

Stephens, Sir William Ernest Reynolds- (1862–1943), artist, was born in Detroit, Michigan, United States of America, on 8 August 1862, the son of William Comben Stephens. Both his parents were English and the family moved to London when William was a child. He was educated at Blackheath School and trained as an engineer before studying at the Royal Academy Schools, London (1884–7), where he won prizes for painting and sculpture in 1887. In 1890 he changed his name by deed poll, hyphenating his last two names.

Reynolds-Stephens's first major work was a mural, *Summer* (1890), painted for the Royal Academy refreshment room. A highly self-confident work even at this early stage of his career, it depicted a bevy of beautiful, somnolent women and was reminiscent of the Victorian neo-classicist Albert Moore. Unfortunately the installation of a heating system beside *Summer* caused serious damage and the work was painted over in the 1920s. Despite this early success, sculpture and design dominated Reynolds-Stephens's output from the mid-1890s until his death.

Reynolds-Stephens had a lifelong belief in the ideals of the arts and crafts movement and was elected to the Art-Workers' Guild in 1888. His cousin Graham Seton Hutchison claimed that:

even up to the last days of his life, his eager, active mind was planning how best the arts and crafts could be brought into the homes of the people, instead **of being ... a kind of opiate for the few. (Hutchison)**

Even judged by the standards of his day, Reynolds-Stephens's versatility was astonishing. He designed furniture, wall decorations, textiles, picture rails, letterboxes, photograph frames, sweet dishes, light-fittings, fireplaces, and medals, as well as statuettes, portrait busts, funerary monuments, and war memorials.

In his sculpture Reynolds-Stephens inherited Alfred Gilbert's and George Frampton's interests in experimentation with metal and precious stones. Although his status is currently lower than theirs, he was highly acclaimed in his lifetime. Between 1897 and 1911 seven articles were published on him—more than on any other living British sculptor—in the *Magazine of Art*, *The Studio*, and the *Art Journal*. **A. L. Baldry's praise was typical: 'he is a very skilful painter, a sculptor with a ... delicate grace of line, a designer with endless resource and unfailing imagination and a craftsman who ... aims**

habitually at a high standard of workmanship' (Baldry, 'Some recent decorations', 278). In 1904 he was one of the signatories to the foundation of the (later Royal) Society of British Sculptors.

Reynolds-Stephens's work combines dazzling technique with sculptural sagacity. The relief *Happy in Beauty, Life and Love and Everything* (1896; National Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide) owes its unusual title to John Keats's poem *Lamia*. The sculpture, which depicts a young woman beside a mirror, is made from copper and bronze and is inset with mother of pearl and precious stones. For all its decorative richness, its contrast between intricacy and plainer passages is highly effective. It was followed by a series of Arthurian statuettes, *Sir Lancelot and the Nestling* (1899; priv. coll.), *Guinevere and the Nestling* (1900; priv. coll.), and *Guinevere's Redeeming* (1905; Warrington Museum and Art Gallery), which use such materials as bronze, silver, coloured marble, ivory, and enamel. Linear elegance, seen in the drapery of *Guinevere's Redeeming*, is as significant as the colour harmonies.

Reynolds-Stephens's ambitious life-sized sculpture *A Royal Game* (1906–11; Tate collection) portrays Elizabeth I of England and Philip II of Spain playing an imaginary chess game with ships. It represents the contest between the two powers for maritime supremacy. Although highly praised at the time, the work **was later scorned by Susan Beattie for its 'manic precision and profusion of detail' and 'trivial historical anecdote' (Beattie, 233)**. She saw it as part of the decline of the New Sculpture. Yet *A Royal Game* could equally be considered a technical and decorative masterpiece, the climax of Reynolds-Stephens's experiments in copper-deposit electrotyping.

Architectural decoration was another important area of Reynolds-Stephens's activities. His decorative scheme for 185 Queen's Gate, South Kensington (1903), included wall panels, ceiling coves, fireplaces, and electric light fittings. A harmony in cool green, grey-green, copper-gold, and mahogany, it was destroyed in the Second World War. Fortunately his interior of St Mary the Virgin, Great Warley, Essex (1902–4), survives. The church was a collaboration with the architect Charles Harrison Townsend. Reynolds-Stephens designed the interior decoration and major fittings, including the chancel and chapel screens, organ case, pulpit, stained glass, font, and electroliers. The focal point of the church is his *Gateway to Life* reredos relief which portrays the dead Christ surrounded by angels, the wings and drapery of the figures forming a **heart shape. Although Great Warley has been called 'a jewel of the Art**

**Nouveau' (Orbach, 123), Reynolds-Stephens** would have disputed this. Baldry stated in 1911 that Reynolds-Stephens's **'sense of responsibility has prevented him from subscribing to any *art nouveau* fallacies'** (Baldry, **'Recent decorative work', 262**). Like most of his arts and crafts contemporaries, he regarded the style as one of decorative excess.

Reynolds-Stephens's most significant works all predate the First World War, although he continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy until 1942. His later sculpture, predominantly portraiture (such as *This Girl with her Dreams*, 1923, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; and *Charles Lamb*, 1936, Giltspur Street, City of London), is relatively conventional and conservative but shows no decline in quality. Reynolds-Stephens's chief achievement in his later career was his lengthy and dedicated presidency of the Royal Society of British Sculptors (1921–33). He carefully avoided the society's involvement in the controversy surrounding Jacob Epstein's *Rima* (1923–5; Hyde Park, London), while not endorsing the sculpture. In 1926 he organized a banquet honouring Alfred Gilbert's return from self-imposed exile in Belgium. In 1928, together with Gilbert Bayes, Reynolds-Stephens organized an exhibition of works by thirty-five British sculptors at the Royal Horticultural Society, London, a more attractive environment than the cramped conditions of the Royal Academy. His services to sculpture were recognized with the award of the Royal Society of British Sculptors' gold medal (1928) and a knighthood in 1931.

William Reynolds-Stephens died at Vale Royal Hotel, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, on 23 February 1943 and was cremated at Golders Green, Middlesex. He was survived by his wife, Annie (*née* Ridpath; *b.* 1866/7), a skilled embroiderer who executed many of her husband's designs, and to whom he was married on 1 June 1891. His *Times* obituarist called him **'a belated Pre-Raphaelite'** (*The Times*, 7). This seemed true in 1943 but was less than fair. Forty years earlier he had stood at the forefront of British sculpture, decorative arts, and design. His achievements in these fields are finally receiving recognition. Examples of his sculpted works are in the Tate collection, the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the Castle Museum, Nottingham.

Mark Stocker

Sources

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Archives

[V&A NAL](#), record of works executed

Likenesses

W. Reynolds-Stephens, self-portrait, drawing, c.1895–1896, repro. in **Spielmann**, 'Our rising artists', 71 · **W. Reynolds-Stephens**, self-portrait, white metal bust, 1934, [NPG](#) · W. Reynolds-Stephens, self-portrait, plaster bust, Castle Museum, Nottingham

Wealth at death

£10,851 16s. 3d.: probate, 18 June 1943, [CGPLA Eng. & Wales](#)

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