

Cutting Edge: Book Sculpture as Protest Art

by Liz Menard

*"A tiny gesture in support of the
special places..."* ANONYMOUS



Poetree. PHOTOS | LIZ MENARD

For me, the story began in the spring of 2011 when I saw online images of an exquisite hand-cut sculpture made from old books. The work was beautifully made, it was interesting, and it referenced poetry! How fantastic! Apparently, the piece was made to show support for libraries and had been left inside a library. No one knew who made the work. Anonymity is a hallmark of protest art. Was this protest art? Possibly.

By definition, protest art is meant to raise awareness of a social cause. It is usually ephemeral, disposable, anonymous and found outside traditional gallery settings in order to reach the broadest audience possible. I believe that the Edinburgh book sculptor's 2011 work fits the definition. The work brought attention to the contributions libraries make to communities and it delivered a powerful message that resonated around the world – stop cutting library funding. Could the artist have found a more fitting medium?

It's no accident that the work appeared in Edinburgh, the first UNESCO City of Literature. Edinburgh has a rich history of mysteries, storytelling, and literature. Robert Louis Stevenson based *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* on an Edinburgh resident (Deacon Brodie 1741–1788), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was born

in Edinburgh, J. K. Rowling wrote the Harry Potter series while in Edinburgh and Ian Rankin and Alexander McCall Smith are residents. Edinburgh was perfect! After all, doesn't everyone like a good mystery?

It began in March 2011, when staff at the Scottish Poetry Library found the first book sculpture sitting on a table in the stacks. The work was painstakingly cut from old books. No more than 12 inches high, it was a gnarly tree with a paper egg at its base. The egg, broken in half, was lined with gold and the words inside formed title of Edwin Morgan's poem: "A Trace of Wings." No one knew when the piece had been put on the table or who had left it. The attached note started with the library's Twitter handle @byleaveswelive and said:

*... a library is so much more than a
building full of books
... a book is so much more than pages
full of words. ...
This is for you in support of libraries, books,
words, ideas..."*

The staff named the work "Poetree" and posted images on Twitter and Facebook. The posts went viral and that's when I found the piece. Before the end of the year, nine more sculptures had been found.

I was intrigued and wanted to see them in person.

In August 2017, I visited the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. Seeing so many of the book sculptures together was fabulous! They are very special and well worth a visit! I spoke with curator Colin Waters who was welcoming, gracious, and generous with his time. Colin's continued enthusiasm, interest, and engagement with the work and the story was obvious. I told him that I first encountered the work online in March 2011. Colin smiled and said: "*Poetree* was like branches reaching out beyond their starting points." My visit was proof of that.

Colin noted that the work was created: "to show solidarity with libraries and what libraries do for communities." Between March and November 2011, sculptures had been found in the National Library of Scotland, The Edinburgh Central Library, The Museum of Edinburgh and the Scottish Storytelling Centre. The work ranged in scale and subject matter, but all referenced mystery, storytelling and literature and the incredible gifts that books, words, ideas, libraries and other public institutions give to individuals and communities. Colin noted that number 10 was left at the Scottish Poetry Museum. The tag stated: "*Often a good story ends where it begins . . . Cheers Edinburgh It's been fun! X.*" This tag caused concern as sculptures eight and nine had not been found and it was feared they had been inadvertently thrown out. However, within a month, they were discovered: one at the National Museum of Scotland and the other at the Writer's Museum in Edinburgh. All ten were intact.

In September 2011, the *Edinburgh Evening News* reported that they knew the identity of the mysterious book sculptor. Colin noted that the newspaper took a poll and asked readers if they wanted the identity of the artist revealed. Ninety-two percent voted no. Fitting.

While a book sculptor may seem an unlikely



Lost in a good book.

activist, each artwork spoke to the value of libraries, books, words, and ideas. The artist's stated purpose was to enhance the sense of community libraries are known to create while encouraging an increased sense of ownership of these public institutions. The sculptures were created to highlight the damage library funding cuts could cause. The artist set the tone by giving this huge mysterious gift to the community without asking for anything in return. As Colin noted: "This was handmade work. It wasn't 3D printed or made in a factory." He continued: "The artist didn't even want their name known. They weren't looking for public acknowledgment . . . or their name on a building." In a statement left alongside the final gift left in the library, the artist described the sculptures as: "A tiny gesture in support of the special places . . ." Colin noted: "We were super pleased then, and super pleased now that they are still getting attention."

I believe the sculptures speak to a much broader community than Edinburgh and may have helped protect library funding in places far "beyond the starting point" including my city of Toronto. This was not some tiny gesture, but a quiet, powerful, well thought out protest. •