

Albert Toft (3<sup>rd</sup> June 1862 – 18<sup>th</sup> December 1949) was a British sculptor. Toft and his work were significant in the New Sculpture movement which occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was trained in the French style and moved from the Classicism of the previous generation of sculptors to a more naturalistic and expressive style of figure sculpture. His career was dominated by public commemorative commissions in bronze. These were mostly single statues of military or royal figures. Examples of these works include the South African war memorial in Cardiff and the Queen Victoria statue in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

This helpsheet is designed to be used by primary teachers as background information on Albert Toft. There is also a set of [Albert Toft fact cards](#) which can be shared with pupils. Both this helpsheet and the fact cards can be used as part of WMT's [Art unit of work: Great artists and war memorials](#).

## Early life

Toft was born in Handsworth, Staffordshire (now a suburb of Birmingham) in 1862 to parents Charles Toft and Rosanna Reeves. Toft's father was a notable modeller in ceramics. At the time of Toft's birth he was a senior modeller at Minton and later became chief modeller at Wedgwood Pottery. Toft's younger brother Joseph Alfonso went on to become a landscape artist.

## Training and work before World War I

Toft trained as a modeller first at Elkington (a silver manufacturer in Birmingham) and then at Wedgwood Pottery, Staffordshire. He also attended art schools in Hanley and Newcastle upon Tyne. In 1881, he won a scholarship to study sculpture at the National Art Training School in South Kensington (later renamed the Royal College of Art) under the French born British sculptor and medallist Edouard Lanteri. Toft's time with Lanteri, who had a romantic French style of sculpting and was seen to be an influential advocate of New Sculpture, heavily influenced his future work. During his second and third years at the School Toft received silver medals.

Following his studies, Toft set up a studio in London where he produced portrait busts, bronze statuettes, medallions and bas reliefs. Later, he received commissions for statuary and architectural reliefs. From 1885 onwards Toft exhibited his work at the Royal Academy. Some of his notable works during this time include:

- Fate-Led (1890)
- Spring (1897)
- Spirit of Contemplation (1901)
- The Bather (1915)

The Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 provided Toft with ample commissions. He was also asked to create and design elements of war memorials which commemorated the Second Boer War (1899-1902) including the South African War memorial in Cardiff. This memorial features the figure of an Angel of Peace holding a branch with a dove atop a plinth and the seated figures of Warfare and Grief on either side of the plinth. Toft signed the base of all the figures.

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In 1911 Toft published “Modelling and Sculpture”. This book was essentially a manual offering students every practical detail required for a complete knowledge of modelling and sculpting. Topics within the manual include modelling a portrait bust and modelling in clay as a prelude to working in stone and wood. The book was reprinted in 1949.

## War memorials

As a result of the wave of public memorialisation that followed the end of World War I, Toft was commissioned to design many local war memorials in the UK (or the sculptural elements of them) including:

- Birmingham Hall of Memory ([www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/141747](http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/141747)). Located in Centenary Square, Birmingham this memorial takes the form of an octagonal Hall with a domed roof. The Hall was created following a competition among Birmingham architects to design a war memorial. S.N Cooke and W Norman Twist won the competition and Toft was the sculptor who designed and made the four bronze seated figures within in the hall which represent the services, Navy, Army, Air Force and Nursing Service
- City and Midland Bank World War I memorial ([www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/223812](http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/223812)). Located behind the HSBC building in Canary Wharf the memorial serves as a record of staff members from the London Joint City and Midland Bank who gave their lives for their country. Fourteen panels list the names of those commemorated and these are fixed to a marble memorial with triangular pediment. Either side of the memorial are bronze figures, to the left St George and the right the Recording Angel
- Royal Fusiliers war memorial, London ([www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/120442](http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/120442)) The memorial features a statue of a helmeted figure of a Private in the Royal Fusiliers in Service Dress with 1908 Pattern Equipment. The figure holds a rifle behind him in his right hand and his right leg is raised on a stone
- Thornton Cleveleys ([www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/138768](http://www.warmemorialsonline.org.uk/memorial/138768)). Situated at Four Lane Ends in the village, Toft’s sculpture atop the memorial takes the form of a soldier standing arms reversed (head bowed while rested on an upturned rifle) which is a symbol of grief and respect

A list of other war memorials designed by Toft can be found on the Resource sheet ‘[War Memorials Online links for war memorials designed by Baker, Blomfield, Lorimer, Lutyens and Toft.](#)’

## Notable honours and positions

- Elected to Art Workers Guild (1891)
- Bronze medal at the Universal Exhibition in Paris (1900)
- Elected a fellow to the Royal Society of British Sculptors (1938)

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