

## **First piece – introducing the series and the first artwork: Title – Introducing The Series – Public Treasures of Stoke-on-Trent.**

**Throughout 2025 (Stoke-on-Trent's Centenary Year) Professor of Art and Society at the University of Staffordshire, Anna Francis will be working with Art UK to celebrate the Public Treasures of Stoke by visiting publicly held artworks both within collections and on our streets to talk about their significance and what they mean to the city.**

As 2025 begins the people of Stoke-on-Trent are making plans and gearing up to celebrate; marking a century since the city was officially recognised with city status in 1925.

Though much of the celebrations will be focused around the Spring and Summer months, with the first in what will become an annual celebration coinciding with the exact day that the city first gained its status, June 5<sup>th</sup> – there will be events, projects and celebrations throughout the year. (add link <https://sot100.org.uk/> )

For my part in celebrating the city and all that it has to offer, I am pleased to be collaborating with Art UK on a monthly series which will talk about Public Art in the City of Stoke-on-Trent; where both Art UK and I are based. I will be sharing where it can be found, what it is about and what the future of public art in Stoke might be.

Just like many other artists, much of my work is inspired by a muse, but my muse is not a person, but a City. Since moving here in the late 1990's, I have found the city of Stoke-on-Trent, its heritage, buildings, green spaces and people to be an immense source of ideas and inspiration. Through this series I will be exploring how the city has inspired many other artists and artworks over the years too.

As well as visiting public artworks on display in public space and on street corners across the city, I will also be aiming to visit heritage and cultural sites to talk about the role of art in the city, and how creativity and culture are such an important part of the city's story.

I think it worth noting that this monthly series will be very much from my own personal perspective, where I hope to reveal some of the things which have enthralled and interested me and others. I know that if someone else were to do this tour of cultural and creative landmarks across Stoke-on-Trent their list would probably be very different to mine, and I am looking forward to hearing what other people may have selected to focus on.

My main aim with the series is to bring extra attention to some of the fantastic collections, artworks, and places that people can visit across the city in order to learn about our culture and heritage. I also hope that this may begin a discussion about what might be missing from the public art offer here, and who is and is not represented on our streets and in museum collections. I hope that we might begin discussing what public art for the future of the city might look like. Undoubtedly, we have hundreds of highly skilled and brilliant people living in the city today and it would be great to think about what kind of mark they might be making on the city for the next 100 years.

Some of the artworks and features that I will be visiting are already within the ArtUK archive, while others, it will be a great opportunity to add. For anyone not familiar with Stoke-on-Trent and what it is known for, I'm going to take this brief opportunity to tell you a

little about the city. I have written before about how the city became known for its pottery; in an essay *A Seam of Clay and Coal*, (1997) I wrote;

'This place of six towns and many more villages developed along the topography of A Seam of Clay and Coal. The discovery of the particular geology of the North Staffordshire landscape saw the development over five hundred years of a material identity centred around clay and coal, those natural resources which made this place ripe for the manufacture and development of industry. The seam running across North Staffordshire importantly revealed itself to contain the long flame coal types that are needed for firing pottery ovens.' (add link <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/5775/1/a-seam-of-clay-and-coal.pdf> )

This coupled with the rich Etruria Marl Clay that was found is why the particular industry that grew here was centred around the design and manufacture of all manner of products and materials made of clay. Although the two materials of clay and coal provided the physical impetus, it has always been the people of the place and the development and innovation of design, ideas and skill that has meant that the city became known as The Potteries.

Wares from The Potteries have been celebrated and sought after all over the world since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and though the skills needed to design and create such a wide range of products could be regarded as creative; the city has arguably always been regarded as industrial first over artistic.

The first artwork to feature in this series is one that I pass most of my working days, being on the Campus of University of Staffordshire where I work, and very much representing the material history of the city; clay and coal mentioned.

(add link <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mining-pottery-and-the-sciences-324268> )

The Frieze - Mining, Pottery & the Sciences, c1914 was jointly commissioned in 1911 by Stoke-on-Trent County Borough (later becoming Stoke City Council) and Staffordshire County Council, the building was designed by the architects for the education committees of the two authorities. Initially the building housed the Central School of Science and Technology, where pottery, mining and general science were taught from 1914 onwards. Today, the building is used for teaching Games Design, Fashion and is also home to the Creative Library.

The carved stone frieze above the entrance to what is now University of Staffordshire's Cadman Building was carved from Hollington Sandstone, a type of sandstone that comes from quarries in the village of Hollington, Staffordshire and was designed and carved between 1911 and 1914 by Charles Vyse (1882-1971) a sculptor and potter, born in Stoke-on-Trent, who studied at Royal College of Art and then Italy. The building itself was named after John Cadman (1877 – 1941) himself a mining engineer and petroleum technologist from Silverdale. (add link <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/john-cadman-18771941-148467> )

The frieze depicts potters and miners working under the watchful eye of Athena, Greek goddess of education, wisdom, knowledge, industry and commerce who became the pottery industry's emblem. Although classical artists and sculptors portray her without wings, Charles Vyse is said to have modelled Athena from the original black figure paintings on early Greek earthenware vases.

The frieze is designed in three sections, the left-hand side depicts miners working underground, and on the right the pottery industry is represented, including a potter throwing a pot, another fettling and the central section with Athena, to represent science.

Born in 1882, Charles Vyse left school aged 14. Having been identified as creative, he became an apprentice modeller and designer at Doulton & Company's works in Burslem. Henry Doulton spotted his talent, and recommended he attend The Hanley Art School, where he won a scholarship to attend the Royal College of Art, London in 1905. It is brilliant to see that he returned to the city as a highly skilled artist to make this significant work, as well as another piece, Madonna and Child, housed within the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery collection. (add link <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/madonna-and-child-268854> )

I have to admit, that when I first moved to the city, 28 years ago, as a student myself going through the doors of the Cadman Building on my first day, I did not pay much attention to Charles Vyse's impressive artwork. This, along with so many of the buildings in the city, rewards those that care to notice. As you walk around in Stoke-on-Trent, there are many buildings with impressive and surprising features, but which we can easily miss. I hope through this series I can draw attention to some of the city's Treasures and celebrate the role art has played in inspiring creative people for hundreds of years.