On the Cover

Portions of the following are based on interviews with Paul Sanderson and Henry Duffy on November 17, 2008.

To be near the art of Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), whether monumental or miniature, is to be surrounded by stories. This month’s cover art contains many stories, among them those of Saint-Gaudens himself, Diana the Huntress, the loves of Saint-Gaudens’s life, and filmmaker Paul Sanderson.

“He had the talent—he could do tiny cameos, massive equestrian sculptures; he painted, designed fireplaces,” Sanderson comments. “But what was most fascinating was his drive. He wanted to be famous; he was not to be stopped. In America, public sculpture was nothing, it was unimportant. By the end of his career, he was being compared to Rodin. His ambition, combined with his amazing talent, is what made him an extraordinary character.”

Over the years, Saint-Gaudens collaborated on a number of architectural and decorative projects with renowned architects Stanford White and Charles McKim. For the “final” atop the tower of their new Madison Square Garden, they commissioned Saint-Gaudens to create a sculpture. His initial effort, an 18-foot Diana complete with billowing metal scarf, was designed to rotate as a weathervane. Although weathervanes were classic icons of Americana, the sculpture was considered radical because of its nudity. After being installed, the gilt sheet copper sculpture was deemed aesthetically too large for the building, and it was replaced with a reworked 13-foot version. (The 18-foot version, shown at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, subsequently disappeared.) When White and McKim’s Madison Square Garden was demolished, the Philadelphia Museum of Art acquired the Diana, and today she resides at the top of the grand interior stairway. An 8-foot reduction is on view at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. At various points, a number of smaller plaster renderings were also created, including the one on this month’s cover, located at Saint-Gaudens’s home in Cornish, New Hampshire, now a National Historic Site.

Diana, goddess of the hunt in Roman mythology, was also connected with wild animals, woodlands, and the moon. Henry Duffy, curator of the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, observes that Saint-Gaudens may have chosen her as subject matter for any of a number of reasons:

The association of the goddess of the hunt with a public amphitheatre might refer to the animal shows (circuses, etc.) that took place there. Her role as a representation of the moon and therefore of light, might relate as well, since this was the first sculpture in New York lit by electric light. Her position before the advent of many tall buildings in the city meant that she could be seen all around the area at night—perhaps reflecting the brilliance of the moon itself. (H. Duffy, personal communication, December 5, 2008).

Saint-Gaudens’s life, suggests Sanderson, was a quintessentially Horatio Alger “rags to riches” story. Saint-Gaudens’s family moved from Ireland to New York during the massive immigration of 1848 when he was just six months old. When he completed school at age 13, he expressed interest in a career as an artist and was apprenticed to a cameo cutter. He took art classes in New York and subsequently in Paris and Rome. He returned to New York in the mid-1880s, by then a commissioned sculptor.

During his time in Rome, Saint-Gaudens married a painter, Augusta Homer, another American expatriate. Once back in the United States, he developed a relationship with an artist’s model, Albertina Hultgren. The Diana is an idealized version of her. Apparently attempting to hide his mistress’s identity, Saint-Gaudens renamed her Davida Clark—perhaps in honor of Michelangelo’s famous sculpture David. Certainly, as one looks at Saint-Gaudens’s Diana, one can appreciate that both sculptures capture an androgynous mix of strength and delicacy. For about 10 years, Saint-Gaudens led two parallel lives, setting up residences for his wife and son in New York and his mistress and son in Connecticut. Duffy thinks that he fell in love with two women. The “question of divorce would never have come into the picture—it would have been socially devastating and religiously impossible. [Husband and wife] just lived separate lives, coming together for social reasons.” Saint-Gaudens brought both families with him to Paris in 1898, but when diagnosed with cancer in 1900, he made a financial settlement to Davida, had no further contact with her, and stayed with his wife.

About 20 years ago, filmmaker Paul Sanderson made a short film on Saint-Gaudens, now regularly used as an orientation guide at the National Historic Site. Sanderson became reengaged with his subject in 2007, when he was asked to make a longer version of the film in honor of the 100th anniversary of Saint-Gaudens’s death. The photograph on the cover was taken during the making of that film. The film has been screened throughout the United States, a version will appear on PBS, and it will be shown at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art throughout its special exhibition of Saint-Gaudens’s cameos, bas-reliefs, and free-standing sculpture (June 30, 2009–October 12, 2009).

Readers of this article can interact with Saint-Gaudens in a number of ways—perhaps creating their own stories in the process. In addition to visiting the National Historic Site (www.sghhs.org), one can encounter Saint-Gaudens’s sculptures in major American cities. Among those to which I am particularly drawn: the contemplative, standing Abraham Lincoln in Lincoln Park, Chicago; the high-relief Shaw Memorial (itself telling a story), facing the state capitol in Boston; the Sherman Monument, with its fearsome Winged Victory, at the entrance to New York City’s Central Park; and the mysterious Adams Memorial, in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington, DC.

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