of his contemporaries, and the wide range of his public commissions, he is not today seen as part of the nineteenth century movements in sculpture, but rather as a craftsman potter who created sculptural ceramics in terracotta.

Even in his own lifetime he was seen as something of an outsider, *not* because of the medium of his art but because of his origins and early training in the slums of South London. This seemed to be a never-ending source of wonder to the affluent middle-class writers and the critics of



Figure 1 George Tinworth in his studio working on the model for the Shakespeare Monument (never erected). Tinworth's bust of Sir Henry Doulton can be seen to the left. (Photograph c1906.)

his day who could scarcely restrain their astonishment that a labouring man could create works of art. It must be admitted, however, that Tinworth's childhood could not have been less likely to have produced an artist without a great determination and steadfastness on his part.

George Tinworth was born in 1843 at Walworth, London, the eldest son of a wheelwright. Tinworth's father was not a success and took to drink, plunging the family into severe financial distress and debt. On at least one occasion the bailiff's men were sent in to distraint on the family's possessions. With such an example before him, it was not surprising that George Tinworth became a teetotaler. His mother, however, was a deeply religious woman who attempted to raise her three children and educate them as best she could under the circumstances. Almost the only reading matter in the house was the Bible – this was before the days of Free Public Lending Libraries – and Tinworth gained a deep knowledge

and love of the Scriptures, which he was to express in his sculptures. It was also his mother who stimulated and fostered Tinworth's leanings towards art, buying him a slate on which he was able to sketch, and later she helped him to pay his art school fees.

At 14, Tinworth was sketching, modelling and carving in wood and the opinion of friends and neighbours was that he should go to the art school, recently set up in Lambeth, for training.⁷ At the time this was not possible as his father was violently opposed to his son's artistic leanings. However, Tinworth used to spend what time he could at wood-carving when his father was out of the wheelwright's workshop, posting one of his brothers to act as lookout and let him know when their father was approaching. Sometimes his father caught him and boxed his ears or destroyed the carving.

In 1861, at the age of 18, Tinworth felt that he could no longer continue without training and he entered the Lambeth School of Art. He took with him a small bust of Handel, carved in sandstone, as an example of his work. It was a piece he was to keep for the rest of his life and indeed it was in his studio when he died. Its present location is unknown. In order to pay the class fees he was sometimes forced to pawn his overcoat, and obtaining materials for his modelling class was a problem. A contemporary account says that he first obtained his clay from a trench which workmen were digging for a drainage pipe,⁸ and he was to write later:

I used to do many clay sketches for the Lambeth Art School at home, early in the morning. I had to break them up again after they had been seen at the school. I used to do same with my life studies at the Royal Academy. I wanted the clay and could not afford to buy more.⁹

In 1864 he was accepted into the Royal Academy Schools, whose classes were held in the middle of the day, and was forced to tell his father who, for three years, had remained in ignorance of his son's studies. His father gave permission for him to attend, and every morning after this he would rise early, work in his father's shop, go to the Royal Academy until 1pm, and then walk back to work. On lecture nights he did the journey twice each day. At this time the Royal Academy was in Trafalgar Square, a journey of more than three miles in each direction from his house.

In 1866, Tinworth's father died and for a little while he struggled to make a living from the wheelwright's shop, until approached by John Sparkes, headmaster of the Lambeth School of Art and a life-long friend of his, with the proposal that he should go to work at the pottery of Doulton & Co. Up to this time, Doulton's, the largest of a cluster of salt-glaze potteries in Lambeth, had been engaged almost solely in the production of utilitarian wares, principally sewer and drainage

pipes, for which demand had massively increased as the causes of disease and the principles of sanitation had been discovered. The firm was now on a sound financial footing and could afford to branch out into experimental wares, including garden statuary, urns, architectural ceramics, and so forth. John Sparkes had been a great advocate of such a move and proposed Tinworth's name to Henry Doulton, son of the proprietor. In Tinworth's own words:

I went to see Mr Henry Doulton at his pottery and it was settled that I should come to work for them – but I kept on the wheelwright's shop some time, not knowing whether I should stay at Doulton's.

At first I was put to touching up water filters that had lately come out of the mould... But when I won the silver medal at the Life School at the Royal Academy, Mr Sparkes said 'Now Tinworth, they must shorten your hours!' So after this I went from nine in the morning until five, and I modelled some heads of Greek coins.¹⁰

There was some talk of recommending me to some other pottery down in Staffordshire¹¹ but Mr Sparkes said he did not want me to leave London... Things began to prosper with me. Doulton's went into the garden work...and there was going to be an Exhibition at Kensington in 1869, so I put my shoulder to the wheel and we made all manner of things for it in pottery, among other things a caseful of art pottery which took the fancy of the public and was afterwards known as Doulton Ware. For this exhibition I also modelled a fountain in terracotta designed by Mr Sparkes.¹²

The fountain mentioned by Tinworth was among the first of his large pieces for Doulton which were later to form his chief output. The fountain was given by Doulton's to Kennington Park, London, where it remained until the mid-1970s, when it was damaged by vandals and the broken pieces thrown away.

A considerable part of Tinworth's non-commissioned reliefs and sculptures were produced in response to the exhibitions abounding during the century. These ranged from the great international and national exhibitions, forerunners of today's trade fairs, to strictly fine art exhibitions held at the Royal Academy and other galleries. Many of Tinworth's large works were, however, commissioned, with a constant demand from churches and other institutions.

The mid-Victorian period was one of religious reform, revival and fervour. It saw the emergence of the High Church Oxford Movement, the Tractarians, and the Puseyites, with their intellectual appeal on the one hand and, on the other, the rise of the great non-conformist preachers, such as Moody, Sankey, and Charles Spurgeon, with their popular addresses and sermons. Spurgeon regularly addressed crowds of over 10,000.

Tinworth, with a fervent dissenting background and his orthodox artistic training, was peculiarly suited to produce religious works of art appropriate to the Low Church and non-conformist

feelings of the period. His relief sculptures became increasingly popular as new churches were built in the cities and old churches were refurbished to suit modern doctrines. Tinworth, as a strict non-conformist, was slightly suspicious of the leanings of some of his clients and once remarked to Charles Spurgeon, who was sitting for Tinworth for his portrait, that if he ever saw anyone bowing to the figures he had made he would never make another. To this, Spurgeon replied, 'If I were a baker and anyone choked himself with a piece of my bread I should still go on making bread'.¹³

Tinworth received his first major religious commission, via the architect G E Street, in 1876. This was for a reredos in terracotta for the High Altar of York Minster, depicting the Crucifixion. This survives today, having been painted over to represent carved wood and moved to the east wall of St Stephen's Chapel. In the same year, Tinworth modelled a terracotta lunette for the newly-built Doulton offices in Lambeth, showing Sir Henry Doulton surrounded by Tinworth himself, Hannah Barlow, Frank Butler and other artists from the Doulton studios. This, too, survives and may be seen over the entrance of the now-deserted buildings at the junction of Lambeth High Street and Black Prince Road, in London.¹⁴

Tinworth obtained other commissions from Street two years later for 28 semi-circular terracotta panels for the Guards Chapel in Birdcage Walk, London, illustrating scenes from the Old and New Testaments. These were destroyed by a bomb during World War II, and only the salt-glaze preparatory sketches survive. The two commissions from Street, however, established Tinworth as an artist whose genius lay in religious sculpture, and for the remainder of his life he was producing altar-pieces and other sculpture for churches in Britain, Europe, North America and Australia.

Edmund Gosse, Tinworth's first biographer, said of him:

Mr Tinworth is...the only artist who has continued to express in his art the actual religious sentiment of the lower middle-class in England... His vision is neither classical, nor Italian, nor conventional; it is purely that of the average English evangelical... He is frankly engaged in telling in his own realistic way a story to edification. His compositions have the same sort of merit, as discourses, which we find in the best of Mr Spurgeon's sermons. We should never have expected to find in English sculpture a return to the spirit which animated Bunyon, but we cannot fail to recognise that spirit in these Biblical terracottas.¹⁵

It was this quality which made Tinworth's sculptures so popular and acceptable for public commissions

During the 1860s, '70s and '80s, Tinworth continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy and elsewhere, submitting not only religious subjects but also realistic sculptures and portrait busts of many of his leading contemporaries, including his patron

and employer, Sir Henry Doulton¹⁶ (Figure 1). In addition, he produced a number of memorial sculptures to philanthropists such as Lord Shaftesbury, Charles Spurgeon and Samuel Morley, of Morley College fame.

Tinworth's output was prodigious. In 1894 he estimated that in the 27 years he had been at Doulton's, he had produced at least 500 panels of 'important size',¹⁷ not including smaller panels and sketches, in addition to his portraits and fountains.

As well as his sculptural works, and, indeed, as a relaxation, Tinworth decorated vases thrown for him, and modelled small figures and groups of frogs and mice, all carrying out actions which Tinworth observed around himself. These small sculptures are so lively and comical that they are today far more eagerly sought after than his costly and laborious panels to which he devoted his life.

Tinworth continued to produce his Biblical sculptures well into this century, in a style virtually unchanged over a period of 45 years but, by the end of his life, fashionable and critical taste had changed. The religious revival of the late nineteenth century was dying away in the face of agnosticism and atheism, which made the simple devotion of Tinworth's sculptures seem hopelessly old-fashioned, especially when compared to such artists as Epstein or even Alfred Gilbert (of *Eros* fame). Tinworth's large-scale and expensive architectural sculptures were almost entirely unsaleable, but at Doulton's he was perfectly free to work as he chose with the company taking no orders for panels unless Tinworth had first agreed to accept the commission. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, with the decline in commissions, it was estimated that Doulton's were losing £10,000 per annum on Tinworth's studio.¹⁸

Sir Henry Doulton had not gone into art pottery from drainpipes to make a profit. Instead, it was a venture which brought prestige and glamour to a company whose main association (and profit) was with drainage and sewage pipes. The presence of Tinworth and the Art Studio brought all sorts of distinguished visitors to the works – British and foreign royalty, clergy, politicians, literary and artistic lions – and it made the name of Doulton a household word across the world.

Towards the end of his life, Tinworth became increasingly isolated and subject to depression. His friend and patron, Sir Henry Doulton, was dead; his wife was an invalid and was eventually to die in an asylum for the insane; he had outlived many of his friends and colleagues and he found it hard to accept the fact that his large sculptures no longer sold. Even in his heyday he had thought it unjust that, while painters such as Leighton and Millais received thousands of pounds for one painting, the most that one of his own panels, *The Road to Calvary*, had ever made was 500 guineas.¹⁹

In the years following his death, Tinworth was virtually forgotten. Many of his public

commissions were destroyed. Some, especially those in London and other large cities, were damaged irreparably in World War II, notably the Guards Chapel and Morley College lunettes, but others were deliberately removed in the modernizations of the 1950s and '60s when 'Victorian' was a term of abuse.

However, a great number do survive, especially in churches, including some previously thought to have been lost. The great salt-glaze fountain, designed for the 1878 Paris Exhibition is one example. It was discovered in pieces in a garden in Sussex and reconstructed for the Victoria & Albert Museum's Doulton Exhibition in 1976. It is in the form of a cone standing within a basin and modelled with scenes from the Bible, all of them related to water, and stands just over seven feet high.

Ironically, it was during the Festival of Britain, 1951, that monument to modernism, that the start of Tinworth's rehabilitation was signalled when some of his animal figures and vase designs were exhibited at County Hall, London. Initially, appreciation was confined to his vases and animal groups, but in 1960 Charles Handley-Read wrote favourably of Tinworth's relief panels and lamented the recent destruction of the 17-foot high memorial to Professor Henry Fawcett, in his

articles for *Country Life*.²⁰ In the last 30 years, nineteenth century religious and memorial sculpture has gradually come back into favour and is being seen as a serious subject of study. In the light of this revival of interest, the work of George Tinworth is once more receiving critical appreciation and he is now becoming recognized as a significant figure in nineteenth century British sculpture.

There are several examples of Tinworth's work in Stoke-on-Trent churches (see Appendix), and elsewhere in North Staffordshire. Considering the number of potteries in Stoke-on-Trent, the appearance of a London ceramic artist's work in the area could be seen as 'bringing coals to Newcastle'. However, Doulton's links with the city date from the late 1870s when they purchased the Burslem factory of Pinder, Bourne & Co, now their Nile Street headquarters. There was much opposition to Doulton's move into Staffordshire from established pottery manufacturers, and it is likely that at least some of the panels were given by the company to churches in the area in order to propitiate local feeling.

Tinworth himself did not see his panels in their settings: he never visited Stoke-on-Trent, but remained devoted to Doulton's in Lambeth until the day of his death on 10 September 1913.

**Appendix:
Tinworth's work in Stoke-on-Trent**

Tinworth himself may have resisted coming to Stoke-on-Trent, but several churches in the city possess panels by him, covering the whole period of his career.



Figure 2 The Garden of Gethsemane. Trentham Methodist Church, 1873, 12x6in. Brown salt-glazed stoneware with details picked out in cobalt

blue and biblical texts inscribed around the edge of the panel. A sketch for the large terracotta panel of the same subject exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874.



Figure 4 (above) The Overthrow of Pharaoh and his Host in the Red Sea (detail). North Staffordshire Royal Infirmary Chapel, Hartshill 1892, 66x25in. Terracotta.

Methodist Church in 1873 (above) and York Minster in 1876, but more fully worked out. This group is balanced by that of Roman soldiers and St Joseph of Aramathea, while Christ rises above.

The flanking panels of *The Visit of the Wise Men* and *The Visit of the Shepherds* are considerably smaller than *The Crucifixion*, but at 84x36in are still large. They were erected to form a triptych in 1902, possibly to commemorate Edward VIII's coronation and, although part of Tinworth's later output, when demand for his large panels had fallen off considerably, they show the vigour of his best work. The depth of plane is great; several figures are almost free-standing, and the variety of expression and emotion in the panels is contrasted well between the eagerness of the shepherds, pressing forward accompanied by their animals, and the stately progress of the wise men with their retinues and dignity. The inscribed titles point out this contrast: *They Came With Haste* and *The Wise Men Opening Their Treasures*.

The whole reredos certainly repays a close scrutiny. Its size and complexity make it unusual, as does the fact that it remains in the original setting for which it was designed, unlike so many of Tinworth's panels. As a bonus to the visitor, there is a small low-relief terracotta panel in the Lady Chapel, *The Holy Family in Egypt*, dated 1899, also by Tinworth.

Figure 5 (below) The Wise Men Opening Their Treasures (detail). St Mark's Church, Shelton, 1902, 84x36in. Terracotta. Part of the right-hand panel of *The Visit of the Wise Men*. In the lower right-hand corner is Tinworth's distinctive GT monogram.

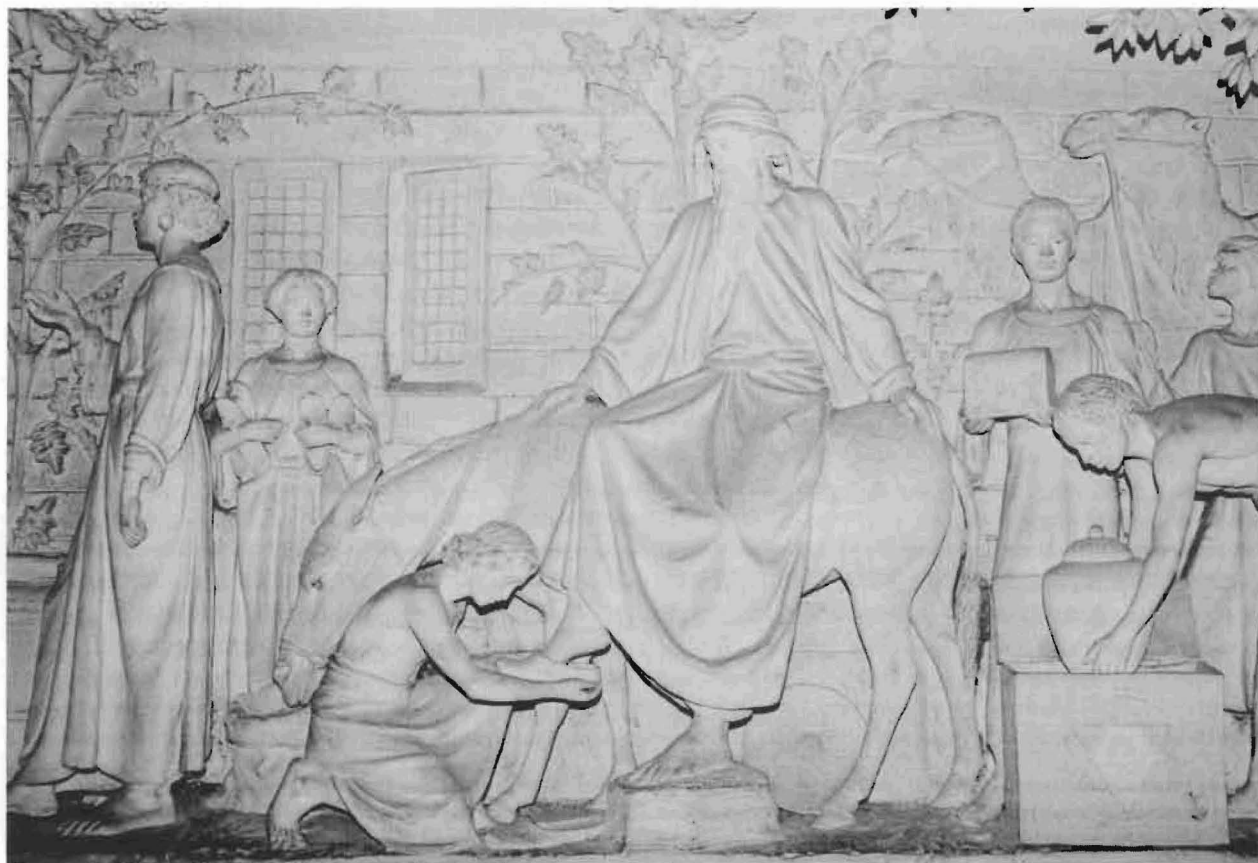




Figure 6 (left) They Came With Haste (detail). *St Mark's Church, Shelton, 1902, 84x36in. Terracotta. Part of the left-hand panel of The Visit of the Shepherds.*

Notes and references

1 J F Robertson *Doulton Ware and Lambeth Faience*, London, 1876.

2 E W Gosse *Catalogue of a Collection of Works in Terracotta by George Tinworth*, The Fine Art Society, London, 1885.

3 J Ruskin *Academy Notes*, London, 1875.

4 Tinworth Street, SE11, formerly Gloucester Street.

5 'Obituary: Mr George Tinworth', *The Times*, 12 September 1913.

6 M H Spielmann *British Sculpture and Sculptors of Today*, Cassell & Co., London, 1901.

7 Lambeth Art School was set up in 1854 by the future Canon Gregory. In 1861 it moved into purpose-built premises under the aegis of the headmaster, John Sparkes, who was later to become the principal of the Central Government Art School, at South Kensington, now the Royal College of Art.

8 'An Evangelist in Clay – The Bible as interpreted by George Tinworth', *The Sunday Magazine*, nd, c1905

9 Unpublished manuscript autobiography.

10 *ibid.*

11 It is possible that it was Minton's who wanted Tinworth to join them, as they had a policy during the 1870s of employing, either on the staff or as freelance, leading artists and sculptors.

12 Unpublished manuscript autobiography.

13 Story told by Tinworth in a lecture reported in the *South London Press*, nd, but c1911.

14 Visitors to South London, may, by alighting at Vauxhall Underground Station, easily walk to a number of places connected with Tinworth. Just off Kennington Lane is St Oswald's Place, site of Lambeth Art School. Returning to the Albert Embankment, one passes Tinworth Street and the site of the Doulton offices in Lambeth High Street and, crossing Lambeth Road, St Mary's Parish Church which contains three panels. These are the remains of a reredos, damaged by bombing, depicting *The Crucifixion*, which was presented by Sir Henry Doulton as a memorial to his wife and to his father. There are also two small memorial panels of *Christ among the Doctors* and *Christ Blessing the Little Children*. St Mary's Parish Church is now the Museum of Garden History.

15 E W Gosse *op. cit.*

16 Now in the Sir Henry Doulton Gallery at Doulton's factory, Nile Street, Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent.

17 Recorded by Walter Fairhall in his unpublished memoirs and quoted in D Eyles, *The Doulton Lambeth Wares*, Hutchinson, London, 1975.

18 *ibid.*

19 Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1880 and sold to F W Bond, erected in Truro Cathedral in 1902 as a thanks offering for the safe return from the Boer War of his two sons.

20 C Handley-Read 'Tinworth's Work for Doulton', parts I&II, *Country Life*, 1&15 September 1960.

Acknowledgments

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