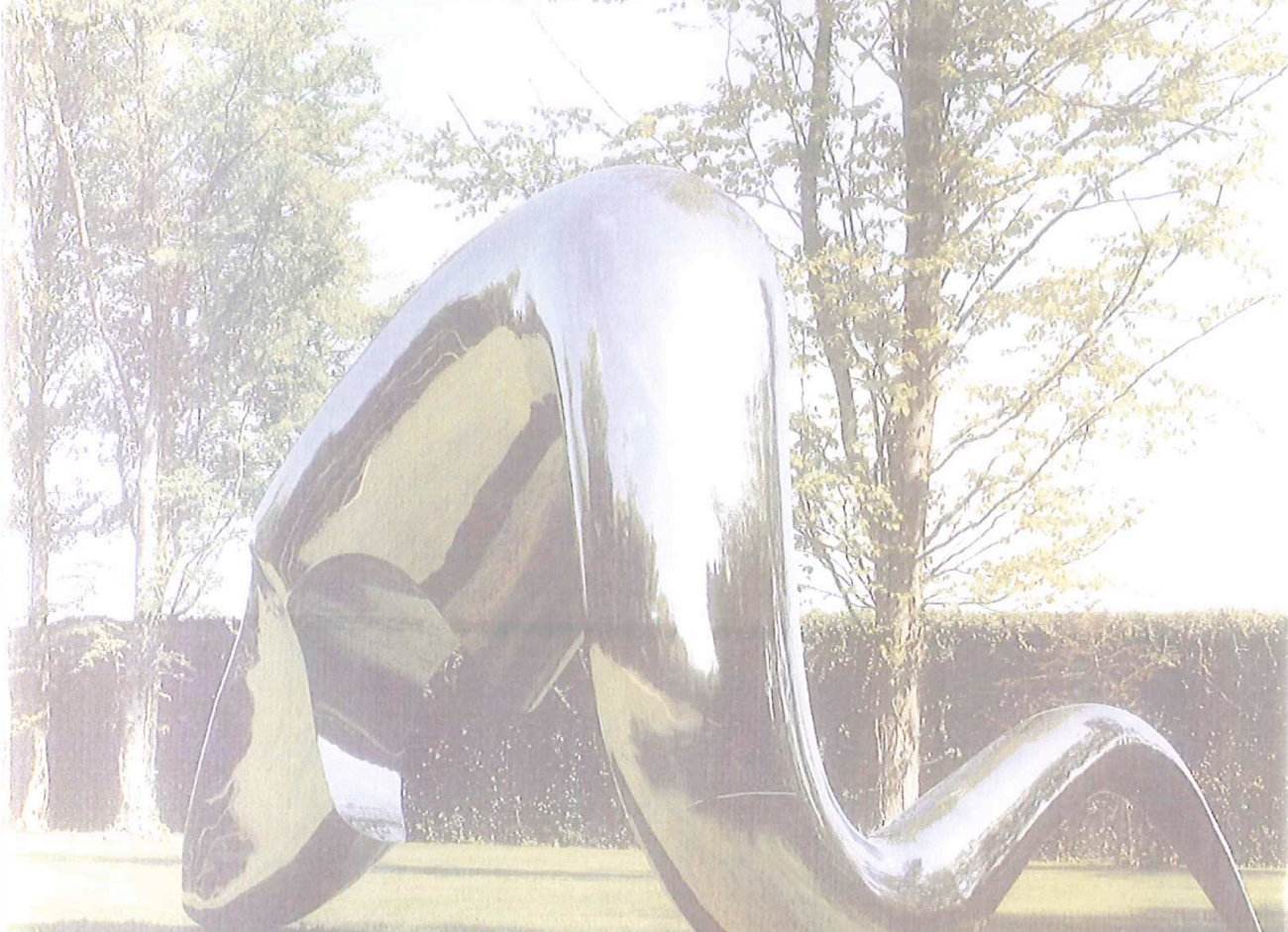


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Wilfrid Cass

COMMISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Wilfrid Cass has developed the UK's most impressive sculpture park via a series of high-profile and improbably ambitious commissions. Here the octogenarian businessman tells Angela Wintle how he spent £7 million of his children's inheritance on his labour of love

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THERE CAN BE few aesthetic experiences to top a visit to the Cass Sculpture Foundation. Where else could you walk into a forest glade and meet a grinning fish surrealistically riding a bicycle? Or skirt a grassy knoll and encounter a sleeping giant? Or climb through dense vegetation and chance upon an enormous Icarus Palm made from two tonnes of tyre fragments?

But in this topsy-turvy *Alice in Wonderland* world, anything seems possible. The only things that are frowned upon are the ordinary and commonplace.

The foundation, lavishly spread across 26 acres of ancient woodland deep on the Duke of Richmond's Goodwood estate near Chichester, is the home of contemporary British sculpture. Yet despite being dubbed "the most important cultural event of the past decade in England", it remains one of the artworld's best-kept secrets.

Over the past 14 years, it has commissioned over 160 monumental sculptures from more than 120 British artists – and worked with almost every notable sculptor in the land.

Antony Caro, Eduardo Paolozzi, Rachel Whitread, Richard Long, Anthony Gormley, Andy Goldsworthy, Tony Cragg... You'll pass works by all of them during a 30-minute stroll. In fact, there's absolutely nowhere else in the country where you'll see £7 million worth of British sculpture of this quality and scale, all in one place.

But this is as much a shop as a gallery. Artists are commissioned to create their

dream pieces, but everything on display is for sale (prices range from £8,000 up to £50,000). And when a sculpture finds a buyer, the foundation deducts its costs, splits the profits with the artist and then, crucially, ploughs its own share into the next commission.

It isn't just the quality of the sculpture that sets the foundation apart, however. It's the imaginative siting of the pieces within their unique woodland setting – the daring juxtaposition of artifice and nature.

Here the sculptures are subjected to daily weathering, gradually becoming part of the ecological landscape as though they had been simply 'found' rather than created. And they don't clamour for attention as they might in a gallery space because they have room to breathe.

Ambitious origins

All this is the vision of one remarkably tenacious 84-year-old man called Wilfred Cass who, in 2006, received a CBE for 'services to art' and who might justifiably be described as the Godfather of British sculpture.

A former high-flying businessman, who has headed Image Bank UK, art materials manufacturers Reeves & Son and the men's clothing company Moss Bros, Cass has applied hard-headed entrepreneurialism and a decisive managerial style to the patronage of the arts.

"I don't think you could run something like this with so few people, if you didn't have a business brain," he says, admitting that all the administration is done by a handful of staff on a couple of Apple Macs.

"This couldn't have been started by an arts professional. To run something like this takes enormous experience."

Cass and his wife Jeannette set up the foundation, a registered charity, in 1994 after retiring to a house in the Goodwood grounds in the late 1980s.

Initially, they'd toyed with the idea of creating an open-air theatre, but as they had a sizeable sculpture collection (Henry Moore and Elisabeth Frink had been friends) they decided that, rather than adding to it, they would sell it off and put the money towards commissioning new works.

Firstly, though, they did their homework and visited many of the world's major sculpture parks, returning with the firm conviction that everybody was doing it wrong and they could do better. They then

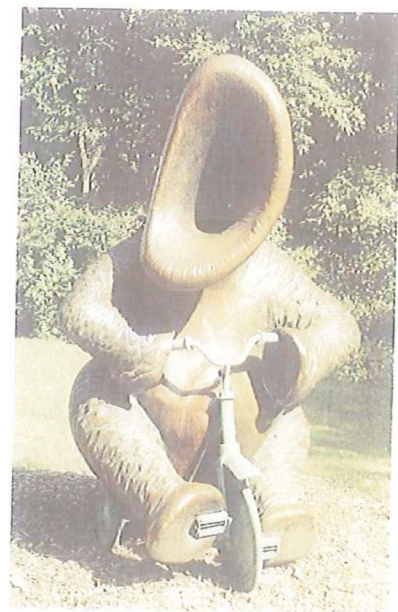
embarked on an ambitious but sensitive clearance programme, laying 14 acres of grass, taking out 3,000 trees and building a visitor centre in just three months.

But how to convince the arts world they meant business? Cass pulled off a remarkable coup – convincing the eminent sculptor Antony Caro to loan a major work called *Tower of Discovery*. That, says Cass, >

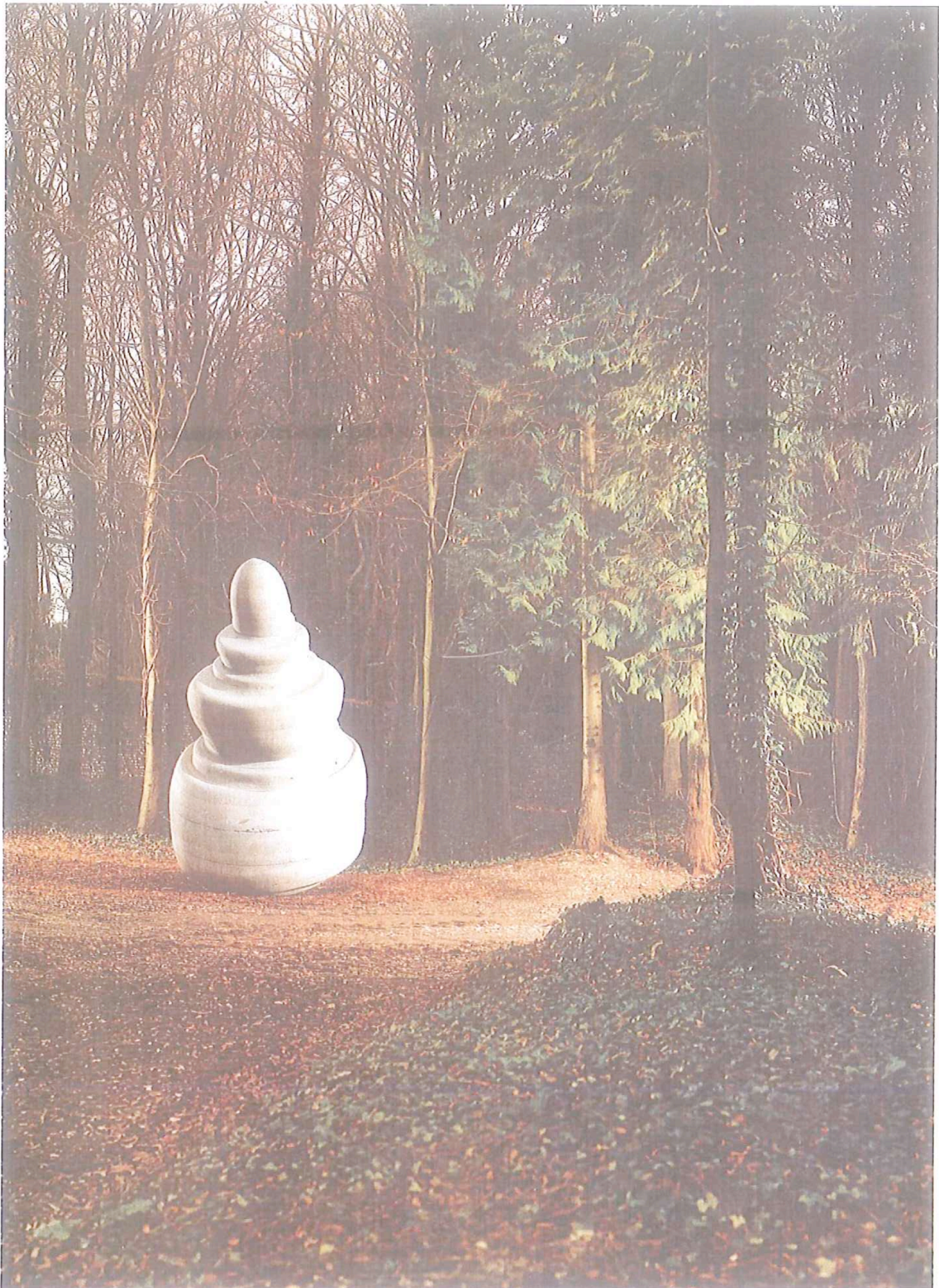
"A successful artist isn't going to give their best work to a sculpture park. If you want the best, you have to commission it"



OPPOSITE-Tony Cragg, *I'm Alive*, stainless steel, 2.5m high, in situ at the Cass Sculpture Foundation
ABOVE Wilfrid Cass stands beside Tony Cragg's bright yellow 2005 bronze *Declination*
RIGHT Steven Gregory, *One Of Us On A Tricycle*, bronze, 2.2m high



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signified that a major British artist was prepared to take a chance.

Since then, no arts organisation has commissioned as much new work or invested as heavily as the foundation, which neither receives nor solicits Arts Council funding or public subsidy. It's also estimated that within a decade there will be 200 works in existence that would not have been conceived, let alone realised, if it hadn't been for the foundation.

Cass was never in any doubt that concentrating on new commissions rather than ready-made sculpture was the way to go. "It's quite obvious that a successful artist isn't going to give his best work to a sculpture park," he says. "He's going to lend the work he hasn't been able to sell. If you want the best, you have to commission it."

But having sunk some £8 million of his personal fortune into the venture – depriving his children of their inheritance in the process, he laughs – he understandably expects big returns.

"Sometimes, we've given an artist 12 times the Turner Prize money and in exchange we want something ground-breaking. We expect artists to produce pieces like nothing they've ever made before; something that may have been in their mind for years, but nobody has ever dared put money behind."

Cass isn't above interfering in the creative process, either. If he believes something isn't right, then he says so and back it goes to the studio. He's an exacting master, but says sculptors never argue with him. How could they? Sometimes, he commissions his favourite artists to produce three or more

large-scale works in one fell swoop – a scale of commissioning that is very rare indeed.

Carving out a future

Cass might be forgiven for thinking he had achieved everything by now, but he remains as questing as ever.

Just look at his recent form. In 2005, he mounted the foundation's first one-man exhibition, creating a new exhibition space now known as the Chalk Pit where he displayed 14 commissioned works by Tony Cragg, a British sculptor whom Cass describes as "without peer in his generation".

Then, just a year later, he topped it off by building a foundation centre to house a unique archive and library containing drawings, maquettes and videos charting the development of 21st century British sculpture.

Now, eager to capitalise on the 2012 London Olympics, when Britain will be in the international spotlight, he plans to commission 50 sculptures on an even larger scale than previously attempted – some measuring 30 metres in length. And not satisfied with showcasing them in the park, he intends to take them out to the people.

Cass has struck a deal with the international property development company Grosvenor, enabling him to show off some of his finest existing sculpture in London's Berkeley Square and Wilton Crescent Gardens.

Always conscious that he has to sell pieces to ensure the foundation's posterity, Cass is hopeful that the multi-millionaires whose homes overlook the parks will rush out and buy one.

"Our main, long-term problem is targeting the small band, of, say, 50 or 60 people in this country who collect or commission large pieces of sculpture," he says.

Fourteen years after Cass threw open his woodland space to the country's sculptural community, he acknowledges the enterprise has yet to be fully recognised for its contribution to British culture.

Visitor figures increase every year, but he believes the park has much to do to increase its profile, both as an arts attraction and as an enabler of significant new works.

"In a way, we're still a secret out there. However, our aim and focus remains the same – to advance 21st century British sculpture and promote it to a global audience."

The Cass Sculpture Foundation is situated at Goodwood, near Chichester. For further information, call (01243) 538449 or visit www.sculpture.org.uk

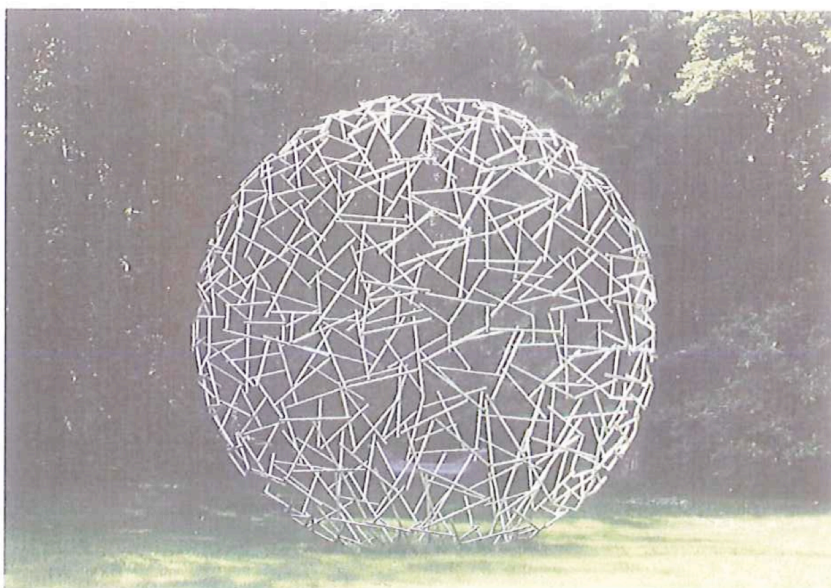


Profile

Born in Berlin in 1924, Wilfrid Cass is a Jewish émigré whose family came to England in 1933. In 1942 he enlisted in the Royal Engineers and after the war worked in electronics, devising circuits for televisions.

Later, he founded Image Bank UK, which became one of the world's largest suppliers of film and photography for the advertising industry, and had huge success as a management consultant, for companies as diverse as men's clothiers Moss Bros, Hadfield Paints and the art suppliers Reeves & Sons.

Cass and his wife Jeannette founded the Cass Sculpture Foundation (then called Sculpture at Goodwood) in 1994. The foundation has published several books, including *Sculpture at Goodwood: a Vision for 21st Century British Sculpture*, to mark its tenth anniversary. In 2006, Cass received a CBE for 'services to art'.



LEFT Tony Cragg, *Bulb*, stone, 3.3m high ABOVE Julian Wild, *System 19*, stainless steel, 5m high
ABOVE RIGHT Wilfrid Cass peers through Lynn Chadwick's 2.3-metre high *Age of Diamonds III*