

Capturing history; symbols for our times

2020 was the year of lockdowns and stay-home orders and yet, across the globe, we saw people gather in public places to tear down statues in response to movements like Black Lives Matters. People crowded in to protest at the feet of monuments or, conversely, to protect their figureheads.

Sculpture is important. It is a way of recording and reflecting on our history and values.

Think about how our conversations during the protests turned toward who the relevant figures are; who are the leaders we want to see in our public squares? Discussions questioned who was missing; the black leaders, the working classes, and women. Women have rarely been depicted with respect, fully clothed with our achievements acknowledged.



One woman deserving of public recognition has been a central theme in our sculpture studio for several years. Muriel Matters, Adelaide born suffragist and social activist. She is acknowledged as the first civilian woman to speak in the English parliament. Her words from an impromptu speech, in surprising circumstances, were recorded in the newspapers of the day the House was closed down, while Hansard only mentions 'a disturbance'.

Muriel had already voted twice in Australia, as an Australian citizen, when she moved to England in 1905. She was shocked that English women were so severely disenfranchised. She was convinced that if women had the vote then profound inequalities would be addressed.

Muriel and her best friend travelled extensively across the UK in a horse drawn caravan, delivering lectures and talks in public halls and chambers, often meeting fierce and aggressive resistance. She and her companions devised a series of daring stunts to draw attention to their cause. She chained herself to the grill in the Ladies Gallery of Parliament house, dropping the padlock key inside her bodice. The grill had to be removed from the wall so as to escort her from the room, putting her on the floor of the House, at which point she leant into the chamber to deliver her historic address. On a separate occasion she went up in a balloon to scatter leaflets over London on the day that the King was parading to Parliament.



A hundred years later, Frances Bedford, the independent member for Florey in the South Australian Parliament stumbled across the little-known history of this inspiring activist. Over the last decade Frances has been researching and advancing the story of Muriel, she has collected photographs, artefacts, letters, documents and testimonies to build a complete picture of Muriel's adventures. A recent monograph printed by The Muriel Matters Society is a brilliantly accessible snapshot.

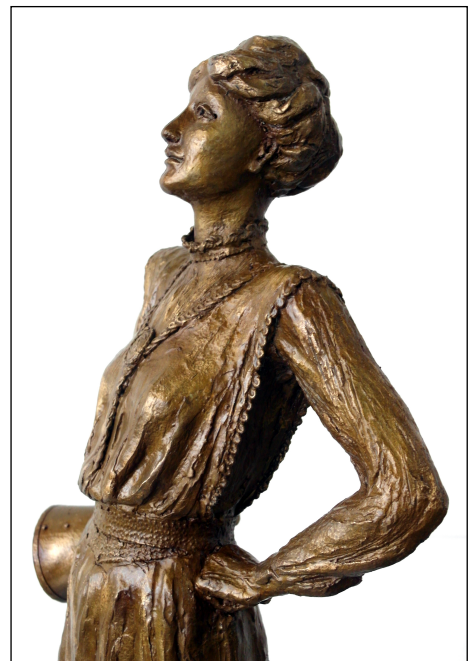
Frances Bedford approached me several years ago, to come up with a design for a sculpture of Muriel. I am a sculptor and bronze caster. My Churchill Fellowship in 2001 was to research advanced techniques to cast artworks into bronze on a large scale. I have specialised over the last twenty years in sculpting historic figures for public places. I own and run an art casting foundry, Liquid Metal Studios, with my husband Will Kuiper.

The intention is to make a sculpture of Muriel Matters as a life sized work. It will be cast as an edition of two, one for Adelaide and one for Hastings, England, where Muriel lived and where her ashes are scattered.

When we design a sculpture we first make a small version, a maquette. The one quarter life sized maquette design for Muriel has gone through several phases. The first idea was derived from a photograph of her clinging to the back of the chair she was standing on, surrounded by a surging crowd. The design was scrapped when we discovered that one of the English suffragettes was to be portrayed in a very similar pose.

I returned to the drawing board, re-read the books and notes about Muriel's exploits, and decided to create a figure based on what I knew of her character rather than working from the photos. A sculpture pose that reflects her audacity, courage and resilience, her capacity to stare down danger with an amused and wry attitude.

I always work from life models for the portrait and figure. It was a wonderful piece of serendipity to find a young dancer who has a very similar face, the high cheekbones, straight classic nose and lovely posture.





Frances Bedford returned from a research trip to England some months after seeing and approving our design, and messaged me that she was eager to show me something. While in England she had been given access to a unique small collection of artefacts which included a photo of Muriel in the very stance that I had sculpted into the maquette. It was one of those beautiful moments of confirmation, when you know you have the work right.

The maquette was cast into bronze in 2019 and finished during 2020. The Muriel maquette was launched in February 2021 by the Chancellor of Adelaide University, The honourable Catherine Branson AC QC, along with the opening of the Muriel Matters room at the National Council of Women of SA building on South Terrace, Adelaide. The maquette will soon be on loan to the University of Adelaide for display in the library of their Politics Department.



The Muriel Matters Society is now beginning to raise funds to have the life-sized sculptures made and cast. Muriel Matters is truly one of the remarkable women of the last 100 years. She was an

inspirational leader who worked actively for social change. Her part in the history of universal suffrage merits recognition. Her audacity, courage, resilience and resourcefulness as she worked toward equal political representation for women, is a story that deserves to live on in our public squares and our cultural imagination.

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