



Yorkshire Sculpture Park: from blot on the landscape to thing of beauty

Founder Peter Murray on how the park once accused of desecrating the countryside is now 2014 UK museum of the year

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Peter Murray smiles as he remembers the early days of Yorkshire Sculpture Park. "There was no money, we didn't have any land and there was so much opposition ... people thought we were desecrating the countryside."

Thirty-seven years later and few would think that now. The park has an international reputation with world class exhibitions, a gradual ascendancy that was crowned on Wednesday when it was named the 2014 UK museum of the year.

Murray, founder and still the driving force behind YSP, picked up the Art Fund award at a ceremony at the National Gallery. "It was a lovely evening, but a bit tense," he said on Friday. "I really didn't think we were going to win."

"We were up against serious competition. The other museums are terrific and when they showed the videos they just looked so good. I just thought... 'oh God!'"

YSP, 200 hectares (500 acres) of beautiful countryside and sculpture - outdoor and indoor - on the edge of Wakefield, won from a shortlist that included Tate Britain, the Hayward Gallery, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts in Norwich, Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, East Sussex, and the Mary Rose museum in Portsmouth.

Judges praised it as "a truly outstanding museum with a bold artistic vision" which in 2013 came of age. It was a year that saw an extremely well-received Yinka Shonibare exhibition and the successful restoration of a chapel that has as its first work a new six-metre-high sculpture by Ai Weiwei. There was also the installation of Roger Hiorns's *Seizure 2008/2013* - a copper sulphate chamber relocated from its initial home, a condemned London bedsit.

The YSP has an international reputation with big shows for artists that have included Jaume Plensa, Joan Miró and the current show by Ursula von Rydingsvard. This is the place you come if you want to see Barbara Hepworth's *Family of Man* or monumental bronzes by Henry Moore surrounded by sheep.

Last year it attracted a record 350,000 visitors, all a long way from 1977 when Murray had the idea that it would be a good thing to install art works in the grounds of Bretton Hall college, where he ran the postgraduate course in art education.

Murray said he had always been interested in organising exhibitions in unusual places - car showrooms and the like - and he thought it would be a good idea to create something in the open air on a permanent basis.

There was an awful lot of opposition, he said - it was, after all, a stunning 18th-century landscape created for landed gentry in the manner of Capability Brown. But he did have enthusiasm from the artistic community. "Not financial support but moral and intellectual support, which always seems easy to get in this country rather than money." The first cash was £1,000 from the Yorkshire Arts Association, and from then YSP has gradually expanded into something unique.

There has never been much money, said Murray, or any kind of template to use. "We had to learn everything. There was no curatorial tradition for organising exhibitions in the open air."

One thing soon became clear: you don't just put sculptures down where they might look nice - "plop sculpture", as the late Anthony Caro called it.

"What we were trying to do was to curate exhibitions in the open air with a coherent statement. No different to an indoor exhibition, except you're dealing with the elements and big open spaces and the sculpture has to be up to it.

"Size is not everything. It is interesting that large pieces of sculpture can get lost in the landscape, it is actually do with the scale. It took us quite a long time to really understand these things."

It is also about respecting the work, he said. So often sculpture has been "so badly sited, it doesn't help the work in any way whatsoever. We really try to respect the aims and intentions of the artist and we have built up a terrific team who will do whatever is necessary, within reason, to get the right spot."

The aim, he said, was to site works in a place "where it looks like it has been there forever". It began small and has grown almost year by year, with Murray giving up his day job in the 1980s to devote himself fulltime to the museum. In 2002 the visitor centre was completed, and its impressive underground gallery opened its doors in 2005.

A success story in its own right, the park is also part of a bigger one, a golden triangle of art spaces all within 30 miles of each other, completed by the Hepworth Wakefield Gallery and in Leeds, the Henry Moore Institute and Leeds Art Gallery.

The one thing missing from YSP on Friday was a banner announcing its triumph. "We're just getting it ready," said Murray. "We didn't like to be too optimistic. It should be up soon."

One important byproduct of the award is the £100,000 which comes with it - money that will in part help fund further residencies for young artists.

It is extremely useful money in challenging economic times, said Murray, although he was quick to stress that YSP earns 64% of its income from private and commercial sources.

The intention is to continue having ambitious plans, said Murray - to carry on developing. "Nothing exists like this anywhere in the world. It sounds like an exaggeration, but it doesn't. There are some great places, but they are all very different."