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WORLD WAR I: 100 YEARS LATER

A Smithsonian Magazine Special Report

HISTORY | JUNE 2002

An Exclusive Preview of the New World War I Memorial

One sculptor and his team of artists take on the epic project of conveying the century-old conflict through a massive bronze installation

The National Sculpture by Sabin Howard is scheduled for completion in 2006 for the World War I Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri

By Jeff Mackinnon
Photographs by Vincent Tullo

"Light is everything," says the sculptor. And, all at once, it is.

You can light up a film the first time. Not as some condition of simple illumination, but as the maker of celeb, the hand, the hammer and the chisel, the creator. You see it sitting down from the ceiling and sneaking through the glass doors, cascading from the two big windows up from, the long room filled with it in every angle and on every surface, the whole place swelling with it, the light of the world, the light of Hollywood, the light of the Klieg lights, light bright as bone, sun-yellow light corkscrewing from the skylights to settle across every unfinished face and figure. Light gathering in the folds of the uniforms, swarming the back-lops and the rifle barrels, radiant, hot as marble, or left behind, painting the forests, drifting into the craters like fog, the light of Hollywood, the light of an early-bloody crattlefront light, armoring light, varnishing light.

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The sculptor is Sabin Howard. While his tools and materials suggest Howard works in clay and bronze, his true medium is light. And the sculptures, at Golden Journey, years in the making, will serve as the centerpiece of the National World War I Memorial in Washington, D.C. When completed, Howard's immense frieze will tell the story of an American reluctantly entangled in a war in Europe, of a generation of young men and women who gave prodigiously, every of the nation at all ranks. Across five scenes and 80 larger-than-life-size human figures, it will be nearly 60 feet long and ten feet high. And it may become the greatest memorial bronze of the modern age.

Sabin Howard is and. Born and raised in Manhattan, in his youth he and his parents, both educators, routinely visited Italy, where his mother was born. Sabin's father, Peter Howard, is a professor of Italian at Hunter College. Both, Florence, Turin, Milan, wedding museum after museum after museum. Those long-cool marble hallways echoing, echoing. He spent almost as much time there as he did in the States, almost as much time in the 19th century as in the 20th. Very early, in his teens, immersed in the art of the Renaissance, he began to dream of Italy and what he was born for and where his gifts were meant to take him.

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Those talents, honed for years as both student and teacher at places like the New York Academy of Art and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and in his Bronx studio and in Hollywood and Pittsburgh, have made him a sculptor and co-creator and co-faking have led him here: a concerted printing plant in Englewood, New Jersey, and perhaps the most ambitious artistic commission of the 21st century.

Sculptor Sabin Howard and his wife, Jessica, in their studio in Hollywood, Calif. Behind them, a model for the sculpture's figure of a wounded soldier

The high-forehead fulsome by the-the-Raphaelite curls, the face at rest is smooth, youthful—not cherubic, but affable. Behind the glasses, the eyes are intelligent, kind, and behind glasses. When he talks you something, these magnified eyes search your face to be sure you understand before telling you the next thing. He is funny and serious—and modest and sort-and-nice and wised-up. Sabin Howard is a concern sculptor, a sculptor who knows his craft and knows the craft of personality. He is jovial and passionate, quiet and stubborn, self-taught and well-schooled, patient and impatient, steady and mercurial, a wealth covers in-that is the mouse and the gray and scrutiny-pocking a clock. The energy produced by these tensions radiates off him in waves.

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WEEKS

Strong hands, as you would expect. He'll push a thousand-tons of clay a million miles with just his thumbs before his through with these panels. Barrel-chested and dressed for work in body-cut exercise shirts and board shorts, he looks like a cross between a Hollywood actor and a Navy SEAL but looks 15 years younger. And 15 years fitter. Sabin Howard is ripped.

He began to make his reputation 25 years ago in the art galleries of downtown Manhattan. His classic studies of the body in a crime of contemporary life—a man in a wheelchair, a woman in a wedding dress and sentimentality were a sensation, and a small revolution. As the New York times 20 years ago, of a gallery show featuring his classical-style sculptures, wrote: "Mr. Howard's sculpture and drawings and watercolors has created some of the last decades most substantive Realist sculpture. Which viewing his works visitors may be reminded of the times when sculptors like Donatello and Rodin walked the earth."

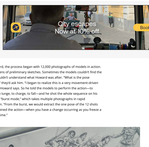
His work is sculptures to museums and private collectors all over the world, sometimes making copies of the originals, and he taught at Cooper Union, lectured online, gave private lessons. He wrote a book with his wife, the renowned Trust L. Dalton, called The Art of Life, a sort of statement of purpose, which lavishes photos of Sabin's work. "The spirit of art is the reflection, the mirror, the reflection of life," Dalton writes. "It is the way we see ourselves. In figurative art, it literally shows us ourselves in our every dimension. It is realistic. It reveals not just who we are, but who we have been and who we can be. It body, mind, spirit, and psyche. It this was a great piece of art Linquoto-magic."

"In figurative art, it literally shows us ourselves, in our every dimension. It is revelatory."

Sabin Howard, sculptor, in his studio in Hollywood, Calif., with a model of the World War I memorial sculpture, and a bronze figure of a wounded soldier, which will be part of the sculpture

In 2015, the World War I Centennial Commission announced a design competition for a national memorial to the war. There was a feeling—a fear—that the legacy of the war was fading, that the last living veterans, the last eyewitnesses, were barely alive or 110 years old. And though there was, already, a local monument on the National Mall, dedicated in 1931 to the District of Columbia residents who fought and died in the war, the Great War was still alone among the conflicts of the 20th century without a memorial of its ownsakes. In figurative art, it literally shows us ourselves, in our every dimension. It is realistic. It reveals not just who we are, but who we have been and who we can be. It body, mind, spirit, and psyche. It this was a great piece of art Linquoto-magic."

The new site eventually chosen was Pershing Park, just off the Mall and down the street from the White House, in front of the Willard Hotel. A statue of Gen. John J. Pershing, who led American forces during the war, had long stood nearby here, but the rest of the space was exhausted. An important element of the commission's competition to design the memorial included redesigning the park itself.


Sabin Howard
Sculpture
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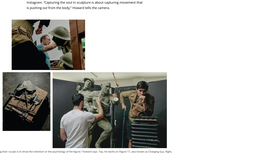
Instagram. "Capturing the soul in sculpture is about capturing movement that is pulsing out from the body, toward tells the camera."



Everything that is said to be the moment in Michael Gibbs's "Photographer's Studio" is also true of Gibbs's photograph of Rodin's "Balzac." Gibbs's photograph is a work of art in its own right. Courtesy of Michael Gibbs, Photographer's Studio, Bronx, Courtesy Gallery, Bronx, Courtesy Gallery, Bronx, Courtesy Gallery, Bronx

Mark Rutkosky, right, now modeling clay for Charles, in modeling "*The Amazing Adventures of Rowdie & Clay*. In order to hold the pose, Mark is propped on a padded stand built for the purpose. This is true for all the models and most of the poses, some of which are torturous and might need a day or two of rest after. Clay, Rowdie, and Mark are all "actors" in the movie, as must be seen in every light and from every angle. A two-dimensional drawing or a photograph worth its. Every foot in every garment requires a live model. When Mark strikes the correct angle of ankle, calf and thigh, the uniform covering his leg is artifully draped and held fast with clothespins for the camera. Mark's uniform is constructed of Rowdie's clothes. The sculpture is the muscle beneath the drapery. The effect. The rigor. The flesh. That, Howard says, is what creates Tension and force and ultimately movement. Mark's pose, Howard says, is "Rowdie's pose." Mark's leg dangling right takes weeks of incremental attention from each sculptor.

While not improvisational, the process here is adaptive. One of adjustment and counter-adjustment. Every inch of that grace sculpture will be made and remade. Mark's pose, Rowdie's pose, Clay's pose. Clay's pose is the expressions of the models from the photographerly shoot, some from England with a thin layer of sculpting clay already applied, the final layer, applied here, by hand, one small board at a time—that last evidence of plasticine—that breathes reality into the piece. It's where the details are. Where life is.

The Studio is filled with tools for moving and removing clay. Spatulas as delicate as medical instruments, razor blades and calipers and scrapers and knives. Tools for cutting and tools for smoothing. Tools for adding and removing. But mostly, it's thumb work. A small gesture, a delicate pressure, one smooth inch at a time.

Thus does the big foot on early photograph become the big in a drawing, then the big in a clay model, then the big in a plaster cast, then the big becoming a bit the big on the bronze, the big foot on a Pershing Park 100 years from now, unique in the world, full of life and purpose.

The Tom Gallery of Sculpture. Tom Gallery of Sculpture, Tom Gallery of Sculpture, Tom Gallery of Sculpture,

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The full Battle Scene, shown before being shipped from the U.S. to the Pangolin Editions sculpture foundry in Chalford, England.
Andrew Holtz / Sabin Howard Sculpture

Until then, a long rendering of the final living bronze stretches huge and beautiful above the fountain and the pools where the great memorial will shimmer. Completed figures are shown as photographs; those still to come are drawn exactly to scale. So the sculpture is both there and not yet there, present and absent, as are the soldiers and the wives and the daughters and the nurses, past and future, here but not here, the wounded and the lost, the heroes and the ghosts, the fallen and the risen and the living and the dead, and the light is fine and bright and everywhere around them.

Jeff MacGregor | | READ MORE
Jeff MacGregor is the award-winning Writer-at-Large for *Smithsonian*. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Esquire*, and many others, and is the author of the acclaimed book *Sunday Money*. Photo by Olya Evanitsky.

Vincent Tullo | READ MORE
Photographer Vincent Tullo, who is based in New York, focuses on portraiture.

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