

## Two hitherto totally unknown van wouws

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The art world is inevitably delighted when new works by an established pioneer artist are discovered, because it not only fills in the gaps in his/her oeuvre, but it also extends our knowledge of the creative potential of the artist in question. Recently two lost works by the well-known pioneer South African sculptor, Anton van Wouw (1862-1945) were discovered. This paper reconstructs the events surrounding the discoveries and places the works within the context of the oeuvre of the sculptor.

**Key words:** Anton van Wouw, South African sculptor

### Twee tot nou toe totaal onbekende Van Wouws

Die kunstwêreld is onvermydelik opgetoë wanneer nuwe werke deur 'n gevestigde pionierkunstenaar ontdek word, omdat dit nie net gapings in sy/haar oeuvre invul nie, maar dit verbreed ook ons kennis van die skeppingspotensiaal van die betrokke kunstenaar. Onlangs is twee verlore werke deur die bekende pionier Suid-Afrikaanse beeldhouer, Anton van Wouw (1862-1945) herontdek. Hierdie publikasie rekonstrueer die gebeurtenisse rondom die herontdekkings en plaas die werke binne die konteks van die oeuvre van die beeldhouer.

In July 1906<sup>1</sup> Van Wouw, who was initially trained as a stucco-worker and concrete caster in Rotterdam, moved from Pretoria, where he originally settled in 1890, to Johannesburg. The principal reason for the move was to be closer to the hub of the major building activities in South Africa in the post-Anglo-Boer war years (Duffey 2002:31). As a matter of fact he had already been doing a great deal of architectural sculptural work for numerous new buildings in Johannesburg for the architects Leck and Emley from 1903 onwards (Duffey 2002:27). By 1905 he was advertising himself as a sculptor and modeller in partnership with Charles Marega in *Longlands Transvaal directory* (Longlands 1905:871 & 1291). His involvement with the building industry in Johannesburg inevitably brought him into contact with the mining magnates of the Witwatersrand and through them with the mining world in general.

The first of the recently discovered sculptures by Van Wouw was specifically created for the Chamber of Mines in Johannesburg. It is the first of a number of sculptures showing miners, which Van Wouw was to create while staying in Johannesburg.

It is fortunate that it was Van Wouw's habit, from very early on in his career as a sculptor, to place recently completed sculptures in the background when he was photographed with new work he was doing. Any researcher of Van Wouw's work, who knows this, can therefore use either the work in the background or that in the foreground to date one or the other.

In an early photograph in the possession of the City Council of Pretoria, one sees the sculptor at work on a clay model of a seated European figure in baggy trousers, mining boots and showing a muscular naked upper body. In his right hand the figure has a heavy hammer, which rests on the rock on which he is sitting, and in his left hand, which rests on his left knee, he holds a miner's chisel. The posture and the tools identify the clay figure as a miner (see figure 1). Behind the sculpture against a boarded wall is a casting<sup>2</sup> of the *Women's Memorial Bas-relief panel*, which was a preliminary sketch that Van Wouw had created for one of the side panels for his design for the Women's Memorial in Bloemfontein. Since this panel dates from the first half of 1910, it serves as a good indicator of the date when the photograph in question was taken. The appearance and dress of the sculptor in this photograph is exactly the same as that in another photograph of him, which was published in the journal, *The State*, of June 1910 (Stuart 1910a:865). Both these photographs were undoubtedly taken on the same day, since the appearance of the sculptor and the clothes he is wearing are identical. The logical conclusion then is that this figurine must have had something to do with a mining event, which happened during the second half of 1910. A day-by-day search through a number of well-known Trans-

vaal newspapers in the State library in Pretoria, was undertaken to try and find the relevant event.



**Figure 1**  
**Van Wouw working on the clay statuette of *The Miner*, ca. 1910. CCP.**

In an article entitled “The city adorned”, in the *Transvaal Leader* of 28 November 1910, an anonymous writer tells of the visit of the Duke of Connaught to Johannesburg and mentions a triumphal arch in Commissioner street erected by the Chamber of Mines, with the following words:

“ It is a study in white and gold. As illuminated last night its fabric seemed wrought in warmly-white porcelain, studded with deep-yellow gold. The piled ingots on its summit, though mainly in the shadow, yet subduedly reflected the refracted light from below, as did also Herr Van Wouw’s masterly conception of a miner, which crowns the centre. This work is certainly the masterpiece of the three studies Herr Van Wouw has contributed to the general scheme. Masculinity and intelligence are in every curve” (*Transvaal Leader* 1910:8).



**Figure 2**  
**Triumphal arch in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg during the visit of the Duke of Connaught in November 1910 – Van Wouw’s Miner on the top.**

Accompanying the article is a clear photograph showing the arch straddling the street with the words “Welcome. Loyal greetings from the mining industry” inscribed on the front of the arch and a larger than life-size plaster version of the figurine surmounting the central arch (see figure 2). The figure on the arch is unmistakably the same one on which Van Wouw is seen working in the City Council of Pretoria photograph. Although this information solved some

problems, it created many others. Why did Van Wouw show a “white” miner, when all his later miner figurines are African? What happened to the original model as well as the final plaster sculpture? Did he make any castings of the original statuette as he did with so many of his other commissions?

Van Wouw seems to have used a “white” miner to comply with the wishes of the board of the Chamber of Mines. In the Imperialist and colonial world of the early twentieth century in Johannesburg, the Chamber had to emphasize its “masculinity” and “intelligence” (to use the words of the above-mentioned quote), to justify its existence in the eyes of the visiting Duke of Connaught as the guardians of England’s mining interests in “darkest” Africa. The implication was that mining interests were in the capable hands of “civilized” Europeans. The muscular semi-nude seated male figure proclaims the image of the masculinity of the mining industry. The emphasis is on the heroic white miner, who epitomises power, strength, daring, perseverance and intelligence.



**Figure 3**

**A.vanWouw: Miner. 1910 Bronze, 546 mm high, Vignali-casting, Private collection.**

With some effort it was found that a plaster of the original statuette, shown in the City Council of Pretoria photograph, had survived until the 1960’s in the possession of a Mr Haynes, a member of the Chamber of Mines. Upon his death it was found amongst his belongings, but it had been painted with a thick layer of industrial paint, which had covered the “A v W” signature on the back. Dr Colijn van Bergen recognized the work as a Van Wouw and with the permission of Mr Haynes’ son, had two posthumous bronze castings made at the Vignali foundry in Pretoria. They then destroyed the original plaster. One of these bronzes (see figure 3) was traced to a private collection in Pretoria.

At the time that Van Wouw was making this figurine, he must have been toying with the typicality of sculptures destined for buildings, since much of the work he was doing at that time in Johannesburg, as well as in Pretoria, was architectural and also since the figure in question was to surmount an arch. The sort of architectural aesthetic one sees in this figurine reminds one of the sort of architectural sculpture which was visible twenty-five years later in Nazi Ger-

many, particularly in the work of Arno Breker and Joseph Thorak (Taylor & Van der Will 1990: 63, 102, 243). Clarity of vision and a peculiar upright stance are key elements in this aesthetic. Fortunately Van Wouw moved away from this aesthetic in his later mining figures.

The second of the recently discovered Van Wouw sculptures is a full-length seated figure of Lord Buxton, the second Governor-General of South Africa<sup>2</sup>. Leads that such a statuette might exist were found in a number of articles about Van Wouw in *De Volkstem* of 1918.



**Figure 4**

**A. van Wouw: *Lord Buxton in a Chair* 1920. Bronze, 380 mm high. Nisini-casting. Family collection of the Duke of Grafton, England.**

According to *De Volkstem* Lady Buxton visited Van Wouw's studio in Doornfontein early in 1918 to become acquainted with his work (*De Volkstem* 22.1.1918:6). She must have been impressed with the sculptor's portraiture, because by December 1918 Lord Buxton had decided to have a life-size bust of himself made by Van Wouw (*De Volkstem* 3.12.1918:2). However, it seems that between this date and February 1920 the Governor-General had decided to rather have a full-length figurine instead of a bust, because in *De Volkstem* of 27 February 1920 we read:

“Met de vervaardiging van Lord Buxton's bronzen statuette sittende in 'n stoel is 'n begin gemaakt” (“A start has been made with the making of Lord Buxton's bronze statuette seated in a chair”) (*De Volkstem* 27.2.1920:14).

From an article in *Die Huisgenoot* of 1925 it was gathered that the statuette had been completed and that Lord Buxton was very pleased with the result (Du Toit 1925:21).

The next step was therefore to determine where the sculpture was at present. After contacting the descendants of Lord Buxton in England, it was determined that the statuette is at present in the family collection of the Duke of Grafton in Herefordshire.

This 380mm high bronze statuette is very conventional and academic. It shows a middle-aged man smartly dressed in a suit, waistcoat, collar and bowtie and seated in a sturdy colonial

chair. He sits straight up with legs crossed and his right arm resting on the right armrest of the chair. With his left hand he grasps his right arm. He is slightly balding and has a large full moustache. The chair stands on a raised base. As far as could be ascertained, this is the only casting ever made of this statuette and no plaster seems to have survived. Lord Buxton personally posed for the work in Van Wouw's studio in Doornfontein and Van Wouw had the statuette cast in Rome by the Nisini foundry when he went there in 1921.

The discovery of these two unknown Van Wouws, at a time when it was thought that all possible works of this artist had been traced, now opens up the probability that there may still be other works by this master sculptor that have not come to light yet.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is contrary to all existing sources on the artist, who all note that he established himself in Johannesburg at the end of 1907 or in 1908 and remained there until 1938, when he moved to Pretoria.

<sup>2</sup> Sydney Charles Buxton (1853-1934) assumed office as Governor-General of South Africa on 8 September 1914 and remained in office until June 1920, the year in which he was granted an earldom.

See Jaff 1963:112, Duffey 1981:10 and Berman 1983:472.

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