

How David Jones saved “Metamorphosis”



Metamorphosis, by Derek Giles, as it was on the side of the Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool. Image courtesy of the Warrnambool Art Gallery.

By Carol Altmann

A simple question – “what ever happened to...” – has uncovered a story about the retrieval of a well-known sculpture taken from Warrnambool, while also shining a light on the artist who made it.

The 3 metre tall copper sculpture, *Metamorphosis*, was installed on the eastern wall of the Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool on August 1, 1967 – the same year as the famous silver ball water tower was built just metres away.

The pair looked down on the factory workers, East Warrnambool school kids and passersby for more than 25 years until the collapse of Fletcher Jones saw the business taken over by Pelaco and the buildings sold to the Warrnambool City Council.

Bluestone recently posted a 1967 photo of the silver ball and sculpture to the Facebook page, [Save the Silver Ball and Fletchers Gardens](#), which prompted a question from one follower: "whatever happened to that sculpture?"

Before long, the answer was provided by Lesena Selvage: it sits on an eastern wall of the South-West TAFE building, overlooking Gilles St, which is just one letter away from the name of the artist who created *Metamorphosis*, **Derek Giles**.

But what has never been revealed, until now, is that the sculpture was taken from Warrnambool to Melbourne and it was only through the dogged determination of the late David Jones, son of Sir Fletcher, that it was returned.



The Metamorphosis sculpture shortly after being installed on the site in August 1967 – the same year as the silver ball water tower was built. Image: Ralph Jones collection, courtesy of Melbourne University Archives.

Letters penned by David Jones reveal that he became aware by early 2007 that the sculpture had been removed by Pelaco and shipped to its factory in Maidstone, Melbourne.

While David didn't name Pelaco, he urged the council to do all it could to ensure the sculpture was returned from "the company".

"As chairman of (the City Art Advisory) committee and because of my past association with the Pleasant Hill establishment, I express my deep concern that this object has been taken from Warrnambool," he wrote to then chief executive of council, **Lindsay Merritt** in February 2007.

"My understanding of the sale of the Pleasant Hill site to the WCC in the early 90s was that the infrastructure including the buildings and the gardens were transferred into the ownership of the city. I cannot imagine why the company could or should have formed the view that they had ownership of this sculpture.

"I request that you take whatever action is necessary to recover the sculpture and that the City Art Committee select a new site for the work."

By December that same year, little progress had been made, despite the issue being raised by the City Art Committee at least four times.



Since 2009, the sculpture has been on permanent loan from the Warrnambool City Council to South-West TAFE and now overlooks Gilles St. Image: Lesena Selvage.

It appears a clearly frustrated David Jones did what any self-respecting supporter of local arts would do and approached the media to apply a little more heat to the flame.

A story ran in the local newspaper on 28 December 2007, asking people to help locate one of the city's "most unusual artworks" that had "gone missing".

"It's 40 years old, a unique piece and worth several thousand dollars, but more importantly it's owned by the citizens of Warrnambool and we should make every attempt to recover it," David is quoted as saying.

The story ended with a request for "anyone with information" to contact the council or David, even though both knew exactly where the sculpture was.

David's tactic clearly worked, because within 12 months the sculpture was back home – we are not sure how it was finally retrieved – and discussions were underway with the City Art Committee as to where it should be displayed.

South-West TAFE was chosen because of Derek Giles' links to the art school.

It has long been thought that Derek Giles was an art teacher at the Warrnambool Technical College (now TAFE), but in fact he was a primary school teacher who lived with his wife and young family near the Fletcher Jones factory and who studied art as a mature-age student.



The artist, primary school teacher Derek Giles, with his wife Meryl, who worked for David Jones, and his young family around the time of the commission. David Giles is next to his father. Image courtesy of David Giles.

I actually helped Dad build it," said Derek's oldest son, **David Giles**, by phone from Melbourne.

"It was put together in our garage (in Emma Ave) and I would hold bit this and that bit, while Dad kept saying 'don't look at the flame, don't look at the flame,'" he laughed.

David, one of four children, was in Grade 6 at the time and, from what he understands, the commission came about through his mother, Meryl.

"My mother worked as a secretary to David Jones for about 12 months and I think one of Dad's penultimate assignments for his art course was to produce a work, so Mum approached David to see if Dad could make him a sculpture," he said.

Derek Giles, who was born in Melbourne, taught in primary schools around the south-west in the 1960s, including Port Fairy Consolidated and Warrnambool Primary School, but always had a penchant for art and worked across a range of mediums.

"*Metamorphosis* is a wonderful connection to Warrnambool for the whole family: it is a real focal point," David said.

"As kids, we always thought of it as Dad's sculpture...(but) not really being art aficionados, we joked that he had made a high-rise for the birds, because they used to love to roost in the horizontal panels when it was mounted on the wall."

Derek Giles died in 1993, at the age of 58.

There is little doubt that had David Jones not pushed for the return of *Metamorphosis*, it would have been gone for good, with the Pelaco factory at Maidstone since closed.

Later this year the Giles family will complete the final vision that both they, and David, had for the sculpture, which is to install a simple plaque naming him as the artist.

I would like to acknowledge retired art academic Ross Gray and Warrnambool Art Gallery Curator Murray Bowes for their assistance with this story.