

Classical Sculpture Rare in Sauk County

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

Casts of classical sculpture are a rare commodity in our area. Although readily purchasable in poured cast replicas, one does not find a Venus de Milo or a David or a Michelangelo on public display. But if you look, you can find some other examples.

It's not that there aren't local sculptors among us—just drop in at the Sauk County Art Association display rooms fronting the Al. Ringling Theatre, or attend the Fall Art Tour. They just haven't achieved the stature and reputation of a Donatello or a Luca Della Robbia—not yet anyway.

Obviously we don't have any original Renaissance pieces, but we do have Donatello and Della Robbia castings in two very prominent places, both in Baraboo. They both portray each artist's conception of the same Renaissance scene, that of a boys choir in a church of that time period.

The originals are part of a church in Florence, Italy, the well-visited Duomo. You've walked under local representation castings every time you enter the Al. Ringling theatre. There, encircling the elliptical foyer, are several panels of the delicate Luca Della Robbia pieces.

It is his representation of the boys' choir from the Singing Gallery of that Italian building, adding elegance to the understated but opulent pre-Revolutionary French décor of our theatre.

In contrast, but presenting the same theme, are the friezes at the Baraboo Public Library. Here one sees the boys' choir as depicted by Donatello, a sculptor contemporary to Luca Della Robbia. Here the figures are somewhat more boyish compared to the delicacy found in the theatre castings.

In either case, one almost expects the figures to come to life and serenade us with heavenly chords. The library statuary was a gift to the new Library building in the winter of 1903 by W.H. McFetridge, owner of the Woolen Mill. A "Moses" by Michelangelo was also given at that time.

Other local sculpture

This writer is not aware of other public classical sculpture castings in the area, though an old photo shows a statue of Julius Caesar in the Red Brick High School auditorium. As for more modern sculpture, the granite Civil War soldier on the square is well done. Not as well-known is the metal casting of a CCC worker on the original grounds of the CCC camp in Devils Lake State Park. It is worth a look someday.

There are a few pieces of sculpture in the area cemeteries. We know little about an outdoor statue on Tower Road. The present Civic Center has some winged lion castings near the doorways, and there is an occasional work of art near the pinnacles of the facades of some downtown buildings. And as reported in an article a few years ago, there are bas-reliefs (sort of half-faces) and gryphon, but no gargoyles. None of these are considered classical sculpture.

Local artist Rochelle Robkin tells me that much sculpture of the Renaissance was produced on almost an assembly line, new students roughing out the design, advanced students detailing it, and the master artist adding his finishing touches. As Michelangelo is reputed to have said, to sculpt an elephant you just chip away the parts that don't look like an elephant. Easily said!



The rather delicate Luca Della Robbia castings of a Middle Ages boys choir
as seen in the foyer of the Al. Ringling Theatre



The more robust figures of a Middle Ages boys' choir, as created by Donatello. These can be seen in in the Baraboo public Library.