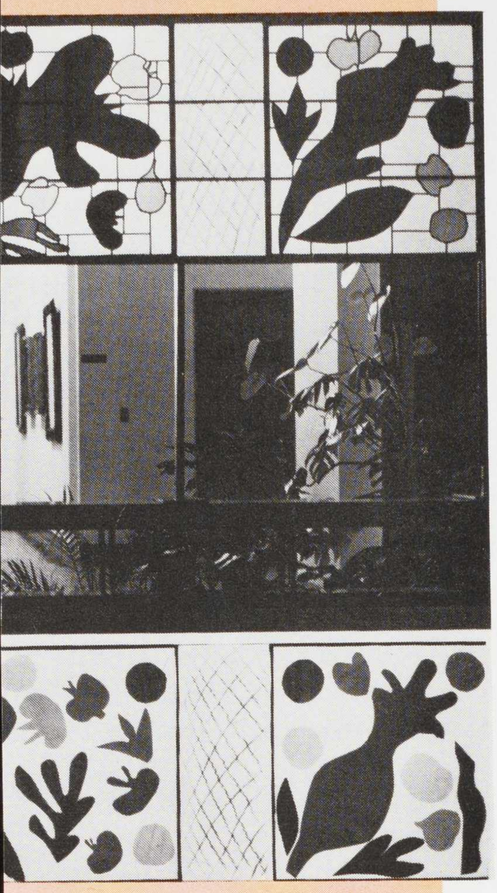

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MONUMENTAL BRASSES

BY J.H. WHITE

Three-dimensional carvings were a natural development from the great religious sculptures which followed the architectural movement. Many of these sculptures were life-size figures, reclining on a bed or couch, individually and beautifully crafted from marble, stone, alabaster, bronze, copper, brass, wood, terracotta and other media. In answer to the demand for economy in space and money, the incised stone or brass slab was developed. Taking up far less space, the incised slabs could be laid on top of the alter tomb, in the church floor or in the wall. Many of the stone slabs have been destroyed by the elements, but in Great Britain alone, approximately 8600 incised effigy and inscription brasses have survived.

Merchant traders incorporated the symbols and markings of arms and trade associations into their memorials. Many other effigies are portrayed standing on a rise with animals or flowers underfoot, but the figures are actually lying down, as evidenced by pillows beneath their heads. Academics and lawyers may carry books. Wool merchants stand on woolpacks or beside a sheep. Puns upon the name of the deceased were also worked into memorials.

The brasses also depict most of the changes in armor for a period well over 350 years. This record is a priceless history lesson that traces change by change as new weapons were introduced and the armor changed to protect the wearer against the new device. After the development of firearms in the Elizabethan era, armor was no longer worn for protection.

The Monumental brass pictured here is of Sir Robert de Bures and shows him with a lion under foot. Mail coif and mittens cover his head and hands. His surcoat is long and has a deep slit up the front for ease in riding. His thighs are covered by gamboised cuisses, a quilted defense for the thigh, with the poleyns (knee caps) attached to them. The sword belt has a braided hanger, the most frequently depicted of this period. Sir Robert's shield, suspended from a guige or shoulder strap, is concave to the body. The whole arms are shown on the visible half.

On other brasses, a woman's marital status was represented. Spinsters were depicted by long flowing hair; a wreath of flowers encircled her head if she had died young. Widows were distinguished by the wearing of a long veil. Women who had married more than once, were shown between their husbands, as were men who had had more than one wife. The style of dress is often elegant. Medieval families were large and it was not uncommon to portray some or all the children on Monumental brasses. A few are shown in cradles. Still-born babies are shown on top of the covers, in bed with their mothers.

The quality of brass effigies began to deteriorate by the late 15th century. Designs became too involved; attempts at three-dimensional effects were unsatisfactory.

While little is known about this exquisite art form in the United States, efforts are being made to correct that oversight. Whitigan's has arranged with crafters in England to produce hand rubbings from twenty-one of the best brasses. These rubbings range from 19" to 72" long and make excellent wall hangings. A catalog of the available hand rubbings along with a history of each effigy is available by sending $2.00 to Whitigan's, 4420 Madison, Suite 180-2, Dept. X, Kansas City, MO 64111. □