The Monuments We Have Built Are Not Our Own
THE MONUMENTS WE HAVE BUILT ARE NOT OUR OWN:
BORGLUM, HUNTINGTON, AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN CULTURE

ERIC SILBERBERG

A unique artifact is currently on display at the American Numismatic Society at One Hudson Square in New York. It hails, however, not from the coinages of the Seleucid nor Roman empires but from the original ANS offices at Audubon Terrace, the Society’s former home for nearly a century. The artifact in question is a large marble relief carved and signed by Gutzon Borglum, the famous sculptor of America’s most iconic monument, Mount Rushmore. No one is certain as to how or why the ANS came into possession of a work by this artist.

Taking the piece in as a whole, it appears quite unfinished, though it certainly bears the marks of Borglum’s style. The marble remains just as craggy and rough as when the stone was harvested from the earth; rendered amid these rocky outcroppings is a nude female figure seen from behind, her head tipped forward slightly, legs enveloped in flowing linen. From her outstretched hands dangle the symbolic masks of comedy and tragedy, and around her is inscribed the legend, The World a Stage, an allusion, most likely, to those famous words of Shakespeare.

In the original ANS building, Borglum’s relief sat over a doorway to a front office, in full view to all visitors. A renovation in 1929, however, hid the relief from sight; much later, it was concealed by a new drop ceiling, above which it then sat, forgotten, for decades. In 2004, the ANS moved from Audubon Terrace to downtown Manhattan, and, during the move, when the relief was finally pried from its grave, smothered in a coat of choking gray dust and debris, the ANS staff was dumbfounded. Why would the ANS—of all places—be in possession of such a large piece so replete with theatrical symbolism (and by Borglum no less)? For a society so often concerned with the mysteries of the past, something in its own house proved just as intriguing.

The investigation was assigned to me—a summer intern fortunate enough to find a position where picking up coffee and making copies were not the expected duties. My first order of business was to understand Borglum’s composition and make some sense of the relief itself.
The Marble and the Medal

Though there is no other known copy of the relief, it is in fact not the only instance in which Borglum employed the image of a nude female with theatrical allusions. In fact, the very same composition also appears on the obverse of a medal Borglum had been commissioned to make to honor Winthrop Ames, the managing director of the New Theatre, in 1909. But why the female figure as the central image of a marble relief and honorary medal?

The nude female was a point of artistic interest for Borglum. Take, for example, *Conception*, subtitled *The Awakening to Maternity*. It is a marble sculpture of a nude female, with her knees turned inward, hands clutching her breasts, and face jutting upward with eyes closed. The piece ostensibly portrays a woman who has just learned she is pregnant. Adam J. Lerner, the executive manager and curator of The Lab forum in Lakewood, Colorado, believes that in *Conception* "Borglum joined his interest in procreativity and immortality to his interest in conception—that originary, or creative, moment." It was an "attempt to unite conception with motherhood, to make the essentially invisible moment of creation simultaneous with its visible product." To Borglum, creating art substituted for the physical inability to conceive. Just as a woman continues the species through her offspring, Borglum the artist overcomes his fear of mortality through his work. Borglum was once even quoted as saying, "if I could not be an artist, I would rather be a mother than anything in the world." The female was put on the Ames medal as an emblem of the creativity and artistry of Winthrop Ames.

The existence of the Ames medal is known to the ANS, and it was included in the society's International Exhibition of Contemporary Medals, a very successful exhibit that the ANS hosted in 1910. The catalogue lists two pieces under the heading of John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum.

The first entry is for a struck gold medal, which is described as being an "original" of 89 mm; it was presented to Winthrop Ames by the directors of the New Theatre in 1910. The second entry is the model in plaster, which is reproduced as a photo. The ANS staff uncovered a few years ago the waxes of the reverse in a small cigar box, which was donated by Archer Huntington; the reverse die for this medal is also in the collection. Curiously, the ANS
The ANS acquired this rare New Theatre Medal for its collections in 2009. The reverse shows a half-drawn curtain with a play in progress. It remains uncertain whether the scene with soldiers and a figure in long dress are from Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra, which was the play on opening night on November 9, 1909. (ANS 2009.33.1)
The beautifully restored marble sculpture is now the centerpiece of the Roger S. Siboni Gallery of the American Numismatic Society.

did not have an actual medal. By happenstance, a specimen turned up in a recent medals sale, and the ANS was able to acquire it; according to the catalogue entry by Joe Levine of the Presidential Coin and Antique Company, this was the first specimen he had ever offered. In her catalogue on Beaux-Arts medals in America, Barbara Baxter mentions a gilt bronze medal in the collections of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the ANS’s former neighbor at Audubon Terrace. Borglum used the nude figure on several other medalllic designs, such as a small medal produced by the Medalllic Art Company and the famous David Livingston medal of the American Geographical Society. ANS members might also be familiar with Borglum’s early Members medal, which shows a nude male in a similar pose as the Ames medal.

The International Exhibition, in which Borglum’s medal was included as his only piece, occurred at a crucial point in American history. America was on the rise, becoming a contender in international play—ascending to the pantheon of the European world powers. Just ten years earlier, the U.S. had driven the final nail in the coffin of the once mighty Spanish Empire, snatching up Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam from her clutches. In 1909, Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet, a flex of America’s naval brawn, returned from its world tour. And in a small
The wax of the Borglum medal was apparently left to the ANS by Archer Huntington. (ANS 0000.999.55027)

Only the reverse die remains in the ANS collection. It shows some wear in certain areas. (ANS 0000.999.55210)

The ANS Members' medal presented to former President Edward T. Newell. (ANS 1968.44.3)

This small medal, which exists in two copies in the ANS cabinet, was designed by Borglum and produced by the Medallic Art Company in 1915. It was awarded by the City of New York in 1915.
exhibition space in northern Manhattan, America demonstrated her perceived equality among the finest medallic artists of Europe.

Interesting also is the fact that Borglum's Ames Medal was included in the exhibition. Aside from the fact that he served on the ANS' Committee on Papers and Exhibitions, the committee responsible for the organization of the medallic art exhibition, he was also a fervent champion in his public life for a body of art in America that America could call her own. In an article Borglum published in a 1908 edition of The Craftsman magazine, entitled "Individuality, Sincerity and Reverence in American Art", he asserts that "the monuments we have built are not our own. Because we have 'cribbed' every scroll and form we build. Because our architects and artists annually 'beat it' to Europe to gather ideas to restock their idea-less plants at home." Borglum continues by saying that the American artist "talks of Greek art and traces its forms, but the ideals of Greece are not ours." The International Exhibition was a real forum for America to size herself up, artistically at least, with Europe. And in Borglum's eyes, he was the man leading the charge—not up San Juan hill, but Audubon Terrace."

Press coverage of the International Exhibition reported that:

A feeling for appropriately conceived and executed small objects has grown steadily in America during the past decade and finds expression in the serious character of the work produced by artists who confine their efforts to sculpture in small. There is no other form of art, however, in which it will be found more interesting to measure the achievement of the present against that of the past and the achievement of our own medalists with that of Europeans.

At this point, I felt that I had some understanding of the iconography of the woman clutching theater masks. I now understood the medal, but the marble remained a
mystery. The more I delved into the matter, the more questions I ended up with. Who were the personalities involved in the marble's creation? What did Winthrop Ames do to deserve his medal, and was he connected to the marble—or the ANS—in any way? And why was Borglum the commissioned artist? And how did the relief end up at the old ANS headquarters at Audubon Terrace?

Winthrop Ames
The man named on the medal, Winthrop Ames, was born in 1871 to an affluent Boston family with a pedigree traceable back to the Mayflower. The Ames family had made their fortune in Ames Shovel Works, the family business, which had helped finance and supply the construction of the Union Pacific Railroad. And, like any good New England aristocrat, Ames graduated from Harvard with interests ranging from dramatic literature to architecture to music and a fluency in French, Greek, and German.

Pictures from newspaper clippings present Ames as dapper and often in high, starched collars—looking rather
clerical in both his dress and manner, like an echo from his Puritan past. An interviewer once described him as "simple, direct and courteous; businesslike rather than effusive, judicial rather than temperamental. It is not the color of his eyes that strikes the observer, but rather the light of quiet inspection that shines in them."

In 1908, Ames took up the management of the New Theatre in New York, a highbrow theater at Sixty-second Street and Central Park West that garnered such titles as the "millionaire's theater" and the "gilded incubator" by its detractors. The theater was backed financially by many of New York's wealthiest industrialists, including John Jacob Astor, Henry Clay Frick, the ANS's benefactor Archer Huntington, J. P. Morgan, William K. Vanderbilt, among many other well-known philanthropists. Each of the thirty subscribers paid $35,000: the beautiful beaux-arts building, which opened on November 6, 1909, cost $3 million and was designed by the famous firm of Carrere and Hastings. Marred by acoustical and financial problems, the theater closed after two seasons, and although various managers, including Forenz Ziegfeld, tried to run it, it was ultimately far too large. In 1931, it was demolished and replaced by an apartment complex known to this day as the Century Apartments. Ames received his medal in 1909, the same year this unfortunate venture started, by the directors of the first New Theatre.

Ames was quite possibly the top expert on theater management in the country at that time. He had spent a year abroad in Europe taking meticulous notes on the management of sixty of the greatest theaters and music halls of Europe. From his contemporaries, we gather that Ames worked frenetically at the New Theatre, micro-managing all facets of a production, from set design to the inflection in each actor's voice. He also introduced new forms of electric theater lighting that he had picked up in Europe and expanded the theater's repertoire and subscription. The repertoire included productions of Shakespeare and other traditional plays from the continent. There were also a number of new American plays from Walters, Gillette, and Mitchell. With Ames at the helm, The New Theatre quickly became one of the most popular theaters in the region. After he left, the project collapsed; judging by the clientele of the theater, it simply priced itself out of business. In his obituary, Ames was cited as "one of the important forces in the development of American theater."

"One of the main purposes of the institution," Ames wrote upon first taking up his job at the New Theatre, "will be to encourage the American playwright." Ames's ideological connection to Borglum was uncanny. I had before me two men connected to the same medal, one the
creator, the other the recipient, both charged by the idea of a national body of art. Ames predicted that "the great period for American dramatic writing is at hand. On the continent and in England they are looking to us, for they are forced to admit our artistic vitality."

I began to dig into Borglum's history. Perhaps in their efforts to establish American art, Ames and Borglum had at some point crossed paths.

Gutzon Borglum

Gutzon Borglum was at best hot-headed and at worst manic and delusional. Like Ames, he was obsessed with fine details and often sacrificed his contracts' budgets for the sake of his artistic vision. He desired power and acclaim above all else, and he attained them by cleverly navigating relationships among powerful New York and Washington socialites, including President Roosevelt and his entourage. He was extremely volatile: his biographer, Howard Shaff, described him as having "nothing moderate about him;" and his friend, the future Supreme Court justice Felix Frankfurter, noted that Borglum thought "people weren't wrong, they were crooked. People didn't disagree with him; they cheated him." He was mad with self-pride, and on one occasion, after losing a $250,000 contract for a memorial to Ulysses S. Grant, began...
publicly attacking his critics, lambasting the art establishment (including the National Sculpture Society, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and John Quincy Adams Ward) for being "incestuous," "archaic," and lost in the European tradition. He quickly found himself with just as many powerful enemies as friends. Today his work is generally little known—this despite his fame as the sculptor of Mount Rushmore. His wild personality, his connection to the Ku Klux Klan, and his anti-Semitic rants make him a difficult artist to appreciate.

The Borglums were refugees who fled Denmark in 1864 to escape both religious persecution as Mormons (the patriarch, Jens, was a missionary for the Church of Latter Day Saints) and conscription into the war with Germany over possession of Schleswig. Three years later, Gutzon was born, and the family found itself living in a two-room log cabin on the frontier Idaho Territory, enduring glacial winters, conflicts with Native Americans, drought, and swarms of crop-murdering grasshoppers. After failing in agriculture, Jens moved the family to Utah, where there was opportunity for work on the railroad, the very railroad on which the Ames family was making its fortune. At seventeen, Gutzon left home for Los Angeles to pursue his interest in art, leaving behind his father, then the peddler of homeopathic wonder remedies in Nebraska and a recent convert to Catholicism.

In Los Angeles, Gutzon began selling his work to the new moneyed elite of the West. By his twenties, Gutzon had earned enough to pay his way to Paris, where he was able to study with Auguste Rodin. Around 1900, Gutzon returned to the United States. He opened a studio in New York and began building a name for himself, winning large commissions from art patrons and municipalities.

It was around this time that Borglum joined the ANS. The record of his membership is confined to a single, graying manila folder among the ANS archives. He was not a very active member, save his help with the International Exhibition, and he was in fact thrown out of the society in 1916 for delinquent membership fees (probably due to the frequent financial problems Borglum had throughout his career). All of Borglum's professional correspondence, some of which is contained in his membership file, was sent out on unusually square sheets of thick paper and typed in bright blue ink. A simple letterhead, "Gutzon Borglum," scrolls across the top in a brash, steely typeface, as if his legendary ego itself headed his correspondence. Interestingly, most of the letters in the file are addressed to Archer M. Huntington, the great benefactor and former president of the ANS. The exchanges were cordial; some might even say friendly.

Archer M. Huntington
"Whenever I put my foot down, a museum sprung up." Archer Huntington fondly recounted to an interviewer about his legacy, which was built on the unbelievable fortune amassed by his adoptive father, Collis P. Huntington. Collis was a shrewd businessman who had gone to the West not to pan for gold on the banks of some godforsaken creek but to sell equipment to foolhardy and exploitable '49ers. His savvy paid off; with his new wealth, he eventually became one of the "Big Four" financiers of the Central Pacific Railroad. From there his empire only grew, bankrolling the Southern Pacific and Chesapeake-Ohio railways.

Archer's life, on the other hand, centered on his study of Spanish culture and the formation of museums and societies. Armed with his great family fortune, he embarked on a crusade to establish cultural institutions for his burgeoning country. He too was a man who felt that America was on the rise and was thus in need of world-class cultural institutions. He founded the Hispanic Society of America and was a major benefactor of the Museum of the American Indian, the American Geographical Society, the National Sculpture Society, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Museum of Natural History, and the University of Texas. He also funded the operations of the American Numismatic Society's original offices at Audubon Terrace.

Huntington was one of those wealthy individuals, one of those important men-about-town, whom Borglum strategically befriended. Their relationship hinged on the various commissions Huntington gave Borglum, including the ANS member's medal, the David Livingston medal, and a bronze statue of his father Collis, which was erected at the train depot in Huntington, West Virginia. The commission for both the marble relief at the ANS and the Ames medal—given that the two pieces were to eventually end up in the custody of the ANS—must have somehow involved Huntington, who was the President of the Society from 1905 for five years.

I was close and knew it—all I needed to do was find the missing link among Borglum, Huntington, and Ames and the marble, the medal, and the ANS. I was sure it was hidden among Huntington's remaining effects, many of which are housed at his beloved Hispanic Society of America, which shares the same plot of land as the former ANS offices.

Success
It seemed more like a chamber from the Spanish Inquisition than a library—dark and cavernous. Everything lurked behind stained glass and walls adorned by old
The first file I flipped open yielded the greatest find of my investigation. It was a letter from Borglum informing Huntington of the payment received for the Ames medal. From the letter, it is obvious that Huntington had commissioned Borglum to make the medal on behalf of the founders of the New Theatre, of which Huntington was one. Borglum says that he did the project out of friendship and not for someone he called "his lordship" and a "mortal coil" from the "new bubble at Sixty-second Street." Presumably Borglum is referring to a founder of the theater whom he thought "crooked."

Though a contract for the marble relief was never uncovered in this investigation, it is safe to assume that it was commissioned by Huntington from Borglum around the same time as the Ames medal. Perhaps Huntington was so taken by the medal that he ordered a marble reproduction, or maybe it was a gift from Borglum, a sign of their friendship. It is also possible that it was destined for the New Theatre but never made it there. It was therefore in all likelihood Archer Huntington, who had the piece put on display.

The relief also represents something quite profound. It is a testament to its time: the final days of the Gilded Age. This was an era whose great opulence was matched only by its widespread poverty; when the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and Fricks of the country threw conspicuous amounts of cash at anything by the European masters, because to buy European was to buy prominence. The American artist was entirely neglected, enraged men like Borglum, who then fought for recognition. Ames and Huntington came from fortunes comparable to those other titans of industry, the infamous robber barons, but instead they turned their attention toward fostering a domestic identity. Some thirty years earlier, Whitman pleaded for "some two or three really original American poets (perhaps artists or lecturers,) [to] arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that,
from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together, they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties and all its hitherto political, warlike or materialistic experiences." Borglum, Ames, and Huntington were all in their various ways answering Whitman’s prophetic call.

Special thanks to ANS Archivist Joseph Ciccone and the staff of the Hispanic Society of America.

Bibliography


Borglum, G. "The Beauty of Lincoln and His Place in Art." Lincoln Centennial Association keynote address, Springfield, Ill. (February 12, 1915).

———. "Individuality, Sincerity, and Reverence in American Art." Craftsman (October 1908).


