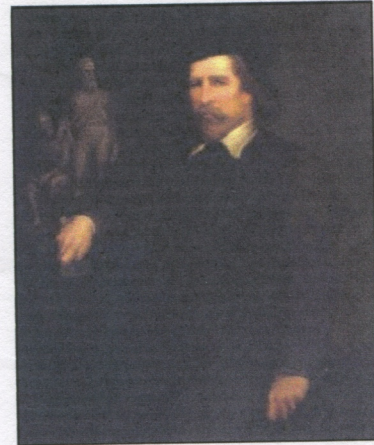


AUSTRALIAN DICTIONARY OF BIOGRAPHY - ONLINE EDITION

Summers, Charles (1825 - 1878)

SUMMERS, CHARLES (1825-1878), sculptor, was born on 27 July 1825 at Charlton Mackrell, Somerset, England, son of George Summers, builder and mason, and elder brother of Joseph. Charles's schooling was negligible and he worked from the age of 8. Business failure forced the family to Street near Glastonbury, Somerset, from where Charles worked in masons' yards. Known for his industry and for his skill at stone-carving, he pleased the foreman of prominent sculptor Henry Weekes and at 19 obtained work at Weekes's London studio and then with M. L. Watson. At night he practised his craft and prepared models for his entry submissions to the Royal Academy. He was admitted as a student in 1850 and next year won medals for the best model from life and for the best group of historical sculpture. Ill health forced him to migrate to Melbourne in 1854, where he built a house before taking up a claim at Tarnagulla goldfield. A week after he sold his claim and returned to Melbourne it yielded £20,000 to the buyers. Later he directed the sculpture work in the superb chamber of the Legislative Council (completed in 1856) and modelled the ceiling figures.



Charles Summers (1825 - 1878), by Margaret Thomas, 1866, courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria. H248. . Image Details

Summers became a central figure in local artistic circles; he arranged annual art exhibitions and was a founder of the Victorian Society of Fine Arts in October 1856. In 1863 he became a member of the commission of inquiry into the promotion of the fine arts in Victoria, and next year was made chairman of a board of examiners testing drawing instructors for Common Schools. He did many fine portraits, busts and medallions of local notables such as Charles Sturt, Sir Redmond Barry and J. P. Fawkner, but his finest achievement is the bronze group of Burke and Wills, which is made entirely of Australian materials; he lived for six weeks among Aborigines to help him to represent their figures accurately. With great courage, patience and skill he built the furnace and did the casting himself, reputedly the first ever done in Australia, and to that time the figure of Burke was the largest ever cast in one piece. The statues were completed and the bronze bas-reliefs, depicting scenes of the expedition, were fixed into place in September 1866.

In May 1867 Summers left Melbourne in the *True Briton* for England and thence to Rome, where he made a successful career. He exhibited at the Royal Academy twelve times between 1849 and 1876. His last work was commissioned by (Sir) W. J. Clarke for the National Gallery, a marble group of Queen Victoria, her consort and the prince and princess of Wales. After an operation for acute goitre he died in Paris on 30 November 1878. Friends in Australia paid tribute to his high ideals, and the *Argus* obituarist described him as 'Simple in manners, frank and gentle in speech, modest and unassuming by nature, and entirely free from that self-consciousness and self-assertion which make some artists so intolerable in private life ... his opinions [were] always the fruit of independent thought and reflection'. As a sculptor Summers was dedicated to his craft and highly revered the classical form. He was 'competent in a dull and un-inspiring period'. His work is represented in the State Library and the National Gallery of Victoria, the Mitchell Library, Sydney, and the Adelaide Art Gallery. Summers married Augustine Ameot in 1851 in London. Their only son, Charles Francis (b. November 1857), joined him in Rome in 1868; he was a minor sculptor whose work is a feature of the Ballarat Gardens.

A portrait in oils of Summers, by Margaret Thomas, is in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

Select Bibliography