NEW YORK—Sabin Howard is in the throes of a monumental task. The master sculptor has to conceptualize a horrific slice of history and then translate it into a sculptural form that is engaging and worthy of honoring incredible sacrifice.

“It’s pretty epic when you lose 10,000 people every hour,” he said.

Nearly a year ago, Howard and the young visionary architect Joe Weishaar won the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission’s competition to create a national memorial at Pershing Park in Washington, with views to the White House.

During the last five months of the U.S. involvement, which effectively ended the war, more than 53,000 U.S. soldiers died. Overall, after 1,560 days of fighting, more than 16 million lives, military and civilian, were lost worldwide.

The commission is looking to raise $50 million in private funds for the National World War I Memorial and hopes to inaugurate it on Nov. 11, 2018, the 100th anniversary of the end of the war.

Howard envisions a visual narrative of World War I that will help people contemplate our shared humanity, for many generations to come.

He called his in-progress design “a soldier’s journey.”

“How redesign the whole thing at least a dozen times,” he said, looking at a long scroll of photographs on his studio floor in the Bronx in September. It showed models in dynamic poses, wearing World War I uniforms from 100 years ago.

He’s had several sessions with models. He directs them to move in slow motion and takes photographs of the poses, gestures, and expressions he wants to convey. From the photographs, he makes sculptural-looking drawings as references for a three-dimensional maquette (scaled model), from which the actual monument will be created.

Currently, he’s working on the blueprint for his latest redesign of the memorial: an 81-foot-long bas-relief depicting about 40 figures, to be cast in bronze. In terms of scale, it’s nearly two-thirds the length of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling, and it will be the largest figurative sculpture created in the United States and Europe since the Albert Memorial in London was completed 144 years ago.

See Monument on C2

By Milene Fernandez | Epoch Times Staff

SCULPTOR
SABIN HOWARD
IN SERVICE OF SOMETHING BIGGER
World War I national memorial work in progress

By Milene Fernandez | Epoch Times Staff
Monument continued from C1

The architect, Weishaar, already went through several redesign rounds with the commission and various government regulatory agencies (including the Commission of Fine Art, the National Capital Planning Commission, and the National Park Service) to more or less finalize the park’s design, which includes a reflective pool.

Now it’s Howard’s turn to respond to all of the feedback from the agencies for the sculptural element of the monument. So far, the commission has approved a design concept, but the final plans are still subject to change before final approval from all of the agencies.

“This is all in process,” he said, showing the revised drawings he made from the photographic scroll. “But the general idea has stayed the same. You have a family, civilian life; then transition or entry; the battle scene at the center; the cost of war; and then the exit.”

In the drawing, the soldier’s daughter serves as the bookends to the story. The soldier leaves his family to go to war, gets wounded in combat, loses his mind, and then fights an uphill battle to finally return to his family.

A pile of helmets represents his dead comrades. On the far right of the wall, his daughter holds a helmet upside down and looks into it as if it is a vessel. “She holds history in her hands and looks into the future. The helmet is like the crystal ball. That’s the metaphor. World War I was the segue to World War II,” Howard explained.

“World War I is very much a forgotten war,” Edwin Fountain, vice chair of the World War One Centennial Commission, said. It hardly registers in popular memory. Yet all of the conflicts we are engaged with around the world today trace back to World War I. Considering the nearly 5 million Americans who served and who actually helped end the war, a memorial in Washington has long been overdue, he says.

Elevating Through Collaboration

After having sculpted on his own for more than 30 years, Howard feels that the intensive, collaborative work in progress on the memorial is a chance to share his knowledge and skills with others. The models who worked with Howard wore genuine World War I uniforms. He says he is working on himself internally, improving his skills, so that he can do this externally because a lot of people got killed. He has to honor them and do them justice.

The models who worked with Howard wore genuine World War I uniforms.
The next step after the final design concept is approved will be a three-dimensional maquette (scaled model).

(1) An earlier version of Sabin Howard’s design concept for the national World War I memorial.
(2) Design of the National World War I Memorial Pershing Park site plan, computer rendered by Joe Weishaar.
(3) Sabin Howard at his studio in the Bronx, New York, on Nov. 2.
(4) Sabin Howard at his studio on Nov. 2.
(5) Computer rendering of the National World War I Memorial by Joe Weishaar.

Collaborative nature of creating a work of public art has elevated his creative process.

“I see things that other people don’t see because of my training and because of what I do. In the beginning I naively thought they [the commission and agencies] would see the same things that I see—mist,” he said laughing. “The last criticism I received was that I had too many guys screaming in the middle.” He was trying to respond to their feedback to introduce more emotion, but realized he needed more variety.

“I have to be strong enough to be able to take the criticism. It takes a lot of internal fortitude... I’m learning to become more humble,” he said.

After another round of meetings in November, his outlook on the collaborative process opened up more. In the beginning, he did not want to include any dead figures because he felt that it was important to glorify the human spirit, not war. But later, he agreed to include a foxhole with a soldier coming out of it and at least one dead figure. “That’s actually a really good metaphor for the end of a form of society that is no longer in existence,” he said.

While everything he designs has to be vetted, and while he’s open to all of the feedback, he’s confident about staying true to his artistic ethos and vision.

“I went through a period when I would be drawing, and I would start crying because I understand how bad World War I was. If you see a guy who gets run over on the street, that’s pretty upsetting. Now multiply that by thousands—10,000 dead every hour, 50,000 every day. That’s too much to take. People become mentally unhinged,” he said.

Despite the brutality, what made World War I memorable and noble was the sacrifice of those who served, and the connections forged between people. That’s why Howard decided it was important to include at least 20 or 40 figures depicting a cohesive narrative to show the magnitude of those sacrifices, “so that you get a sense of how vast and deep and epic it was,” he said.

See Monument on C4
**IN SERVICE OF SOMETHING BIGGER**

World War I national memorial work in progress

Monument continued from C3

A Sculptor’s Journey

Howard grew up in New York City and Toledo, Ohio. He studied art at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia and then earned his MFA from the New York Academy of Art. He has spent at least 40,000 hours working life models in the studio. The Italian artistic influences of the great Renaissance artists are always with him—especially Michelangelo, Raphael, and Da Vinci—and further back to the ancient Greeks, like the sculptor Polykleitus. Looking at a reproduction of a Michelangelo drawing hanging in his studio, he said: “It’s so cool. It’s like a higher level of consciousness.” He’s been reading books about the 15th-century masters and turns to them for guidance and solace: “It’s like different characters [artists] running the same script,” he said. They all faced the same kinds of challenges, went through the same dilemmas and problems they had to deal with the same kinds of gods and charac-
ters. “I’m not the first seal on the planet that experienced this. I’m not the last one either. I’m just one guy who’s in this humanity,” Howard said, chuckling.

His classical sculptures of Greek Gods—Hermes, Apollo, and Aphrodite, among oth-
ers—in clay, plaster, and bronze, surrounded him, leaving minimum floor space in his stu-
dio: “I worked through 65 to 70 hours a week drawing this summer. It’s just a lot of focus,” he said. Despite the plaster dust filling the air, the ideals made sculptures felt vibrant, as if they could move any second.

Representing ourselves at our highest level has always been my dream as an artist.

Sabin Howard

“...Representing ourselves at our highest level has always been my dream as an artist.”

Sabin Howard at his studio in the Bronx, New York, on Sept. 13.

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