

## In pictures: Making a four-metre-tall bronze sculpture that fuses British innovation and Chinese tradition



*British sculptor and Loughborough University Reader in Fine Art, John Atkin, with his latest piece 'Heirloom' ahead of it being shipped to its final location in Guangzhou. Image courtesy of AART.*

British sculptor John Atkin has unveiled his latest creation, *Heirloom (The Water Sleeve Dancer)* – a four-metre-tall bronze sculpture weighing more than two tonnes – and a series of behind-the-scenes images revealing how the monumental piece came to life.

Atkin, a Reader in Fine Art at Loughborough University, was commissioned to create a piece that captures the creative spirit of Guangzhou for installation at a landmark site in the city adjacent to the Pearl River.

The sculpture was inspired by the flowing movements of Cantonese Opera's water sleeve dancers, who convey emotion through the sweep of long, billowing sleeves.

“Working through a combination of digital and traditional sculptural methods, I began to explore geometric forms that could be stretched, folded, and intertwined to evoke the flow of draped fabric and the rhythm of a moving body”, said Atkin, a former student of the Royal College of Art, who was personally funded during his MA by Henry Moore OM CH.

“*Heirloom* stands as both a gesture of cultural exchange and a testament to historic craftsmanship, merging digital precision with the enduring resonance of bronze.”

## How it was made

Working with skilled craftspeople, Atkin developed a series of digital models and animations to test scale, placement, and materials before settling on bronze – a material chosen by Atkin for “its sense of permanence and heritage, and for its resonance with the nearby Pearl River as a symbol of continuity and renewal”.

A full-scale plastic prototype was 3D-printed at a foundry in Tianjin. Atkin refined the surface contours and detailing. Then, a multi-part mould was created, from which a wax pattern was produced in preparation for bronze casting.



*The full-scale polystyrene prototype of 'Heirloom'. Image courtesy of AART.*

Molten bronze was poured into the moulds to create a series of sections that were later welded together around a concealed steel framework for strength and stability. Each join was ground and polished until the surface appeared seamless. The final phase of polishing was achieved by hand.



*Left: The bronze segments of Heirloom built around concealed steel frames. Right: An artisan working on a segment. Image courtesy of AART.*

Up to six artisans worked simultaneously to achieve the sculpture's flowing form, sanding and buffing the metal until it reflected light like draped fabric.

The final stage was 'patination' – heating the bronze and brushing on chemical solutions to create its warm tone. The colour was sealed with wax and hand-polished to a soft sheen that shifts subtly with changing light.



*Left: An artisan patinates a segment of Heirloom. Right: Artist John Atkin applies the finishing touches to a section of his latest work. Image courtesy of AART.*

### **Where to see it**

*Heirloom* has been installed at the entrance of the Poly Guangzhou Tianhe District development on Linjiang Avenue – a new mixed-use complex overlooking the Pearl River.



*Heirloom stands proudly in the entrance of the Poly Guangzhou Tianhe District development on Linjiang Avenue. Image courtesy of AART.*

A spokesperson from AArt Public Art Organisation, who commissioned the sculpture, said: “We deeply admire John Atkin's unwavering pursuit of artistic excellence, and his work has been a great source of inspiration for us.”