





**“America (Continents),” 1903–04. Plaster, 7-1/8 by 5-5/8 by 6-5/8 inches. In the final version of French’s “America,” a mostly hidden Native American figure huddles behind the heroic central form.**



**“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.**



**“Marshall Field Memorial, Working Model,” 1910. Plaster, 25-7/8 by 23¼ by 16½ inches. Many have seen this monumental seated figure, which marks the grave of Chicago department store magnate Marshall Field, as a precursor to French’s famed work for the Lincoln Memorial.**

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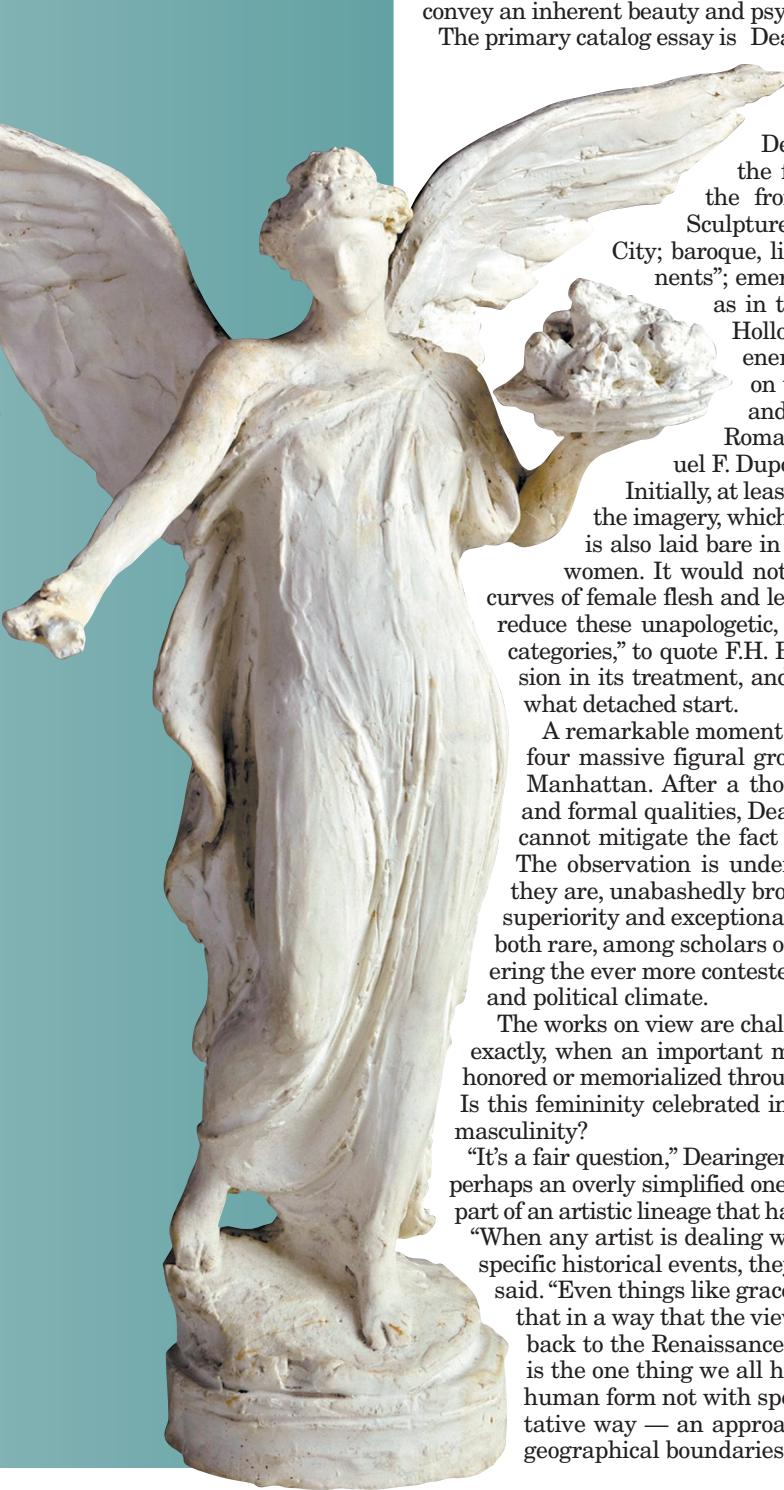
# Daniel Chester French

## The Female Form Revealed

**“The Sower (Harvest) (George Robert White Memorial),” 1923. Plaster, 14 by 13-1/8 by 5-1/8 inches. The White Memorial is another landmark Boston sculpture by French. It is the central figure of a fountain in the Public Garden, where it is emblematic of the city’s — and the donor’s — commitment to public sculpture.**



**“Mourning Victory, Head (Melvin Memorial),” 1907. Bronze, 20½ by 10-3/8 by 11-7/8 inches. This visage is a small study for a large, architectural work in which a solemn, heroic female figure seemingly emerges from a block of stone. French wrote of the work, “I am better pleased with it altogether than with anything I ever did.”**



shoe is worn bare of its patina by the many tourists and students who ritualistically touch it for good luck. Dearinger offers this up as one more example of how so many people have some sort of experience of French’s work.

“It’s hard to go anywhere [in this country] without being within spitting distance of a Daniel Chester French sculpture,” he notes, without recognizing his name or having a deeper understanding of his contributions.

No spitting, metaphorical or otherwise — or, indeed, touching — is allowed at the Athenaeum show, of course. While such physical interactions and the gradual damage they cause may be “a small price to pay for people’s attention” to works of outdoor public sculpture, the standards are different in a museum setting. Nevertheless, the exhibition’s curators — along with their colleague Bruce Weber, whose research helped inform both the show and catalog — acknowledge that they conceived the project, in part, as an opportunity to examine the compelling visceral quality of French’s work. “For us,” they write in the introduction to the 70-page catalog, “the study and selection for this exhibition of French’s sculptures of the female figure ... clearly highlights his extraordinary ability to use allegorical subjects to convey an inherent beauty and psychological power through his sculpture.”

The primary catalog essay is Dearinger’s. Acknowledging, perhaps, that to explore this theme in French’s work is to enter uncharted territory, he begins by surveying the terrain in an almost archeological way. French’s allegorical female figures, Dearinger writes, might usefully be presented through the framework of five major “types”: Classical, typified by the frontal, compact figures of Architecture, Painting and Sculpture for the Richard Morris Hunt Memorial in New York City; baroque, like the weighty, complex figural groups in “The Continents”; emergent, in which the figure blends with the background, as in the memorial for James C. Melvin in Concord’s Sleepy Hollow Cemetery; exuberant, characterized by the joyous energy of “The Spirit of the Waters” and “The Spirit of Life” on the Spencer Trask Memorial in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.; and poetic, exemplified by the “balletic” figures of Truth, Romance, Knowledge, Wisdom, Music and Poetry on the Samuel F. Dupont Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Initially, at least, this methodology seems clinical: arguably at odds with the imagery, which is often deeply emotional (so many are memorials), but is also laid bare in a more literal sense, in that so many of them are nude women. It would not do, of course, to wax rhapsodic about all the luscious curves of female flesh and leave it at that. Yet it does not seem quite right, either, to reduce these unapologetic, unveiled images of femininity to a series of “bloodless categories,” to quote F.H. Bradley. Passionate material requires a measure of passion in its treatment, and Dearinger does get there in due time, after the somewhat detached start.

A remarkable moment comes in his discussion of “The Continents,” a series of four massive figural groups created in 1907 for a new US Customs House in Manhattan. After a thoughtful examination of the series’ history, symbolism and formal qualities, Dearinger writes that “idealization, beauty and femininity cannot mitigate the fact that ‘The Continents’ are, intentionally or not, racist.” The observation is undeniably true — the sculptures, visually enthralling as they are, unabashedly broadcast cultural stereotypes and a doctrine of American superiority and exceptionalism. And yet Dearinger’s unqualified use of the word is both rare, among scholars of the art of the American Renaissance, and bold, considering the ever more contested interpretations of the word in today’s heated cultural and political climate.

The works on view are challenging in another way as well. What is it that we have, exactly, when an important man like Richard Morris Hunt or Samuel F. du Pont is honored or memorialized through the use of a nude, or semiclad, idealized female form? Is this femininity celebrated in its own right, or femininity exploited in the service of masculinity?

“It’s a fair question,” Dearinger recently said in response, while also observing that it is perhaps an overly simplified one. It is important, he notes, to understand these works as part of an artistic lineage that has long used the human figure to illustrate complex ideas. “When any artist is dealing with ideas and emotions as opposed to specific people or specific historical events, they have to figure out a way to illustrate that,” Dearinger said. “Even things like grace and beauty and love or sadness — how do you express that in a way that the viewer will understand what you are talking about? Going back to the Renaissance, that has been done by using the human figure, which is the one thing we all have in common.” Seen in this light, French is using the human form not with specificity, as in a portrait, but in a generalized, representative way — an approach, it is worth noting, that crosses nearly all cultural/geographical boundaries.





**“Richard Morris Hunt Memorial, New York, Presentation Model by Daniel Chester French and Bruce Price,” 1897. The formal, dignified figures on this memorial establish architect Richard Morris Hunt as part of the lineage of classical art and architecture. —Chapin Library, Williams College photo**

**“The Spirit of the Waters, Maquette (Trask Memorial),” 1913. Plaster, 11-7/8 by 9¼ by 5-1/8 inches. Katrina Trask sought out French specifically to create a memorial for her husband, Spencer Trask, who founded the Yaddo art colony. She rejected this early design, asking for something with more “buoyancy” and “life.”**

In late Nineteenth Century America, Dearing notes, there was a surge of interest in public monuments not just to people but also to ideas. For a variety of reasons, French and his generation felt that this could be best expressed in female form. Even in sculptures that memorialized a specific male individual, the obvious disconnect between the female figures and the male subject may actually have aided in this generalizing effect. It was a way, Dearing muses, “to transcend the specific and say this person’s life meant a lot more than just what they did on this earth ... it’s in the pulling away from portraiture and de-specifying the person’s life or contribution that it takes on more universal meaning.”

Still, Dearing acknowledges that for Twenty-First Century viewers the conceit can seem perplexing or even repellent, as in “The Continents,” and agrees that there is ample room for further exploration from a feminist art historical perspective.

One mitigating aspect — and Dearing does discuss this in the catalog — is the fact that, while none of the monuments featured in the exhibition are to women, in many cases “it was really women who drove the process.” Katrina Trask, along with May du Pont Saulsbury and Sophie du Pont Ford, in particular, took the lead in commissioning the sculptures that honored their family members, working with French to develop the design and navigating the often complex politics of securing the site. The Trask and du Pont commissions also exemplify another key aspect of French’s career: that he was a gifted and committed collaborator.

“Such an important part of the Beaux-Arts style was collaboration,” Dearing notes, and “French was just so good at it.” This was true not only of his relationships with patrons, but also of the architects and designers he worked with. “He must have had the right kind of personality,” Dearing muses, a personal gift that surely explains, in part, how prolific he was — everyone wanted to work with him, and he, in turn, was eager to work with them.

French’s natural diplomacy may also go some way to explain how — with, admittedly, some key exceptions — his work has stood the test of time. Even in our much more divided and complicated America, it still captures the emotions and the imaginations of tourists and moviegoers by the millions. It is a kind of accomplishment made even more impressive when one considers how rare it has become. Outdoor, public, figural sculpture is “a talent we’ve lost,” Dearing observes. “It is seemingly almost impossible to create in this day.” The Athenaeum’s exhibition offers an opportunity to consider the truth of that statement through the lens of history and the challenging but undeniably appealing work of Daniel Chester French.

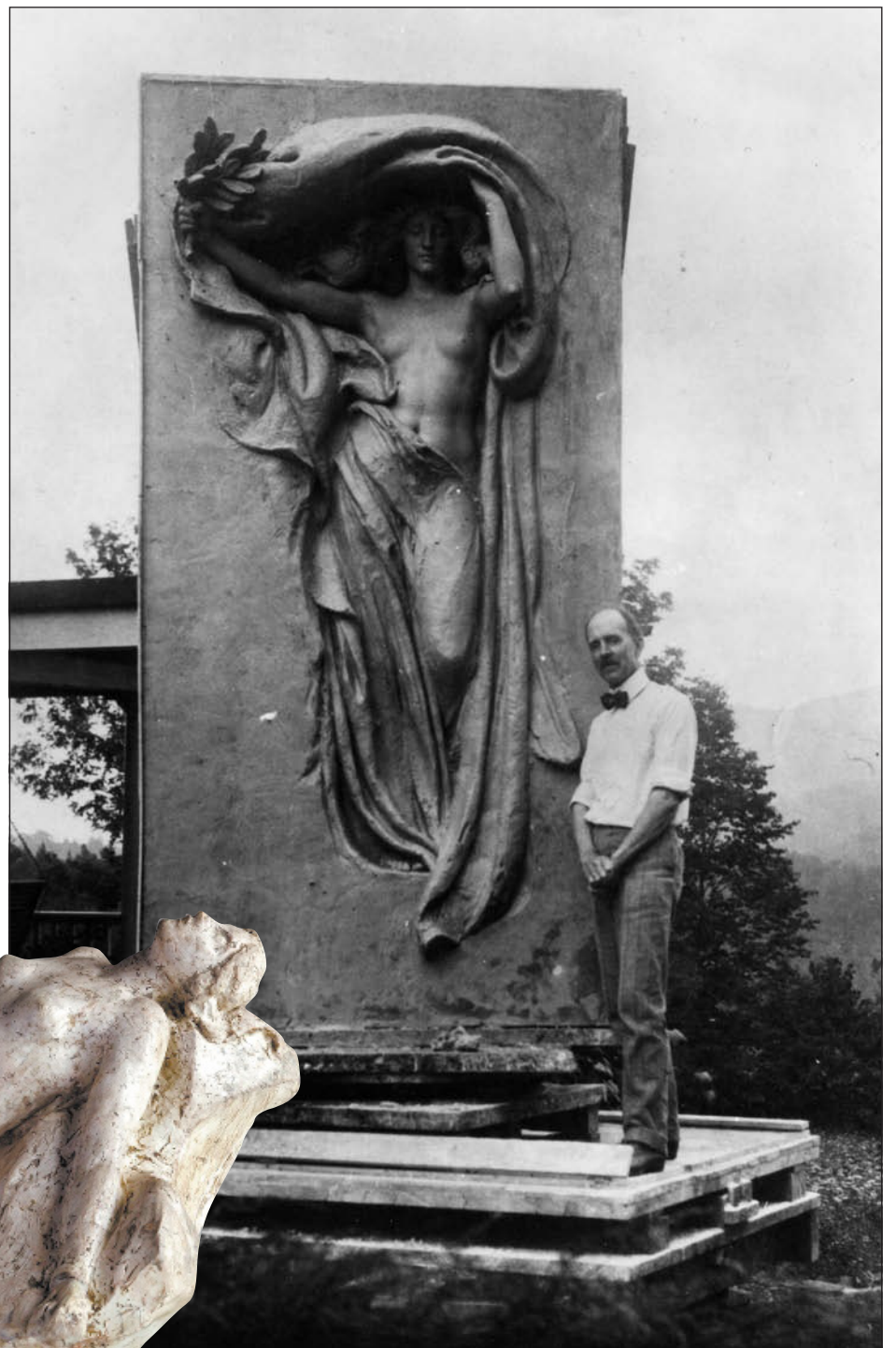
The Boston Athenaeum is at 10½ Beacon Street. For information, [www.bostonathenaeum.org](http://www.bostonathenaeum.org) or 617-227-0270.

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**“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.**



## BOSTON ATHENAEUM



**“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**

**“Andromeda, Maquette,” 1929. Plaster, 10½ by 9-5/8 by 7 inches. This is one of French’s last works, demonstrating that his interest in the allegorical female nude stayed with him throughout his career.**

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Daniel Chester French and are from Chesterwood, a National Trust Historic Site in Stockbridge, Mass. Photos, unless noted, are by Paul Rocheleau and are courtesy Chesterwood.