

## *Chapter 15*

# MODELLING IN CLAY & CASTING IN PLASTER

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### **Modelling**

Within the British tradition modelling in clay was, generally speaking, little more than a means to an end. This was because terra cotta will not easily survive the rigours of northern latitudes although stoneware, the basis of “Mrs” Coad’s “stone”, is more resilient. The terra cotta selected by Giovanni de Maiano for the commission of 1521 to adorn the external elevations of Hampton Court with his tondos of emperors were securely let into the brickwork to resist the English winter.<sup>1</sup> Much the same precaution was taken with the terra cotta enrichment of *c.* 1525 on Layer Marney Hall, Essex and Sutton Place, Surrey. More often these Italian or Italianate works of art in Britain were intended for display in interiors – as for example the “picture of Moses made of earth and set in a box of wood” that was stored in the royal “wardrobe” or warehouse in early Tudor London.<sup>2</sup> Fully three-dimensional terra cotta works were destined for the interiors of churches as, for example, the Italianate tomb of *c.* 1530 which commemorates Lord Marney at Layer Marney, Essex, his tomb being an echo of his house.<sup>3</sup> More usually terracotta was used by English sculptors for the preparation of maquettes for large scale works or portrait busts that might subsequently be translated into marble or used as the basis for a full-sized figure.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively a preliminary sketch or full-size work was modelled in clay and cast in Plaster of Paris as the first step towards its metamorphosis into wood, stone, marble, bronze or lead.

A remarkable exception to this notion of fired earth as little more than a



FIGURE 94. Francis Hayman RA (1708–1776), *Joseph Wilton and His Family*, 1760, oil on canvas ( $34 \frac{5}{8} \times 42 \frac{5}{8}$  in/ $80.8 \times 106.7$  cm). On the easel is a clay *modello* for a marble overmantel relief destined for Northumberland House (dem. 1874) Westminster. The clay model was believed to have been translated into marble by Benjamin Carter. A sculptor of Wilton's kind was the supervisor rather than the executant of much of "his" work. This was a situation that made possible the fine clothes and drawing-room setting shown here. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

preliminary is the work carried out in John Dwight's (1633/6–1703) "Potthouse" in Fulham. In terms of his background Dwight falls well outside the craft traditions of his day. Following his graduation from Christchurch, Oxford, where he read Civil Law and "Physick", he spent a decade (*c.* 1660–1670) as an ecclesiastical lawyer. While still at Oxford he began experiments with ceramics and, by 1672, had established his pottery near his house in Fulham, immediately to the west of London on the north bank of the River Thames. At Oxford Dwight became acquainted with Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke and through them the emerging Age of Enlightenment. These connections show that, with regard to his ceramics business, Dwight was more the chemist and

entrepreneur than the working craftsman.<sup>5</sup> Robert Plott (1677) implied as much by stating that Dwight “hath ... caused to be modelled Statues of Figures” and that these were created in such a durable material that they were “capable of more curious work than *stones* that are wrought with *chisels* or *metals* that are cast. In short he has advanced the *Art Plastick* that ’tis dubious whether any man since *Prometheus* have excelled him ...”<sup>6</sup> Dwight’s products were cast in multiples and fired (hence the reference to Prometheus) to become stoneware. They were therefore more robust than terra cotta. Less certain is the identity of the sculptors that Dwight “caused” to make his products (Fig. 97). The known connections between the Fulham potteries and those down river at Southwark and Lambeth could point to a member of the Anglo-Netherlandish school of sculptors. Despite this possibility Chris Green (1999), the authority on Dwight and his “Potthouse”, suggests that Edward Pearce (*c.* 1635–1695) was the author of many of the surviving pieces of this ware. Dwight patented his processes in April 1672 and in June 1684. These rights extended to the “Mystery & Invencon of making transparent Earthenware ... And also the Mystery & Invention of making the Stone Ware vulgarly called Collogne Ware”.<sup>7</sup> The stoneware “*Statues* or *Figures*” were discontinued but hollow earthenwares continued to be made at the Fulham pottery down to the late 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

If modelling in clay was generally regarded as a preliminary towards a more permanent material what was the next stage in this ongoing process? A good example concerns a closed



FIGURE 95. John Bacon RA (1740–1799) *The Marquis Cornwallis*, 1791. The extent to which Bacon was able to work marble is uncertain. This is clearly a highly accomplished work which was probably carved by an assistant. For structural reasons, the cloak and the cornucopia of fruit help to sustain the figure at the legs and ankles. Similarly the sword and olive branch support the wrists and hands by which they are ostensibly held. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, London; Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art)

competition in 1795 for a statue of Lord Cornwallis to be erected in Madras, India.<sup>9</sup> In connection with this venture the Royal Academy held its first meeting on 16 July that year and it was eventually agreed that Thomas Banks RA (1735–1805) and Joseph Wilton RA (1722–1803) would compete for this commission. Of these two men much the most accomplished as a carver was Banks and, probably for this reason, Wilton quietly withdrew as a contestant. By 25 May 1796, less than a year after the initial discussions, Banks invited members of the RA Council to see the figure. By this date it had been modelled half size (n.b. one-eighth volume (Fig. 107)) in clay and cast in plaster so the sculptor sought the imprimatur of the Academicians “before he [began] work on the marble [which] he thought he should compleat ... by next Christmas twelve months” – a year and a half to carve the figure. It was anticipated that Banks would make a profit on this job of “12 or £1300” since the marble “including the Pedestal” was unlikely to cost more than £200. The figure was then transported to India and unveiled on 15 May 1800.<sup>10</sup>

As usual this progression from clay to plaster to marble was typical and serves to demonstrate the importance of modelling in clay as the first step to realising the work in marble. The place of clay in the sculptor’s studio was paralleled in the decorative plasterer’s workshop where the components of a given scheme were often modelled before being cast and offered up and fixed in their final position – although mouldings were frequently “run” *in situ*.

The sculptor Sir Joseph Wilton RA emerged from just such a plasterers workshop. His father William Wilton (d. 1768):

“though a common plasterer, acquired a fair fortune ... in his workshops in Hedge Lane, Charing Cross and in Edward Street, Cavendish Square, he employed several hundreds of men and boys in this profitable manufacture. These premises were afterwards occupied by his more eminent son.”<sup>11</sup>

With such a background, and equipped with such studio space it was perhaps inevitable that this son, Sir Joseph Wilton, was principally a modeller. He employed others to transfer his work into marble.

Although the association between plastic and wrought sculpture was close most large studios were organised so as to separate the activities which involved modelling, plaster casting and carving. This division was an important way of maintaining the purity of the clay and ensured that it was not contaminated by plaster, stone dust, wood chips or marble gallets. This separation of the crafts led to specialisms in modelling, casting and carving. With regard to casting in plaster one such specialist was Thomas Collins (born *c.* 1740–d. after 1796) who was “bred to the Plaistering business by his uncle” William Wilton.<sup>12</sup>