



# NICK BIBBY

A BESTIARY  
OF THE  
REAL AND IMAGINED



Nick Bibby

SLADMORE CONTEMPORARY





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of the  
Real and Imagined

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## Introduction

I am pleased and honoured to be holding this, our fourth one-man exhibition of the remarkable bronze sculpture of Nick Bibby, at the Sladmore.

Our first exhibition together, in 2010, showed him to be the natural inheritor of the mantle of our great realist sculptor Herbert Haseletine, with his Champion Animal series. In this new exhibition, he has further demonstrated the breadth of his talent and skill by straddling a far wider range of styles, influences and centuries, from beautiful, minimalist, wildlife pieces, to meticulously detailed imaginary creatures. Yet, the work still has obvious links to the many great artists represented by the Sladmore over the last 50 years. Nick continues the long held fascination with dragons, serpents and mythological subjects in general, exhibited by many 19th and 20th century sculptors. The enormous recent popularity of Game of Thrones and other books and films in the fantasy genre have made dragons and serpents familiar to many, but this is old and familiar territory to Nick, who grew up steeped in Greek, Celtic and Scandinavian mythology, as well as the myths and legends of his home in North East England. And in these new bronzes, those fantastical creatures become truly real, the attitude, detail and textures totally convincing. These pieces must have been sculpted from life!

Whether it is a tiny wren, a snail, a dragon, a huge romantic torso, or a writhing, coiled, Midgard Serpent, from ancient Norse legend; the unbelievable range of subjects in this exhibition is a testament to Nick's talent, imagination, dedication and unrivalled modelling skill.

With close to half a million followers on social media, Nick is our artist most attuned to the modern world and most generous in sharing his enthusiasm, inspiration and working methods. He draws constantly from the worlds of nature, antiquity, even prehistory, legend and the imagination, giving his sculptures a life and resonance that few achieve. Nick's aim is to promote and encourage a love and appreciation for sculpture, whilst demystifying the subject for those that wish to pursue it in all its forms. This exhibition is a treat for both the eyes and the imagination. Enjoy!

Gerry Farrell  
25 August 2016



Sculptures





Firedrake  
Maquette



# THE EVOLUTION OF A DRAGON



I study my chosen subjects in great detail before ever touching a piece of clay; outward form, natural history, anatomy and behaviour. All is fundamental to the 'Life' of the resulting sculpture and when my chosen subject does not actually exist, it becomes even more important to build that 'back story'.

Many classic works of fiction are utterly compelling, totally immersing the reader in their world; worlds conceived by their authors with a depth and complexity often only hinted at within the text, but it is these hidden depths which lend veracity to those fictional creations. With that in mind, here is a glimpse into the world of one of my fictional creations; the 1/12th scale maquette of the firedrake dragon. One of five, mythologically inspired, maquette sculptures included in this exhibition.

Firedrakes evolved from a common, archosaur ancestor of dinosaurs (birds) pterosaurs and crocodiles, sharing some common anatomy with these related groups.

Originally evolving as a small, tree dwelling predator, the young of the firedrake still follow an arboreal lifestyle, growing rapidly until adolescence, when they move to the upland hunting grounds of the adults.

A carnivore, taking prey in flight, the jaws and teeth look to related species feeding on small, fast-moving prey - fish, birds and flying insects (with some larger, ground-based prey – more on that later). It has the large eyes and binocular vision of a hunter. In addition to its primary teeth, the firedrake has specialised fangs, similar to those of spitting cobras, for spitting venom, burning venom in this case, employing a pyrophoric liquid, triethylaluminium, which ignites instantly on contact with the air. It synthesises this in special 'venom' glands, having ingested aluminium-rich ores, such as bauxite.

The muscular throat pouch inflates during territorial/mating displays, showing the brightly coloured skin between the scales and acting as a sound box, amplifying their booming calls. As it spits venom, the firedrake exhales strongly, the muscles of the throat pouch simultaneously contracting, focusing and amplifying the blast of air to propel the flaming venom accurately towards its target.

Spitting fire originally evolved as a defence mechanism in smaller ancestors, later used during courtship displays, before becoming the firedrake's primary weapon and means of killing prey. As with humans, the use of fire to cook food increased the amount of energy available, per kilo consumed, supporting the development of a larger brain. Firedrakes are intelligent; possibly sentient.

My firedrake is an adult male; with a dorsal head crest, erected during courtship and territorial





disputes. Fire is not used against rivals when competing for territory/females. Males first deter opponents with a threat display – roaring, head bobbing and swaying, flashing their head crest, gaping their mouths and inflating their throat pouches, finally blasting fire harmlessly into the air. Only if this fails to intimidate their rivals do contests of strength follow – clashing heads, pushing and wrestling with their armoured, muscular, necks and shoulders. Because of the risk of damaging the relatively fragile wing membranes, the whole body is rarely involved. Male's necks become more muscular during mating season, aiding in these contests of strength. My firedrake is preparing to spit, crest erect and throat pouch distended, in full threat display, the lower eyelids rolling up and the nictitating membrane closing, to protect the eyes from the blast.

Firedrakes hunt other flyers, roasting them in flight and snatching them from the air as they fall. To facilitate this, the jaw has a double hinge, allowing it to open very wide, so that multiple victims can be snapped up (and coincidentally, keeping the jaws clear of flaming venom). Larger prey is 'shot down', dismembered on the ground using the scythe-like wing claws and two dromeosaur-like hind claws, then devoured in small chunks.

Flight anatomy is derived from that of pterosaurs, birds and bats, with the skeletal structure following a largely avian/pterosaur pattern, with thin walled bones, strengthened and supported by internal struts and an open lung system, with air sacs throughout the skeleton and wings, increasing lung capacity. A lightweight, but muscular body contains a preponderance of fast-twitch muscle fibres, giving a tremendous power to weight ratio. Potentially adult firedrakes could attain wingspans of over 15.25m. More than capable of tackling large, ground-based prey (an occasional knight errant) killing with a blast of pyrophoric venom, before landing to dismember and devour. The wing loading and much of the wing anatomy derives from that of giant azhdarchid pterosaurs, such as *Quetzalcoatlus northropi*, which had a wingspan in excess of 10.4m and stood taller than a modern day giraffe, when on the ground. These pterosaurs probably used a combination of very powerful wing musculature and elastic tendons to launch themselves into the air, employing both their wings and hind legs in the launch. The firedrake employs a similar system, with additional launch power provided by a strong, flexible spine, akin to that seen in the cat family. Once in the air, it rides thermals and air currents, using minimal energy to stay airborne, only using powered flight during hunting, take-off and landing, making my firedrake a truly fearsome apex predator, worthy of the name, "Dragon".



H30" x L18" x W14"  
Edition of 12







Midgard Serpent  
Maquette





H8" x L23" x W15"  
Edition of 12





Artemis & Apollo



H80" x L22" x W21"  
Edition of 9





H83" x L21" x W24"  
Edition of 9





H19" x L5" x W5"  
Edition of 12



H20.5" x L6" x W6"  
Edition of 12

Artemis & Apollo  
Maquettes





Red Deer Stags  
The Duel





H16" x L55" x W16"  
Edition of 12





Silver Wren II



H13" x L5" x W3.5"  
Edition of 25







Silver Toad II



H3" x L6" x W5"  
Edition of 12



Toad II







H3" x L6" x W5"  
Edition of 25







Gyrfalcon





H67" x L24" x W18"  
Edition of 12





Red Grouse





H14" x L12" x W7"  
Edition of 12







Red Grouse II



H5" x L12" x W7"  
Edition of 12







Garden Snail



H5" x L6" x W2.5"  
Edition of 25







Emperor Penguin



H75" x L24" x W24"  
Edition of 12





Imperial Griffin  
Maquette





H45" x L17" x W22"  
Edition of 12





## Biography



Nick Bibby started drawing and painting as soon as he could hold a pencil. As a young child, his earliest sculptures were made using plasticine, or on occasion, Opal Fruits (known as Starburst to younger generations) when the plasticine ran out. He sold his first sculptures at age thirteen, becoming a professional sculptor in his late teens. Born in Bishop Auckland, in 1960, he was encouraged from an early age to explore the surrounding Durham countryside, developing his abiding love of nature and natural materials.

Nick's professional career began when he became director of a leading miniature figurines company, at the age of nineteen. From there he moved to France in the mid eighties, to work as a chief design consultant, before returning to London, sculpting for the world of television and stills advertising.

Working in bronze and silver since the early nineties, one can see the profound influence the natural world has on his creations, even shaping his most imaginative works to date. His comprehensive understanding of comparative anatomy enabling him to sculpt even fictional creatures that seem capable of flying, swimming, or breathing fire, should they magically transform into flesh.

An unflagging perfectionist, Nick's work is deeply rooted in the figurative tradition, even his more impressionistic pieces exhibiting the same meticulous attention to detail, finish and an unrivalled ability to convey the form, beauty and character of his subjects.

Nick exhibits work regularly at Sladmore Contemporary, as well as several other galleries in the UK and abroad. In addition, his work has been exhibited at The Royal Academy of Art, London, the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli, Turin, Leigh Yawkey Woodson Museum of Art, Wisconsin, Sigurjon Olafsson Museum, Reykjavik and the Society of Portrait Sculptors, London and many others.

Nick lives and works in the South Hams, Devon, with his wife Clare and daughter Emily.

## Limbless Wonders

When the Venus de Milo was unearthed in 1820 on the Greek island of Milos, it was almost immediately recognised as a paragon of feminine beauty. A pity about the arms, of course, giving rise to endless conjecture about what, precisely, the lady (goddess, presumably) was doing: weaving, serving, worshipping or offering a prize? But was it really a pity that the arms had disappeared? Somehow their absence, taken with the perfection of form in what remained, in some ways set off, or even enhanced, the abstract beauty of the figure and face. By an historical accident, the sculpture, dating from the second century BC, was to represent a sculptural tradition according to which the part, cunningly isolated, might prove in some ways more expressive than the whole.

To this tradition, celebrating if you like the power of the close-up, Nick Bibby's heroic torsos unmistakably belong. He even signals the classical connections by labelling the male torso Apollo and the female Artemis, which indicates that he is clearly aware of the tradition into which he is inscribing himself. We call it Classical, but it is very doubtful whether the sculptures of Praxiteles or Alexandros of Antioch, the apparent creator of the Venus de Milo, were ever partial figures when they left the artists' studio. Indeed, the idea of deliberately producing a partial figure sculpture seems to be a relatively modern one. Significantly, the Venus de Milo was discovered at the height of the Romantic era, just four years before Byron died fighting the cause of an independent Greece at Missolonghi. And it is easy to associate the rise of deliberately fragmentary sculpture with the Romantic craze for ruins.

Busts are one thing, associated particularly with funerary sculpture ever since ancient Rome. But armless, legless, and, perhaps especially, headless torsos, male and female, are really a Romantic, Nineteenth-Century invention. Essentially late-Romantic at that. The last of the self-consciously Classical sculptors, such as Canova, Flaxman and Thorwaldsson, would not have dreamt of deliberately presenting a fragmentary or unfinished-appearing sculpture to public view as an achieved work in its own right. Even later, more Romanticism-tinged figures like Carpeaux might make such works only as a preliminary study or transitional piece, to remain hidden from prying eyes in the studio. It is not until we come to Rodin that we encounter a sculptor who glories in the idea and constantly turns to it in his public art.

There are two aspects of Rodin that contribute to this revolutionary attitude: that he was almost exclusively a modeller, a master of bronze rather than of stone, and that he lived very consciously in the artistic world of the Impressionist painters, and shared their fascination with the transitory, the evanescent. He wanted to achieve in the sometimes obstructively solid medium of sculpture a sense of *panta rei* (all things flow), so that his figures, like the humans they represent, seem to be constantly in a state of flux, moving from place to place and evolving in time. Sometimes Rodin would have the "excuse" that his small individual pieces were all really studies for the great and complex works like *The Gate of Hell*, with its myriad souls in torture. This was frequently true enough, but still he sold the fragmentary maquettes as self-sufficient works of art.

Through Rodin's recognition as the greatest sculptor of his generation, his views on the nature and possibilities of sculpture became acceptable and then accepted. Since Nick Bibby, unlike, say, Henry Moore, a carver to the roots of his being, is also primarily a modeller whose favoured medium is bronze, it has been impossible for him to remain totally outside Rodin's sphere of influence. This is particularly noticeable in his human figures and some, but not all, of his animal figures. There it depends on the animal: Rodin's Impressionism is appropriate to the soft and gentle outlines of a bloodhound, but would hardly do for a monumental figure of a Kodiak bear or a champion carthorse. But wonderful though these are, his relatively few human figures remain among his finest achievements.

The two torsos may not be quite monumental, but they are certainly heroic. As indeed they should be, if they are associated, however loosely, with classical gods and goddesses. Paradoxically, they are both intensely realistic and unmistakably ideal. Among the skills required of a sculptor working in a broadly realistic context is the ability to choose exactly the right model. I do not know where Bibby found his models for these two torsos, but it looks as though they came as close to physical perfection as even a god could desire. The structure of bone and muscle beneath the skin is beautifully (and accurately) rendered, by a master hand, as capable as Rodin of framing their fearful symmetry.

John Russell Taylor  
Author and Art Critic



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Nick Bibby  
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