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Walls have mouths: architectural emblems in the Glasgow City Chambers

Kirsten Somerville

Architectural sculpture may often be overlooked or dismissed as mere aesthetic embellishment, but on closer examination, important messages may be contained within it. Specifically, it can be used in a uniquely emblematic way to project certain ideologies of power. This emblematic process involves the recombination of various fragmented signs and allusions into new forms by the viewer to arrive at a meaning. It is argued that such a process is employed extensively in the architectural sculptures of the Glasgow City Chambers building as a powerful tool to communicate Victorian ideals of power and value. The power of the emblem in architecture can only be appreciated through a multi-disciplinary approach, incorporating architectural, historical and literary methodologies.

The emblematic figures of architectural sculpture are designed precisely to tell stories; stories of a city's history, what it valued and how it wanted to be seen, as decided by the powerful few. Those in control of the design of public buildings gave a voice to these architectural figures, and thus imparted the power to speak to the public about what, and who, is valuable to society. This article will outline some important methodological considerations in the study of architectural emblems, as well as tracing the history of their use in communicating power. It will then examine in detail a local case study of the City Chambers building in Glasgow city centre, aiming to highlight the way in which emblematics in the architecture can be seen to reveal certain aspects of the political and cultural values of the Victorian era in which the building was largely developed.

It is important to note from the outset that a particular methodological approach is needed for the study of architecture as emblem. This approach incorporates methodologies from a range of disciplines: one must consider the architecture of the building itself, the history of its construction and use, as well as the literature and other cultural forms which may have informed the composition of the emblematic figures. Judi Loach, a 'hybrid academic, trained in architecture, architectural history and literature'¹, notes that the academic study of emblems has hitherto been predominantly from the literary perspective, focusing on the analysis of

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¹ J. Loach 'Architecture and Emblematics: Issues in Interpretation', in (ed.) A. Adams, *Emblems and Art History: Nine Essays* (Glasgow, 1996), 2.

particular emblem books.² She suggests ways in which we might bridge this apparent methodological gap by considering issues raised by four key properties specific to architecture, namely: ‘spatiality, sequentiality and simultaneity, architecture’s role as the setting for ceremony or performance, and the communal nature of the experience’.³ In her article, Loach makes reference mostly to emblems in Renaissance and Baroque architecture in Lyon, and suggests that these emblems can be best understood by analysis of their intended environment. In order to best understand these emblems we must appeal to a conceptual reconstruction of their locations’ physical and perceived environment, a conceptual reconstruction of the ceremonies and performances held within this environment, and the consideration of the sensory experience of this environment. Although some of Loach’s suggestions might appear specifically suited to the understanding of architecture from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, which are both temporally and culturally distant from modern and contemporary times – for example, aspects relating to royal entry ceremonies and festivals – it is nonetheless a very useful guide to notable aspects of architectural study. There are particularities in the way emblems function in the built environment (as opposed to on the printed page of an emblem book), which stem from the way that they are encountered, animated and experienced. These methods of conceptual reconstruction should not be forgotten when analysing architecture from any time period.

It is important to establish exactly what is meant by an ‘emblem’. After the first named ‘emblem book’, Alciato’s *Livret des Emblemes*, was published in French in 1536, its popularity inspired a new genre of literature that focused on the text-image combination. Conventionally each emblem comprised of a picture, a title and a short verse text;⁴ this form appealed to the hybrid visual-textual culture, which developed with the rise of literacy after the visual culture of the Middle Ages. This allowed emblem books to remain popular until the late 17th century.⁵ However, emblems do not exclusively exist within literature. The use of specific emblems outside of the printed book, for example in architecture and interior decoration, is not a new idea but rather one that was there from the very beginning of the genre’s development, and indeed was actively encouraged by some authors of emblem books.⁶

It is also clear that emblems’ influence on culture extended far beyond the individual emblems composed and published by known authors. Emblems that were created off the page

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ D. Russell, ‘1536: Emblems’, in (ed.) D. Hollier, *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, 1989), 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶ D. Russell, *Emblematic Structures in Renaissance French Culture* (Toronto, 1995), 214.

were also extremely important. In the words of the emblem historian Daniel Russell, emblems were ‘taken very seriously and understood as a particularly potent means of communication’.⁷ It is therefore important to explain the workings of applied emblematics and how certain images may be understood in an emblematic way, without necessarily being lifted and reproduced exactly from an original published source. Russell identifies such an ‘emblematic process’ by distinguishing it from the interpretation of medieval allegory which only has a single intrinsic meaning to be deciphered:

[T]he emblematic processing of traditional materials would seem to involve two distinct sequential procedures consisting, at least by implication, of the fragmentation of well-known allegorical works or traditional sign systems and the subsequent recombination of fragmented elements of them into new and striking signifying units.⁸

Writing specifically on court culture, he argues: ‘when [...] a fragmentary motif or allusion in painting or discourse can be interpreted only in an allegorical way, it becomes [...] an emblematic image’.⁹ Thus, the essence of the emblematic image lies in its fragmentation of allusions which must be pieced together by the viewer themselves, who will be – according to the various sign systems available to them – combining the conveyed information and the implied references to arrive at a meaning. This could be visualised as a kind of ‘conversation’ between the figures in the emblematic image and the viewer. It is this interaction between the voices of the observer and the observed that gives the emblem its unique cultural power.

Historically, emblems as architectural decoration have existed as more than the simple reproduction of printed emblems. They can often be seen to operate in accordance with Russell’s ‘emblematic process’. In *Emblematic Structures in Renaissance French Culture*, Russell notes the development of emblematic decoration in light of the development of the emblem phenomenon in general:

Although by the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, complete emblems were commonly used in programs of interior decoration [...] such an explicit use of emblematics was rare in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries [...] The reason is, I think, that early in the period no need was felt to signal the emblematic, whereas by the eighteenth century, with its increasingly naturalistic view of the world, the emblematic needed more than ever to be bracketed, framed, and set apart from the surrounding world.¹⁰

⁷ Russell, ‘1536: Emblems’, 167-168. He goes on to note, for example, the extensive use of emblems by the Jesuits as a ‘rhetorical matrix in structuring sermons’ and ‘a highly prized pedagogical tool in religious schools’, as well as the teaching of emblem composition in Jesuit colleges’, 170.

⁸ D. Russell, ‘The Emblem and Device in France’, *Series: French Forum Monographs*, Vol 59 (Lexington, 1985), 164.

⁹ D. Russell, *Emblematic Structures in Renaissance French Culture*, 193.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

There are numerous examples of ‘such an explicit use of emblematics’ in the décor of court ceremonies, royal entries, marriages, festivals and processions in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century France. Surely the best example from this era is the Palace of Versailles, a landscape conceived precisely as an all-encompassing emblematic experience, produced to convey the perfection and wonder of Louis XIV’s absolute monarchy. In itself, his sun device was designed to portray his image as an all-powerful ruler, and this is reflected at every scale in the design of the Palace and its grounds. From the gardens’ central axis, themed around the sun’s progress throughout the day, radiated a whole host of other displays. These features varied from the labyrinth, with its technologically and visually magnificent fountains, to the gardens, with their exotic fruit and flowers brought under symmetrical control. Even the experience of visitors within this space added to the emblematic quality of the landscape. The guided visits led visitors’ movements in a strictly controlled direction, and the musical and theatrical entertainments of festivals were laden with symbolism and iconography (of the sun and Apollo). Each and every detail was designed to communicate the Sun King’s power and embody his *Nec pluribus impar* device.¹¹ From the example of Versailles we get a sense of the importance of the uniquely architectural aspects of the emblematic functions as outlined by Loach. It is the combined impact of the spatiality (the layout of the Palace), the sequentiality and simultaneity (the directed movement around the palace and omnipresence of iconography), the setting (for complementary entertainments) and the communality of the experience (its importance in the common memory of the citizenry) that render Versailles such a powerful ideological tool. As Grove summarises: ‘Throughout, mystery leads to marvel as the beholder pieces together visual effect, sensory perception and intellectual context’.¹²

The metaphoric ‘voice’ of emblems has been utilized to communicate power since their early development. Versailles was a key example of such processes at the peak of the emblematic age. At the time of its construction and initial reception, the emblem was a well-established and self-aware genre, with commentaries and theories on its workings. A notable example is Ripa’s definitive guide, *Iconologie*, from which artists and architects could draw inspiration; Russell notes the importance of such works in consolidating the various sign systems/codes available to Renaissance artists.¹³ The emblem format, and emblematic age, is conventionally understood to have died out after Louis XIV, towards the mid-eighteenth century. But to argue that this was the end of its influence in wider culture is to ignore a wealth of evidence

¹¹ L. Grove, ‘Multi-Media Emblems and their Modern-Day Counterparts’, in (eds.) A.J. Harper, *et al.*, *Emblematic Tendencies in the Art and Literature of the Twentieth Century*, 10, (Glasgow, 2005), 171.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹³ D. Russell, ‘The Emblem and Device in France’, *Series: French Forum Monographs*, vol 59 (Lexington, 1985), 173.

to the contrary. In architecture, emblematic influences can be seen in examples ranging from the Victorian era to the present day. The literature on applied emblematics has tended to focus on Renaissance architecture, but it is interesting to note that Grove's paper compares Versailles function to the emblematic functioning of Disneyland Paris. According to Grove, Disneyland uses similar strategies of cultural enticement to that of Versailles, but to communicate an ideology of North American capitalism. He argues that the employment of such processes in Disneyland is a mark of 'the second emblematic age'¹⁴ in contemporary culture. If this is the case, let us not forget the preceding peak in the emblem's historical rise and fall – the Victorian revival. This period saw an 'exponential growth of sculpture'¹⁵ in terms of both monuments and architectural decoration – the latter being deemed 'an equally, if not more fertile breeding ground for significant work'.¹⁶ In this article, the case study will focus on an area constructed during the Victorian era in central Glasgow, at the peak of its position as 'Second City of the Empire'. I contend that a revival of elements of Renaissance-style emblematic architecture can be seen, yet this time reworked to illustrate the Victorian-Imperial values of trade, knowledge and honour, extending from the Second City to the rest of the world.

In the early 1880s, City Architect John Carrick was asked to propose a site for new purpose-built Council offices, following a series of relocations as the city's population and council's responsibilities continued to expand. The design of the eventual City Chambers was executed by Paisley-born, London-based and Glasgow-trained architect William Young, after he was chosen as the winner of two competitions which drew hundreds of entries. It was a grandiose design, conceived as a status symbol of Glasgow's industrial wealth and prosperity at the height of the empire. We get a sense of the symbolic importance of this building from the grand ceremony conducted around the laying of the foundation stone by the Lord Provost, John Ure, on 6th October 1883. The date was made a public holiday and all public works were suspended. An estimated 600,000 spectators gathered to watch a number of trade and Masonic processions – which converged on George Square, decorated with temporary triumphal arches and later the scene of fireworks displays – before the ceremonial laying of the stone commenced.¹⁷ In short, it was not at all dissimilar to the proceedings of Renaissance royal entries that Loach detailed or the entertainments at Versailles as outlined by Grove, with a slight alteration in the cause of the celebrations – once the personal virtues of a monarch became the blossoming of a city into a global centre of trade and industry. Following Loach

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵ R. McKenzie, 'Public Sculpture of Glasgow', *Series: Public Sculpture of Britain*, vol. 5, (Liverpool, 2002), xiii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-151.

and Grove, it is important to remember how sensory experience can enhance the emblematic experience in architecture. One can imagine the sense of shared civic pride felt by the crowds of spectators as the trades that made Glasgow were paraded through its streets, and the saturation of the senses as the national anthem was sung in George Square. The new heart of the city was finely decorated for the occasion. Taking advantage of her visit to the grand imperial event of the International Exhibition at Kelvingrove Park, the City Chambers was officially inaugurated by the imperial leader herself, Queen Victoria, on 22nd August 1888. The following year, the first council meetings were held there and the building was opened to the public, attracting 400,000 visitors in ten days.¹⁸

The City Chambers' architect himself described the building's architecture as 'a free and dignified treatment of the Renaissance'.¹⁹ It is evident from the extensive use of detailed architectural sculpture in the design that there was a conscious effort to replicate the emblematic function present in so many grand buildings from the aforementioned era. We have already seen how, following Russell's understanding, the emblematic process can be understood as a fragmentation and recombination of commonly known sign systems. The sculptural embellishments of the City Chambers building employ this process in a number of examples that recombine classical figures and symbols with known symbols and allusions from the era of its production, which resulted in a building that operates on a number of levels as emblematic of Glasgow and its status as a leading city on a global scale.

Let us begin by analysing the pediment on the George Square façade above the main entrance (see Fig. 1) and examining how the sculpted figures situated there speak of historical power structures. The pediment is not only visually the most arresting and sculpturally the most elaborate component; it is also emblematically the richest feature of the building. It depicts Queen Victoria seated on her raised throne with a lion at her feet, crowned and holding a sceptre. She is supported on each side by classically draped figures representing England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, each bearing the national coat of arms and wearing a wreath of honour. The sides are then filled with figures representing the British colonial possessions, the 'oriental' on the right and 'occidental' on the left, paying homage and bringing presents and products. Every detail of the image is designed to show Victoria's authority over her Empire. The seated figure is the definitive symbol of authority. This is ordained by Ripa's *Iconologie* (see Fig. 2) where he elaborates '*les Juges, qui ont puissance d'absoudre & de*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ W. Young, quoted in C. Foreman, 'The City Chambers: George Square', in her *Hidden Glasgow* (Edinburgh, 2001), 2.

condamner, ne le peuvent faire selon les loix, s'ils ne sont assis,²⁰ ('judges, who have the power to pardon and to condemn, cannot do this according to the laws, if they are not seated'). Added to this definitive symbol is the equally long-established symbolism of the crown and sceptre (which also features in Ripa's icon of authority). Interestingly, the main difference between Ripa's image of authority and the image of Victoria – other than the understandable absence of partial nudity of the subject – is the absence of religious imagery. Ripa's figure holds up keys '*pour nous apprendre, comme dit S. Paul, Que toute puissance vient de Dieu*'²¹ ('to teach us, as St Paul said, *that all power comes from God*') and has books at her feet, '*un signe expres de l'Autorité des Escritures*'²² ('an express sign of the Authority of the Scriptures'). Victoria, in contrast, has a lion at her feet. This image makes for an interesting comparison with Alciato's emblem '*Amour affection trespuissante*' ('Love, the all-powerful emotion' (see Fig. 3)) which depicts the all-powerful Cupid taming the lions. The final lines of the emblem's *subscriptio* ask:

Car s'il est puissant pour ces bestes,
Pensez vous que nous en allions,
Sans qu'il nous lie coeurs & testes?

(For if he holds power over these beasts,
Do you think that we could go along,
Without him linking our heads and hearts?²³)

The taming of the lion is a vivid symbol of power over a great beast. In the pediment image it is Victoria who holds this same inescapable omnipotence as Cupid in the emblem. Even the geometry of the pediment reinforces the structure of authority in the Empire. The triangular shape in itself evokes hierarchy, with the individual Victoria at the apex, the four nations her closest level of support, and the numerous colonies subordinate, who present the products of their labour to their rightful owner. This imperialist, internationalist theme is embodied in the very fabric of the building, its interior an opulent exposition of the finest materials from around the world: the staircase is of Tuscan marble, the Council Chamber is of Spanish mahogany, and the Salon of Australian Satinwood.

It is fascinating to note that this image was not the initial plan for the pediment, which was originally designed to depict a symbolic figure of Glasgow, with 'the Clyde at her feet

²⁰ C. Ripa, *Iconologie, ou, Explication nouvelle de plusieurs images, emblemes, et autres figures: tirée des recherches & des figures de Cesar Ripa; desseignées & gravées par Jacques de Bie, et moralisées par J. Baudoin* (Paris: Chez l'Auteur, 1636), 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Translated more literally from the original Latin as 'Would one who has the power to conquer such a beast keep his hands from us?'

sending her manufactures and her arts to all the world',²⁴ but this was reconsidered in light of the construction taking place in the year of the Queen's Jubilee. This change was proposed after construction had begun, and its significance is clear considering the added difficulty and cost of such an alteration. Perhaps the prime image being of gifts given to Victoria from the world, rather than from Glasgow to the world, is revelatory of Queen and country still being the prime value in Victorian Glasgow. Perhaps it was merely a desire to display the exotic figures of the colonial possessions or emphasise the internationality of the city rather than its own production. We cannot be sure of the reasons for the change in the pediment's design, but what we can be sure of is the prime importance of its emblematic message. The power of the emblematic voice was clearly well understood by those charged with the building's design, and it was decided that the more appropriate story to be told was one which ultimately emphasised the power of the monarch over the power of the city workers – a crucial decision which reflects the values and power structures of the time.

Let us return to the rest of the architecture of the building's exterior. Above the pediment stand the figures of 'Truth, holding up the light of liberty over the city, and in her train are two supporting figures of Riches and Honour'.²⁵ These seem to mark the guiding principles of the Empire. Continue the gaze upwards and one discovers the central tower, surmounted by a gilded copper filial composed of an orb, a cross and a weather vane. The tower is decorated with four figures representing the four seasons. These can be interpreted emblematically when their orientation is considered: Spring faces to 'the opening east', Summer to 'the sunny south', Autumn to 'the declining west' and Winter to 'the bleak north'.²⁶ We get a sense from this and the iconography of the filial that Glasgow – and by extension, Great Britain and its Empire – is at the centre of the world. The progress of "elsewhere" is being judged in relation to its golden example. This can be seen as another incident of the emblematic 'conversation' between the viewer's knowledge and the emblem's allusions. This process has been cleverly manipulated to lead the viewer to discover a certain ideology which reinforces Glasgow's power as a city in the world.

Having studied the emblematic projection of the power of Victoria and the Empire, a further aspect of interest is the stories told of Glasgow itself. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a building intended to represent the city, the Glasgow coat of arms features heavily in both its exterior and interior. The most interesting example is its incorporation into an elaborate emblematic frieze above the main entrance archways on the George Square façade. The coat of arms, in itself an emblem combining allusions to the miracles of St Mungo, Glasgow's patron saint,

²⁴ W. Young, quoted in R. McKenzie, 'Public Sculpture of Glasgow', 156.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁶ North British Daily Mail (3/07/1889), quoted in R. McKenzie, 'Public Sculpture of Glasgow', 157.

and bearing the motto 'Let Glasgow flourish' is at the centre of the central panel above the principle entrance archway (see Fig. 4). It is flanked by reclining female figures, winged and classically draped, one bearing a trumpet and the other a palm leaf, to symbolise glory and victory. These are accompanied by further classical personifications of the virtues of hope, faith, truth and charity (holding an anchor, a crucifix, a mirror and a crowned heart respectively). The panel above the left archway contains male figures representing various areas of scientific knowledge; for example, a telescope for astronomy, and a globe for geology (see Fig. 5). This is complemented on the right by male figures representing various areas of artistic knowledge: sculpture, as knowledge of forms; painting, as knowledge of colour; etcetera. (see Fig. 6). This identification of particular symbols with the various virtues and areas of academic knowledge represents the first stage of Russell's 'emblematic process': the fragmentation of known symbols and allusions. The second stage consists of their recombination and subsequent re-interpretation into new significations in accordance with a text. Here, the text is not explicit, but rather alluded to in the safe knowledge of its understanding given the place specificity of the architectural emblem. The text is the extended version of the Glasgow motto. Young describes the figures as 'all bringing their respective knowledge to support the central motto, "Let Glasgow flourish". Religion, Virtue and Knowledge – may be taken to embody the missing half of the motto, "by the preaching of the word"'.²⁷ This follows Loach's theory on the importance of spatiality and place in architectural emblems. The emblematic frieze is created to be understood especially by those who have a pre-existing knowledge of Glasgow's local texts – it is an emblematic voice with a Glaswegian accent.

Thus it can be concluded that Glasgow City Chambers operates in a distinctly emblematic way to project a Victorian ideology, which emphasises Queen, country and Empire, as well as championing the values of knowledge, trade and industry that had brought Glasgow to the fore at that moment in history. We have seen how, following Russell, this impact was achieved through the fragmentation and recombination of various sign systems, both classical-historical and local-contemporary. We have also seen how, following Loach, the function of the architectural emblematics is best understood through the conceptual reconstruction of the environment and its place in space and time. The presence of this extensive use of architectural emblematics can be seen to reflect the Victorian revival of emblem books and indeed a cultural shift back towards mysticism, and symbolism, after the rationalism and empiricism that dominated the eighteenth century. Thus, the powerful emblematic images have 'spoken' to us, providing the key to unlock the cultural and political history preserved in the bricks and mortar of our public buildings. Historical figures may have

²⁷ W. Young, quoted in R. McKenzie, 'Public Sculpture of Glasgow', 153.

been set in stone, no longer showcased by accompanying ceremonies, but to the attentive passer-by, their voices have not been silenced.

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Fig. 1: City Chambers Jubilee Pediment. (Author's Photograph)



Fig. 2: 'Autorité', Cesare Ripa, *Iconologie*, (Paris, 1636), 28. (Author's photograph, by permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections)



Fig. 3: 'Amour affection trespoussante', Andrea Alciato, *Livret des emblemes* (Paris, 1536). By permission of University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections, via <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FALa007> [6.6.12]



Fig. 4: City Chambers main entrance archway frieze, central panel. (Author's Photograph)



Fig. 5: City Chambers main entrance archway frieze, left side panel. (Author's Photograph)



Fig. 6: City Chambers main entrance archway frieze, right side pane. (Author's Photograph)