

Sydney's French Art

French gems adorn the Emerald City's celebrated beauty

Frances Cowell, April 2025

No visitor to Sydney can miss Hyde Park, abutting the city's commercial and business centre. Its honour parade of 58 towering weeping figs guides you from the elegant, art deco ANZAC Memorial northward to the Archibald Fountain that commands the park's northern end.

Both monuments owe their existence to the twentieth century's world wars, the Archibald Fountain however, is special in that it honours the association of Australia and France during WWI "for the liberties of the world".

The gift of Jules François, born John Feltham, Archibald, the founding editor of The Bulletin newspaper and admirer of modern French culture for its "clarity of thought and resourceful originality". The oeuvre of French sculptor, François-Léon Sicard certainly does justice to Archibald's legacy.



Against the backdrop of a large arch of fine spray representing the rising sun, a central pedestal vaunts the bronze Apollo six metres high to dominate figures of Diana, who brings harmony to the world, Pan, who watches over the fields and pasture, and Theseus, conquering the Minotaur, symbolic of sacrifice for the common good. At Apollo's feet, horses' heads, tortoises and dolphins direct jets of water towards the centre.

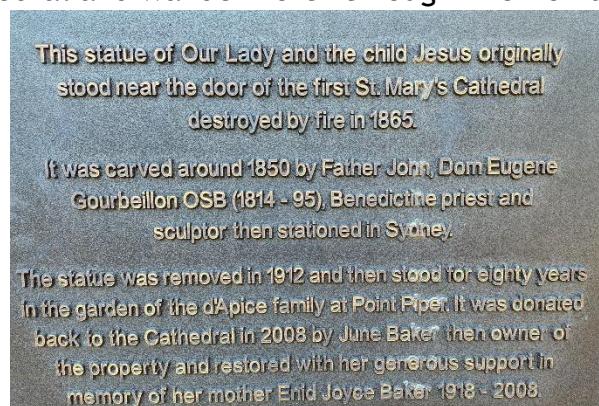
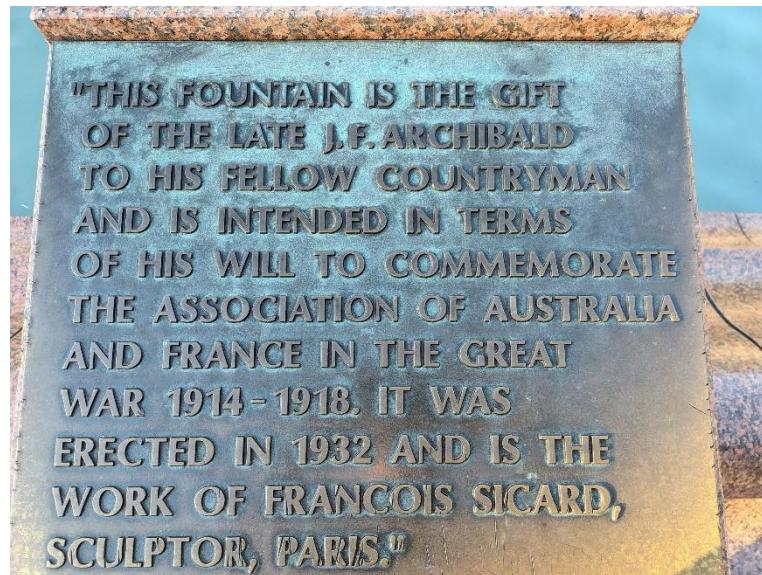
Sicard's bronze figures were displayed in Paris at the Grand Palais in May 1930 before being presented to the City of Sydney on 14 March 1932. Alas, the sculptor never visited the site.

Sicard was hardly the only French artist to enrich Sydney's public spaces, even if, unlike him, most French artists were architectural sculptors, decorative artists or skilled stonemasons, answering the increasingly prosperous colony's demand for skilled artisans, that could not be satisfied by freed convicts and their descendants, to work on government buildings, churches and homes.

Some of those artisans were also doubtless fleeing political turbulence in Europe following revolutions and wars or, like Lucien Henry, a former Communard, escaping political persecution. Others sought the prestige associated with bringing European (especially French) art and culture to what was viewed in Europe as a distant frontier.

French artists in Australia may not have been numerous, but their influence is unmissable. From the Archibald Fountain, turn right and cross College Street to Saint Mary's Cathedral. Nestling discreetly in the shade of the apse, you will see a stone Madonna and child, the creation of Dom Eugene Gourbeillon, a French Benedictine priest serving in Sydney. As discreet as his work, little is known about Dom Gourbeillon.

Exit the grounds of St Mary's Cathedral and wander north through The Domain, where on weekdays, teams of office workers challenge each other in football matches, and on Sundays, tourists and locals gather to listen to the "Soap Box" speakers, who wax on about practically anything. Nutty? Often. Offensive or violent? Never. Free speech as we want it to remain.



Further along, you will come to the gates of the Botanic Gardens, 30 hectares of nature's splendours. Some man-made treasures, too: two of its sculptures are the work of French artists.

Head toward the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and you will see Huntsman and Dogs by Henri Alfred Jacquemart né à Paris le 24 février 1824, étudiant de Paul Delaroche à l'École des beaux-arts de Paris et détenteur de la croix de la Légion d'honneur pour son service dans la Garde nationale mobile du Calvados aux combats dans l'armée de la Loire. En sculpture, il a profité de l'engouement de la bourgeoisie pour les sculptures d'ameublement, particulièrement les sculptures d'animaux. Selon Le Figaro, Henri-Alfred Jacquemart est « un artiste consciencieux et savant, connaissant à merveille sa spécialité de sculpteur animalier » même s'il a été « bien oublié » au moment de son décès.



Now walk down toward the sparkling blue of Sydney Harbour and cross a sunny lawn, where you are unlikely to miss La jument et son poulain -La Reyna et Campéador, purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1891, donated to Botanic gardens in 1958. Il est l'œuvre du Sculpteur d'Arthur Jacques Le Duc, étudiant d'Alfred Guillard ou du sculpteur Pierre Le Nordez à l'École des beaux-arts de Caen, selon Wikipédia.



Continue your meanderings and you will doubtless encounter yet more French culture and influence. That these works are now so essential to Sydney's landscape is witness to the natural affinity between France and her antipodean admirer.