



# Daniel Chester French

The Female Form Revealed

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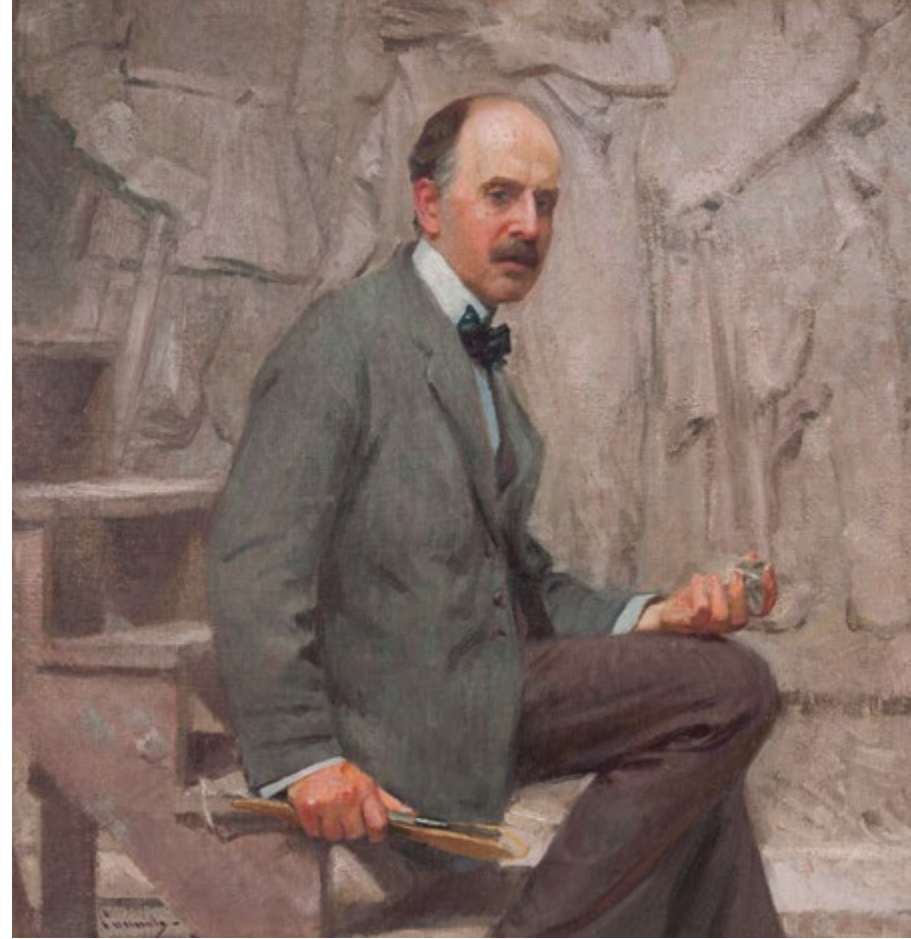
“The Spirit of Life, Maquette (Trask Memorial),” 1913. Plaster, 13-5/8 by 9-3/8 by 10 inches. French’s revised design for the Trask Memorial, evocative of “benevolence, enthusiasm and joy,” found approval from its patron and was ultimately cast in bronze and installed as a fountain in Providence, R.I.

By Jessica Skwire Routhier

BOSTON, MASS. — Scarcely an American today is unfamiliar with Daniel Chester French’s best-known work, the central sculpture of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. About six million people visit it annually. Many billions more know it through movies like the *Independence Day*, *Transformers* and *X-Men* series, where it serves as an emblem, invariably threatened, for American integrity. And yet, of the many who imbue the statue with such significance, far fewer know the name of the gifted and prolific artist who created it. Even those who take the time to read the plaque about the sculptor will not, for the most part, recognize or appreciate the remarkable breadth of his career.

That knowledge gap has begun to be addressed in recent years. Among such efforts is “Daniel Chester French: The Female Form Revealed,” on view at the Boston Athenaeum through February 19.

The exhibition is, in some respects, a follow-up to 2013’s “From



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“Daniel Chester French in His Chesterwood Studio” by Robert William Vonnoh (1858–1933), 1913. Oil on canvas, 31 by 32 inches. Chesterwood.



“Samuel F. Dupont Memorial, Presentation Model (detail showing ‘Sea’),” 1917. Plaster, 25½ by 37 by 37 inches. French gave “Sea” the place of honor in the Dupont Circle monument, facing straight down Massachusetts Avenue to the White House.

the Minute Man to the Lincoln Memorial,” presented at the Concord Museum in Massachusetts. (French’s almost-equally well-known sculpture, “The Minute Man,” is part of what is now Minuteman National Historic Park in Concord.) Like that show, this one is also co-organized by Chesterwood, French’s country home and studio in Stockbridge, Mass., which now operates as a National Trust Historic Site, and was co-curated by Chesterwood’s executive director, Donna Hassler.

In the gallery guide for the Concord show, Hassler noted that, remarkably, French has not benefited from a major retrospective or book since 1976 — the US Bicentennial year. Neither the Concord show nor the present one in Boston represents an attempt to resolve that issue with a sweeping overview of French’s career. In both cases, the curatorial teams elected instead to narrow their focus to a limited group of works — here, those that use the idealized female form in an allegorical way — as a sort of case study to, in the words of exhibition co-curator David B. Dearing, of the Athenaeum, “increase awareness” of French’s importance in the canon of American art history.

“The study of sculpture, art historically, has played second fiddle to the study of

painting for a long time,” notes Dearing, particularly in the realm of American art history. Noting that “only a small handful of scholars [of American art] have studied sculpture seriously,” he speculates that the very nature of sculpture, especially public sculpture of the kind French specialized in, can be intimidating — its scale, its weightiness, its permanence. He acknowledges, too, that there are significant logistical problems in presenting exhibitions of such sculpture.

Even if the works are transportable, and many permanently sited works are not, it can be prohibitively expensive and dangerous — both for the works themselves and their handlers — to ship and install them. The solution, employed by both Concord and the Athenaeum, is to make liberal use of plaster maquettes, smaller-scale bronze models and preparatory drawings (many from Chesterwood’s collections), along with documentary photography of the final, full-scale works in situ, in order to “present the material in a way the public will understand it.”



“Daniel Chester French with Full-Size Clay Model of ‘Mourning Victory’ on Railroad Track at Chesterwood,” 1907. Upon completing the full-size plaster model for the Melvin Memorial, French exhibited it at the National Academy of Design, where it was universally praised.

—Chapin Library, Williams College photo



The Athenaeum is a logical venue for such a show, Dearinger observes. Not only does the institution now own two significant sculptural works by French (a large-scale plaster model for the figure of Wisdom on the Minnesota State Capitol Building was acquired earlier this year), but it also has a historical connection to the artist himself, who used to visit the Athenaeum as a student to make drawings from plaster casts in its collection. French passed his formative years in greater Boston — his family moved to Concord when he was 10 years old — and the city remained a touchstone for him throughout his career. His many public works in the area include not only “The Minute Man,” but also the statue of John Harvard in Harvard Yard, whose left

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“Alma Mater, Sketch Model,” 1900. Plaster, 11¾ by 8¾ by 5-1/8 inches. Designed for Columbia University’s Low Library, this monumental seated figure was inspired by Columbia’s official seal.

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