



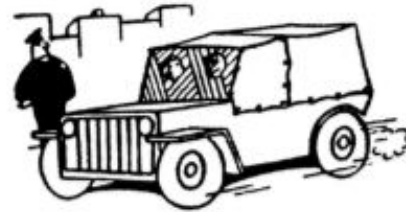
IN MEMORIAM MAY 28, 2018 ISSUE

# THERE'S NO FIRST WORLD WAR MEMORIAL ON THE NATIONAL MALL?

*The sculptor Sabin Howard is jumping through hoops to right an art-historical wrong.*

By Anna Russell

On a recent Tuesday, Sabin Howard, the figurative sculptor, was preparing for one of the first public viewings of a planned national memorial to the First World War. He had driven from his studio, in the Bronx, to the New York Academy of Art, his alma mater, in Tribeca. At the curb, he opened the doors of his van to reveal a ten-foot scale model of a fifty-seven-foot bronze tableau: a narrative meditation on the Great War, to be installed in a few years near the White House, not far from the tributes to the Second World War and the wars in Korea and Vietnam. He carried the model inside in three heavy pieces. “Sorry it’s not bigger,” he said.



In 2016, Howard and his collaborator, Joe Weishaar, were named the winners of a competition, created by an act of Congress, to design a national monument to the First World War. Surprisingly, it would be the capital’s first. Washington’s war memorials were not created in chronological order; they grew organically, out of need, like footpaths in an open field. It started with Vietnam. “Vietnam veterans always had this feeling of not having a parade, not being memorialized,” Chris Isleib, the director of public affairs for the United States World War One Centennial Commission, said. “So they lobbied, thankfully.”

Isleib's commission wanted a First World War memorial on the Mall, too, but, after vets mobilized to get monuments to the Korean War and the Second World War, Congress passed the Commemorative Works Act, which, Isleib said, "basically declared the National Mall a completed work of art." By then, veterans of America's first global war were disappearing. (The last, Frank Buckles, died in 2011.) In 2014, the First World War was given Pershing Park, a run-down slice of green adjacent to the Mall, near the Willard Hotel. "The pedestrian traffic there is really great," Isleib said, optimistically.

In a room on the Academy's first floor, Howard set down the pieces and a large wooden pedestal. He is soft-spoken, and had on jeans, a fleece jacket, and hiking boots. He had brought with him two assistants, Paul Emile and Zach Libresco, both in hooded sweatshirts, who had posed for the sculpture and were helping to set it up. "I did twelve iterations before I got to this one," Howard said. The Centennial Commission includes a dozen lawyers, academics, and retired military officers. "Meeting after meeting, I'd bring my work, and they'd criticize it," Howard said. "The initial idea was a story, a long relief, but the story line kept changing. I would ask, 'Well, what do you want?' And they'd say, 'We'll know it when we see it.' "

He started pulling photographs out of a cardboard box on the floor. The memorial's central narrative involves a father who leaves his family, goes to war, and returns home changed. "I realized, Oh, my God, this is like Joseph Campbell's 'the hero's journey,' " Howard said. "It's a very simple story that everybody in every single culture has experienced." Figures in the sculpture go blind, suffer from P.T.S.D., and fall in battle.

Howard found genuine First World War uniforms online and photographed actors posing in them. He used 3-D scanners to make mockups. "Actually"—he paused at an image of two soldiers draped over each other, gruesomely—"here's Paul and Zach." He turned to them: "Hey, guys, here you are, dead."



Paul squinted at the image. “The harder ones were the squats,” he said.



*“I’m just worried the knots are the only thing holding me together.”*



Zach nodded. “The ones where we had to defy gravity.”

Howard continued, “The commission would say, ‘Well, we want it grittier,’ or ‘We want more wounded.’” He picked up another photo, which showed an actor, his head lolling, supported on either side by an apron-clad nurse. “I took twelve thousand of these.”

Deep into the process, Howard had a realization: “I was in my studio, and I looked up and saw this big poster of

Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgment.’ I had this voice in my head that was, like, ‘Make the art for yourself. Do what *you* wish to do.’ ”

He ran his finger along the model and said, “We have three sections, in five acts, like a Shakespearean structure.” He pointed out the father (“an allegory for America”). “He enters into the brotherhood of arms,” he went on. “This trench represents the Atlantic Ocean.” The action moves into a battle scene (“the insanity of it”), a death (“a Pietà pose”), and a transformation (“there’s your Joseph Campbell”). He mused, “I’ll probably scan Paul’s face for the father.”

Paul considered the figure. “I don’t know if I can *do* a dad face yet,” he said.

“Well, a *young* dad,” Zach offered.

“Maybe a young dad.” ♦

*This article appears in the print edition of the May 28, 2018, issue, with the headline “The Hero’s Journey.”*