

HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Massive national monument to World War I comes to life in Englewood

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That's fitting for World War I" quips artist's model Christian Ashdale.

It is a detached leg.

A casualty, not of war, but of the artistic process, explains Sabin Howard — the master sculptor behind an extraordinary First World War monument taking shape in Englewood.

"We're still redesigning on the fly now," says Howard, who has that leg — literally — in hand.

A perfectly good leg. Or anyway, as good as a leg made of Styrofoam covered with a thin coating of Plasteline clay needs to be.

But it no longer seems to work, in the context of the 38 figures that crowd and jostle on the enormous 58-foot long, 10-foot high tableau he calls "A Soldier's Journey." It will have to be redone. "Everything is relational," Howard says. "You see how we move things around."

Since August 2019, Howard and a dogged team of sculptors and models have been at work on what, for sheer scale alone, must count as one of the epic art projects of the 21st century.

His mammoth sculpture group, which will become the nation's official World War I monument when it's unveiled in Washington, D.C., in 2023 or 2024, may be the largest freestanding bronze relief in the western hemisphere.

"This is very hard physically and mentally — it's very challenging," Howard says. And his spacious, cluttered, 5,000-square-foot studio bears witness.

All the expected stuff is there: Metal wax tools, clay rakes, brushes, everything that has been part of the sculptor's toolkit from the days of Donatello. But there are also some other, less likely tools.

Pullup bars. Gymnastic rings. Yoga mats. An inversion board. A Peloton.

"Making art is incredibly stressful at this level, and so this is a mind-body connection that is critical in maintaining the path to your goal," Howard says.

He himself is fit — he frequently bikes the 10 miles across the George Washington Bridge to his studio, a 100-year-old derelict printing plant with 18-foot ceilings and skylights on South Van Brunt Street.

But the assistant sculptors and models — generally there are eight or nine people around the place at any given time — also work out.

When they're not lifting enormous sculpted figures and anchoring them in place, or standing in tortured poses for six hours at a time to model World War I soldiers charging into battle, they're likely to be found to one side, doing push-ups.

"I keep joking that I want to do a calendar of the sculptors and models with their shirts off," says Howard's wife, novelist Traci Slatton, who has been assisting her husband in multiple capacities. "Like those firemen's calendars. I think we could make some money."

MEN OF BRONZE

It's not by accident that a crew of sculpted guys is at work on a mammoth piece of sculpture.

The heroic, in art, is not in fashion. It hasn't been for 100 years. But it goes to the heart of Howard's vision as an artist. It's a tradition that goes back to Michelangelo and Leonardo. Further — to the ancient Greeks and Romans who inspired them.

"I do look for guidance in some of the heavy hitters that have preceded me," he says. "I have a tremendous admiration for Michelangelo. And I don't think I'm the only one who does. Because if you look at the lines that go into the Vatican to see the Sistine Chapel, they extend for maybe six or seven city blocks."



Sabin Howard sculpts an enormous work in his Englewood studio that will be installed as the national World War I monument in Washington D.C., after it is completed. In an era dominated by abstract art, Howard is one of a small group of sculptors who still do art the Renaissance way. The "figurative revival," it's been called. (From left) sculptor Raymond Frech, model Mark Puchinsky, Sabin Howard, model and apprentice Christian Ashdale and sculptor Charlie Mostow.





Such artists saw nobility in the human spirit. Also the human form. And that was what drove them — as it did Howard, in the 1980s and ‘90s — to study anatomy, to hone their craft.

“This kind of art has been pushed to the rear, and has been cut off,” Howard says. “You cannot get this kind of education in art schools, to create this kind of art.”

In an era still dominated by abstract art — of concrete slabs in museum galleries, and steel pretzels in public squares — Howard is one of a small group of sculptors who still do art the Renaissance way. The “figurative revival,” it’s been called.

Reactionary, in the aesthetic sense? Perhaps. But it requires a level of sheer technical skill that few, nowadays, possess — or even seem interested in.

“I think a lot of art is really crap, garbage,” Howard says. “If you go see Michael Jordan in a basketball game, you pay good money to see him. You’re not going to see a JV basketball team and pay that kind of money. You’re looking for great skill. Why is it that in art, that’s not important anymore? Great skill. That’s my question, for my audience.”

AN AMERICAN STORY

Visitors who see “A Soldier’s Journey” in its eventual home, Pershing Park, will see what amounts to a movie in bronze.

It’s an enormous frieze that takes the viewer — left to right — from the home where the departing father is handed his helmet by his little girl (Howard’s daughter Madeleine, 11 at the time, was the model), to the high drama of soldiers charging and thrusting bayonets and screaming in agony as nurses tend to the wounded (the sculptor’s wife is one of the nurses), to a final scene where the returning father hands his helmet back to his daughter.

“It’s about the soldiers who had to go, to leave their comfortable homes and go to a hellish place where the worst of the worst atrocities were seen,” Howard says. “That’s the hero’s journey in itself. Those soldiers had to do something heroic.”

Such realism has its limits, naturally. Uplift is the goal, for any national monument. And Howard, like the old masters, has his Medicis to answer to (the project has a \$40 million price tag,



(Top) A prototype of the full memorial; (above) Sculptor Sabin Howard. “It used to be that art showed people what they could be,” he said. “It’s about looking at a piece of art and being elevated in spirit. That is what is needed today in this country. Guidance and direction.”

mostly funded through donations).

No physical gruesomeness. No grappling with certain social realities. African American soldiers — rightly honored in the piece — are seen fighting side by side with whites, something that would certainly be news to the famous “Harlem Hellfighters” and other segregated units back then (Native Americans, who did fight in white units, are also shown).

But the expression in the faces, the contortion of the bodies, are real enough. The energy, the dynamism —something that Howard, and others before him, picked up from a favorite classical sculpture, Laocoön — speak eloquently to the horror of battle.

“That’s kind of the lineage I feel connected to,” Howard says. “The motion is emotion. That’s what sculpture is.”

A MODERN TWIST

This being 2021, classical technique has been combined with some modern methods.

The armature — framework — of the figures has been created using 3D printing. Images of the models have been captured by a sophisticated computer program, ZBrush, which creates a Styrofoam “maquette,” which is then covered with clay. That’s the canvas on which Howard and his two assistants, Raymond Frech and Charlie Mostow, work their magic. Technology is

PROTOTYPE: COURTESY OF SABIN HOWARD — PHOTOGRAPHER: ANDREW HOLTZ

perhaps one-tenth of the process, Howard says. “It’s not art, it’s a tool,” he says.

Later, the clay figures are transferred through a silicon mold to wax, which in turn becomes a ceramic shell — into which hot bronze will be poured. Then the individual figures will be shipped from an English foundry to Washington, to be assembled on-site.

“We were allotted six weeks per figure,” Slatton says. “Our contract date is Dec. 20, 2023, but I think we’ll come in three or four months early. That’s my goal.”

That any World War I monument — let alone Howard’s — will be unveiled at Pershing Park is itself a small miracle.

The site, about a mile from the White House, has been fought over by competing groups since the 1930s. It was dubbed Pershing Square in 1957; a statue of Gen. John J. Pershing was dedicated there 26 years later. But it wasn’t until the National World War II memorial opened in Washington in 2004 that there was a big push to create a large-scale memorial to Pershing’s war: World War I.

Alas, when the the World War I Centennial Commission hosted a design competition, Howard’s proposal — he was one of 360 entrants — didn’t make the 2015 short list.

“And Sabin’s like, ‘I have this weird feeling it’s not over for me,’” Slatton recalls.

As it later turned out, an architect named Joe Weishaar did make the short list. But he needed a sculptor. “So he started researching sculptors,” Slatton says. “He googled sculptors and he found what he liked: Daniel Chester French.”

Only hitch: the sculptor of the Lincoln Memorial was dead. “Then,” Slatton says, “he googled living American sculptors.”

It was a scary moment, when Howard got the call — and realized he was being handed something huge. But also the moment he’d been waiting for all his life.

“My motto is, go big or go home,” he says. “I always dreamed of recreating the Renaissance today.”

THE MOTHER COUNTRY

His earliest exposure to art had been in Italy. His mother, from Turin, near Milan, took him back there three months after his birth in New

York. He later returned to America — but by then he had already imbibed the strong wine of the Renaissance.

“I didn’t start making art until I was 19, so I had absolutely no clue what was going on around me,” says Howard, now 57. “I thought there were three artists: Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. And that’s the type of art I wanted to make. I had no idea there was de Kooning and abstract expressionists going on at that point.”

His sort of art, he found, was mostly not taught in schools. He was lucky enough to find mentors: first Walter Erlebacher and Antony Visco from the Philadelphia College of Art (now the University of the Arts), then Paolo Carosone in Rome. And so he began to make his own Apollos and Aphrodites. Some of them are on display in his studio.

“What I got is not available in a typical American art school,” he says.

Which brings us to 2019 — Englewood — where something truly momentous is going on (Howard still commutes to Bergen County, but he and his wife are looking for a house in the area).

Not just because of the scale of the piece. Not just because of the logistics of keeping three artists, a rotating group of 20-odd models, several rambunctious dogs, and assorted photographers and videographers coming and going as a COVID-free “pod.”

What’s bold — striking — is the very idea of the project itself.

NO TIME FOR HEROES?

Show us a heroic monument to World War I, and we’ll show you a paradox.

It was precisely during World War I — and because of World War I — that those old heroic ideas of human nobility went out the window. “World War I is the beginning of the end, in the sense that there is a divine order that governs the universe,” Howard says.

Idealistic young men, with their heads full of patriotism and Kipling, found themselves, between 1914 and 1918, charging into a meat grinder. The hellish, impersonal, mechanistic horror of tanks and trenches, the severed limbs and mangled bodies, the numbing senselessness of it all, was a great turning point. Twenty million

died in that war; 116,516 were Americans (we entered the war late, in 1917).

“In the early stages of the war, they would just be marching into machine-gun fire,” says Ashdale, modeling a doughboy in an authentic — and authentically itchy —100-year-old uniform. “Just walking into it and getting mowed down.”

Afterward, art and literature were never the same. T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the disillusionment of writers like Hemingway and Virginia Woolf, all came out of it. So did much abstract art and sculpture. No more gallant figures on horseback: that’s what got the world into this mess.

“The sight of a khaki uniform began to mean everything in life that was wrong and wasteful and anti-life,” said Henry Moore, a World War I veteran who was to become England’s leading abstract sculptor.

Culturally, World War I was the great divide. To bring heroic, figurative art to a World War I subject — as Howard is doing — is to take Western culture itself back to a fateful fork in the road. And why not, he says. Not everyone came back from the war disillusioned.

“Yes, history has painted it that way,” he says. “Society has painted it that way. But the soldiers that did return were actually heroes. And why shouldn’t they be seen as heroes?”

In 2021, the disenchantment of the post-World War I period is still with us. Our art, and our whole outlook, have been shaped by it — and possibly not for the better.

But heroism and nobility, Howard believes, still have a place in this century. Maybe it just takes an artist to show us.

“Art leads culture,” he says. “It used to be that art showed people what they could be. It’s about looking at a piece of art and being elevated in spirit. That is what is needed today in this country. Guidance and direction. Not this kind of strife and tribalism and breaking apart.”

His piece, he points out, has 38 figures. But only one of them — a guy suffering from shell shock — is alone. “They’re all connected, they’re all together,” he says. “That’s my vision. It’s never going to happen in this world. But unless I present my vision — which I really believe in — then I’m being false.” ■