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## The Sculptor Who Brought Dead Civil War Heroes to Life

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.

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*Augustus Saint-Gaudens's masterful statues allow Americans to come face to face with Lincoln, Sherman, and other legendary figures as they stroll through city parks.*



Shortly after the Civil War, Memorial Day was established to remember the Union dead.

The cemeteries of those killed at Antietam, Cold Harbor, Gettysburg, and other hallowed grounds are evocative of the great conflict, but so are the statues of Civil War heroes created in the late 19th century by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, considered by many the greatest American sculptor.

These huge works in bronze -- of Lincoln, Sherman, Farragut, Logan, and the war's first black regiment and its colonel -- occupy prominent public spaces on the Boston Common, New York's Central and Madison Parks, and Chicago's Grant and Lincoln

Parks. For those able to transcend hot dogs, beer, car races, and spring frolics on Memorial Day, they stimulate powerful remembrance and reflection on a tumultuous epoch that spawned a second American Revolution -- one that, in the words of Lincoln, was truly "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

Saint-Gaudens was born in 1848 in Dublin, but immigrated to New York with his Irish mother and French father the next year, where his father plied his trade as a shoemaker. The young boy experienced the Civil War era in ways that stirred strong emotions. He saw Lincoln speak at Cooper Union in the 1860 presidential campaign. From his window, he watched as volunteers from New England marched south to join the Army of the Potomac singing "John Brown's Body." He witnessed the bloody New York draft riots of 1863. And, in 1865, he paid respects to the slain president lying in state on a bier at City Hall -- only to return to the end of the long line to view the body again.

After studying at art schools in New York and apprenticing as a stonecutter of small cameos, in 1867 Saint-Gaudens was sent by his parents to Paris, where he studied at the prestigious Ecole des Beaux Arts, which was then challenging the ideals of classic sculpture with more realistic forms from the Renaissance. (Despite his French father and French training, his name is pronounced in the American, not the French, idiom: Saint Gaw-dens.) Saint-Gaudens is a central figure in David McCullough's delightful account of American artists in France in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris* (Simon & Schuster). He also studied Greek, Roman, and Renaissance figures in Rome before receiving his first great public commission in 1877.

That work was a huge statute of Admiral David Farragut, commander of the Union fleet at the battle of Mobile Bay and famed for exclaiming, while lashed to the mast so he could see and command his ships, "Damn the torpedoes, full steam ahead!" The statue was unveiled on Memorial Day 1881 in New York's Madison Square and won Saint-Gaudens instant fame for its naturalistic depiction of the admiral standing as if on deck, flinty and weather-beaten, one hand grasping field glasses, his coat blowing open in the wind.

After this striking debut, Saint Gaudens was for the next 20 years the sculptor of choice for larger-than-life public statues of great Civil War leaders.

In 1887, his "standing Lincoln" was unveiled in Chicago's Lincoln Park. Inspired by a newly discovered life mask of Lincoln, it shows the president standing before a chair with a pensive expression, one hand on his lapel, about to speak. Again, the work is striking for the realism of the personality, which cut through the hagiography that had accumulated since the assassination, and is considered the finest sculptural rendering of Lincoln's face. A replica stands in London's Parliament Square.

His portrayal of General John A. Logan, unveiled in 1897 in Chicago's Grant Park, is a dramatic equestrian statue, with his horse pawing the ground and the general, back arched, holding a battle flag high in his right hand. Logan served under Sherman. After

the war, he was head of the Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of Northern war veterans, and was an early advocate of a memorial day to honor the war dead.

In the Grand Army Plaza at 59<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue in New York stands Saint-Gaudens' powerful statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman, unveiled on Memorial Day 1903. The indomitable scourge of the South rides hatless with a look of iron purpose on his face.

But the fifth of Saint-Gaudens' public Civil War monuments -- considered by some art historians to be the finest piece of American sculpture -- is not of the president nor his military leaders. Rather, it is a tribute to Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Infantry, the first Union regiment made up solely of African-Americans. This black unit, 900 strong, gained fame and glory by its attack on Fort Wagner outside of Charleston in 1863. Shaw was killed leading his men up the parapets, and more than half the soldiers were killed or wounded. The striking bronze relief was dedicated on Memorial Day 1897 on the Boston Common, near the site where Colonel Shaw and his men had marched off to their destiny. Saint-Gaudens was so consumed by the power of these events (the subject of the 1989 movie, *Glory*) that he made models of 40 African-Americans so he could represent each of the black soldiers as a distinct, dignified individual.

Saint-Gaudens had many influences on his art. He was schooled both in the ideal forms of classical sculpture and in the realism and naturalism of the Renaissance and late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. He also sought to transcend realism with allegorical figures complementing his lifelike main figures (such as an angel of glory hovering over Colonel Shaw and his troops, or a beautiful female Victory leading Sherman forward on his inexorable march). He believed in the strong linkage between sculpture and architecture: Stanford White and Charles McKim, the renowned architects, designed pedestals and environments for his monumental Civil War pieces.

He was also a prolific artist, although sometimes slow in execution of particular pieces (his Shaw memorial took 14 years to finish). He created other famous public sculptures -- an archetypal Puritan, a Haiwatha in response (with clear echoes of Michelangelo), the philanthropist Peter Cooper, the preacher Phillip Brooks, a nude (and controversial) Diana with bow who was placed atop Stanford White's new Madison Square Garden. Perhaps most striking is his mysterious sculpture of a shrouded figure, which historian Henry Adams commissioned in memory of his wife, Marian ("Clover"), who committed suicide in 1885, and which is located at her gravesite in Washington's Rock Creek Cemetery.

Saint-Gaudens was also a master of low-relief portraits, one of the most famous depicting Robert Louis Stevenson at work). In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt asked a cancer-ridden Saint-Gaudens to design new gold coins for the United States. His \$20 gold piece--with, on one side, a wind-swept Liberty striding forward, her gown billowing in the wind, lit by the rays of a rising sun and, on the other, an eagle in flight --

is considered one of the most beautiful coins ever created. But he never lived to see it minted. He died in 1907, and the coin went into circulation later that year.

As a sculptor, Saint-Gaudens' genius, seen especially in his Civil War works, was an ability to combine the heroic and the authentic, the public figure and the private person. For all the technical virtuosity, it is the humanity, character, and personality of his subjects, set in a unique environment (aided by his architect friends), that strike the viewer as artistry of direct but transcendent beauty, of history alive and deeply moving.

Of course, very few of us even know who Saint-Gaudens was or look closely at his remarkable public monuments. Were it not for a PBS special on him several years ago or David McCollough's book, he would truly be lost in history for all but a few today.

Moreover, there is the awful capacity of our of-the-moment commercial culture to bury the past. The Sherman Memorial, set at the Southeast Corner of Central Park, is barely noticed as people stream into the new icon directly across the street: the Apple Store. In his 1960 poem, "For the Union Dead," Robert Lowell contrasts the nearly forgotten civic virtue of "Colonel Shaw and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief" with the noise, havoc and materialism of the construction on an underground garage near the Massachusetts State House, as "giant fined cars nose forward like fish/savage servility/slides by on grease."

For a true appreciation of Saint-Gaudens, perhaps we need to go back more than a century to the Paris World's Fair of 1900. Saint-Gaudens exhibited plaster versions of his famous works--"The Sherman" and "The Shaw" -- and won the grand prize for sculpture and was also awarded the Legion of Honor. The chair of the fair's arts committee was the famed French sculptor, Auguste Rodin. When he saw Colonel Shaw and the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, he stopped and, out of respect and for the only time at the fair, took off his hat and bowed his head in silence.

Perhaps on this Memorial Day, we, too, should stop in silence to honor not only the thousands of war dead but also the heroes of the Civil War displayed so dramatically in the grand public spaces of our cities -- and pay tribute to the great American artist who has given them immortality.

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