WILFRED CASS

The boffin who became a leading patron of sculpture (*Privatair*, 2006)

To walk around the grounds of the Cass Sculpture Foundation at Goodwood is to feel your grip on reality being slowly prised loose. While some of the pieces on display in the 24 acres of woodland – among them a 30-foot-high double spiral made of supermarket trolleys – are obviously an artist's work, others inhabit a twilight zone between the natural and the artificial. A sleeping man glimpsed through the trees turns out to be a painted figure one and a half times larger than life; a bronze wolf seems to be on the trail of two equally inanimate deer, until his intended victims suddenly kick up their heels and scamper away towards the Sussex Downs. As for guessing what is a bench that has been placed there for your convenience, and what a three-dimensional *jeu d'esprit* worth tens of thousands of pounds, you could be at it all day.

But however deceptive and whimsical some of the exhibits may be, the park's creator Wilfred Cass has his feet very firmly on the ground. An electronics expert who helped revolutionise radio and television sets, and who went on to manage companies such as Image Bank and Moss Bros, he has used his business expertise to develop what is, in refined terms, an unmatched resource for students of 21^{st} -century British sculpture, and in crude terms, a one-stop shop for collectors of huge, show-off pieces: because what sets this park apart is that everything in it – all £6 million worth – is for sale.

'When my wife and I bought our house here fourteen years ago,' Cass explains, 'we had to decide whether just to keep on collecting sculpture as we had been, or to do something more ambitious. We took a year to visit every sculpture park we had ever heard of around the world, and when we got back

we came to the conclusion that they were all too full, because once a piece was acquired it stayed there for ever. So we decided to spend our money commissioning pieces of the highest quality, putting them here, and then trying to find homes for them.'

They also decided to give British sculpture (in Anthony Caro's words) a shot in the arm by commissioning only native artists and inviting them to produce work on a massive scale. Among the names in the foundation's impressive archive are Eduardo Paolozzi, Andy Goldsworthy and Rachel Whiteread; its recent acquisitions include *Bent of Mind*, a sculpture by Tony Cragg of two swirling faces in black bronze measuring fifteen feet high and weighing more than any sane removal man would care to contemplate.

The financial risk has been considerable, since part of the deal is that the foundation covers all the artists' costs – materials, transport, assistants' fees and so on. But, says Cass, 'After eight years we turned the corner, and this is now a very, very viable proposition. It's beginning to help people who are setting up sculpture parks throughout the world, because there's nowhere else you can go and buy from if you need seven or eight pieces almost immediately.' The foundation has sold to such prominent figures as Damien Hirst and Jacob Rothschild; there are around 60 works on display at any one time, ranging in price from £6,000 to almost £1 million, and if none of them take your fancy, the foundation will offer advice on how to go about commissioning for yourself.

It should be added that what might pass for a lifetime's work is, for Cass, simply a retirement project. Now 82, he is a small, comfortable figure (he jokes that when he joined the army as a teenager, he was shorter than his rifle) who nevertheless radiates a quiet authority, somewhat in the manner of Yoda, the diminutive sage in *Star Wars*. He was, he says, a late starter in life, and at

the end of his business career still felt that he had much to do: 'Looking back, this was the ideal thing to put one's energy into.'

Something that only gradually dawned on him was that by devoting himself to art, he was following in some deep ancestral footsteps. The Jewish Cassirer family (his father dropped the 'irer' after fleeing to Britain in the 1930s) had been prominent in German cultural life, Wilfred's great-uncle Paul being among the first gallery-owners to champion the work of van Gogh and Cézanne. But with Wilfred's father – a successful manufacturer of electric cables – this enthusiasm skipped a generation: 'My parents didn't have a single painting in the house.'

Wilfred was nine and a half when he came to England, and found no difficulty in fitting in ('I'm told that I spoke English fluently within three months of arriving here'). On leaving school he went to work as an electrician's mate — 'but I was very quickly not a mate any more, because the person in charge was called up and I was catapulted into going into factories and trying to mend motors'. In 1943 he joined the Royal Engineers, where his research into the aiming of anti-aircraft guns gave him the chance to work with some of the earliest computers, for which he developed an enduring passion: the foundation was one of the first such organisations to invest in a comprehensive website, on which no fewer than 10,000 sculptures can now be seen.

At the end of the War, Cass spent four years formally studying electronics and then joined Pye, where he helped invent the first printed circuits and put them to use in radio and television sets. 'It was a magical place,' he says, 'because you were given a lot of responsibility at a very young age'; but he was reluctant to be bracketed simply as a boffin, and decided to move into management instead.

Cass came to specialise in reviving ailing companies, among them Reeves & Sons, a manufacturer and distributor of artists' materials. It was this which led to his love of sculpture. 'Henry Moore was using all these washes on his drawings, and wanted to experiment, so he came to me for advice. I got to know him, and he was a lovely man – a great teacher of sculpture, and so enthusiastic about it all. I collected a few of his maquettes, and then I had a small gallery in Knightsbridge where I showed his drawings. That's how it developed; but if we hadn't bought this house with this site, I don't think the foundation would ever have happened.'

'This house' is Hat Hill House, a modernist building on the edge of the Goodwood estate designed to accommodate the previous owner's art collection. The Casses began by displaying smaller pieces of sculpture in the grounds, 'but in a woodland setting it became very clear that there was something we could do that others couldn't'. To give free rein to their vision, they approached Goodwood's owner, the Duke of Richmond and Gordon, who agreed to donate twelve acres of land to the foundation, doubling the exhibition area. The first large piece to be installed was Anthony Caro's *The Tower of Discovery*, which proved a vital endorsement: 'It gave a signal to the world,' says Cass, 'because such a major artist was prepared to take a risk.'

Nor, Cass believes, would the foundation have happened without his managerial experience. 'You're dealing with quite a lot of money – our turnover is £2 million – so a basic business sensibility is essential, and that's something most artists don't have.' He considers marketing to be one of his main strengths, and in this respect the Goodwood connection has been a godsend. 'A major problem is to get people out of London, but Goodwood has everything to attract them – horse racing, motor racing, golf courses.'

(There is also an airstrip where you can have your jet serviced while you decide which sculpture to buy.)

While Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* has, in Cass's opinion, been the chief catalyst in the resurgence of British sculpture, he argues that the foundation has also played a key role. 'There's no doubt that if you commission 169 large pieces, as we've done to date, it will make some mark: you're starting a mechanism that will grow and grow.' He estimates that the artists concerned – who take a percentage of the sale price, while the rest goes towards commissioning further pieces – have earned almost £8 million between them.

Of these sales, roughly half are made to private collectors, the majority of them from overseas. 'As people buy bigger houses, there's more and more need to enhance them by doing something with the grounds, and there's a growing number of people who are astute enough to invest in sculpture. Not that you should buy a piece for financial reasons, but as with everything else, it's a boom period. You're getting incredible prices now for Caros and Chadwicks.'

This sounds like an unfashionably elitist approach to art, but Cass argues that encouraging works on such a large scale is actually of general benefit, partly because – being too big for a drawing-room – they are less likely to disappear from public view, and partly because anyone can engage with them. 'To get people to understand three-dimensional things is very difficult,' he says. 'A sculpture either talks to you or you ignore it; if it's big enough, you pay more attention to it, and you're going to understand it better.'

For the artists, meanwhile, these commissions provide an opportunity both to realise their potential and – if they are not yet famous – put themselves on the map. 'If you want to move an artist on, you need a big statement,' says Cass. 'In other places, they are not tested as they are here. There is a lot of

skill involved in making a piece bigger – you can't just blow up the maquette, because it doesn't work that way. But here we try to take all the worry away. We say, "If you've got a dream, show it to us and we'll make it together." A sculptor doesn't get many offers like that.'