Part of Historic Environment Scotland

CANMORE
NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

Archaeology InSites

Return to Archaeology InSites

The Kelpies, Falkirk

The nuts and bolts of the Kelpies

The Kelpies are massive! They stand 30 metres high and together weigh over 250 tonnes of steel tubing, laser-cut sheets and huck bolts, which hold the steel 'skin' on to the underlying frames. They were created by the Glasgow-based artist Andy Scott, after a commission by British Waterways (Scotland), now Scottish Canals. Over an eight year period up to 2013, the sculptures went from a creative idea to a fully constructed centre piece in the Helix Park. The full story of their construction is told in Scott's beautifully illustrated book, 'The Kelpies', (Scott 2014). Luckily there is also a time lapse video of the construction (https://vimeo.com/90747645).

But underlying their grandeur is a story of creative ideas, steel welding, cutting and structural engineering design. Add to that the logistics that went into the creation of the project, the planning, the moving of the steel frames and sheets to the place of construction and you end up with a whole series of interlocking decisions, ideas and activities. There really is no better way than to appreciate the complexity of the Kelpies, once you've visited them, than to read Scott's book. One of the things that struck me when I visited the Kelpies a few years ago was that if they were archaeology, then what happened to them under the ground? Where were the bodies of these massive horses? This fanciful idea was further stimulated when I opened Scott's book to see on the inside cover a double page spread of the complete horses with a line indicating current ground level, but with their bodies in motion under the ground. Now, let's be clear, Scott did not construct the rest of the bodies and then bury them. But that illustration stirs something in the imagination that requires some consideration.

-

‘Excavating’ the Kelpies: how the archaeology of the contemporary past can consider public art

Archaeology of the contemporary past considers the changing world around us and enables archaeologists to ‘excavate’ the remains of today (Graves-Brown et al, 2013). This emerging practice assists archaeologists and others to explore beyond the traditional boundaries of the subject. In the case of the Kelpies we can explore not only their physical presence, but also their relationship with the landscape, past and present, and how they are a part of a Scottish public art phenomena, which represents a wider ‘deposit’ across the world of public sculptures.

Traditionally our public art was commissioned by institutions to commemorate, celebrate and memorialise people, places and events. There are hundreds of statues to Queen Victoria around the world, commissioned by various public and private benefactors, to commemorate her life, visits to specific places and her reign. Animals are also visible in the pantheon of public art, although less prominent than people. More recently animals have become more popular, for example, the Cow Parade (http://www.cowparade.com/), which has provided painted fibre glass cows to over 80 cities across the globe, since 1999. This rise in the choice of animal forms over humans signals a change of focus. Whereas once we erected images of great people in public spaces, like civic squares, today we are tending towards animals, abstract art and mythological creatures, such as Arria, another of Scott’s sculptures (http://www.andyscottsculptor.com/sculptures/arria).

The Kelpies fit into this more recent trend in commemorating the importance of working horses in Scotland’s past and echoing the mythical water creatures that sometimes embody horse-like forms. But they are more than just creative responses to a past way of life. They represent new forms of archaeological remains, just like the carved statues that adorned ancient temples and shrines. The Kelpies stand in the Helix Park as a modern day shrine to leisure time within a public space.

Three areas of modern life have intersected at the Kelpies which through an archaeological lens can be considered; the creative turn, place-making and heritage as an industry. The most recent ‘creative’ turn, as it has been called refers to a rise in the creative industries and their influences on cross disciplinary research. This ranges from the rise of maker spaces in post-industrial buildings, artist co-operatives growing up in abandoned buildings, the burgeoning on-line ‘how to’ videos that cover everything from re-upholstering a chair to how to build a computer and how creative responses are increasingly an output from research projects. In addition, place-making programmes of work have recognised the value and potential significance of public art in their aims and objectives.

At the same time, heritage has become a globalised phenomenon, with Scotland alone possessing six UNESCO World Heritage sites. ‘Heritage’ has become the modern day lubricant, which can entice people into a castle, and enable them to research their family history. In the case of the Kelpies, the heritage of the place and the association of the working horses with the canal was central to the creative spark from which the artistic response is the two huge sculptures. So, next time you spot a statue of a horse on the side of the motorway or a see a piece of public art in a city square, think about it as the latest archaeological deposit on our landscape, that has managed to rear its head above ground level.

Reference:
Paul Graves-Brown, Rodney Harrison & Angela Piccini (eds.) (2013) The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World, Oxford University Press.
Andy Scott (2013) The Kelpies, Freight Book, Glasgow.

Dr Alex Hale, Archaeologist, Survey and Recording

https://canmore.org.uk/site/345044/the-kelpies
http://www.cowparade.com/
http://www.andyscottsculptor.com/sculptures/arria

#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

SUPPORTING
year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND | ÀRAINNEACHD EACHDRAIDHEIL ALBA