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Monument Man

The Life and Art of Daniel Chester French

Harold Holzer

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“As one of the foremost living authorities on Abraham Lincoln, Harold Holzer has long straddled the crossroads of history and art with his own inimitable brand of scholarship. Not surprisingly, in this grandly illustrated and beautifully written biography, he proves to be the ideal guide to the life of Daniel Chester French, who transmuted Abraham Lincoln and other historical figures into monumental sculptures of surpassing beauty, poetry, and inspiration. This book will surely rank as the authoritative life of a man whose creations in stone and bronze have become inseparable parts of our historical memory.”—Ron Chernow

The long life and dramatic artistic career of pre-eminent American sculptor Daniel Chester French, whose statue for the Lincoln Memorial is arguably the nation’s most iconic statue, are fully explored for the first time in ***Monument Man: The Life and Art of Daniel Chester French*** (March 2019, \$35.00), a lavishly illustrated cradle-to-grave biography by Harold Holzer, one of the leading historians of Abraham Lincoln and the political culture of the Civil War era. Holzer won the 2015 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize and additional awards from the Columbia Journalism School and Harvard’s Kennedy School for his last book, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*.

Although this new book begins and ends with fresh research on the racially segregated dedication of French’s masterpiece, the Lincoln Memorial, ***Monument Man*** explores the creation and reception accorded all of French’s great works: *Minute Man* in Concord, Mass.; *Death and the Sculptor* in Boston; *Alma Mater* at Columbia University; *John Harvard* for Harvard Yard; the giant centerpiece sculpture for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition at Chicago; allegorical representations of the Continents for New York City’s Custom House; the pensive “Standing Lincoln” for the Nebraska State Capitol; and larger-than-life equestrian statues of George Washington and Civil War Generals Ulysses S. Grant, Joseph Hooker, and others.

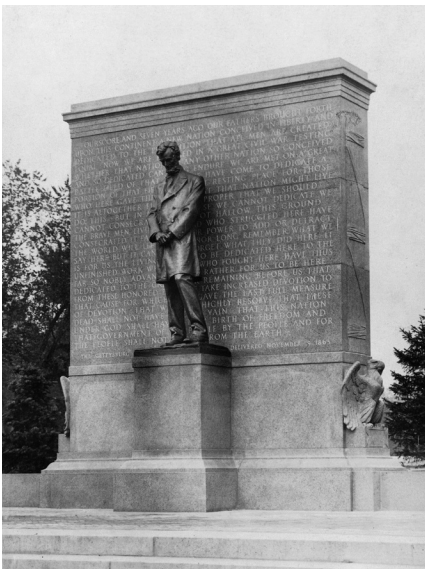


Minute Man, Concord, Mass.

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John Harvard, *Cambridge, Mass.*



“Standing Lincoln,” *Lincoln, Neb.*

Over the decades, these works have inspired reverence, commemoration, protest, romance, vandalism, plagiarism, and on one occasion, a French statue barely escaped a baseball launched by Lou Gehrig. *Monument Man* features the first-ever comprehensive geographical listing of French’s public sculpture in the United States and abroad.

Monument Man taps original sources, including French’s private correspondence, period newspaper and magazine reports, reminiscences by the sculptor’s contemporaries, and the records of the federal commission that supervised the Lincoln Memorial project. Using the source material to inform a complex portrait of the artist as a young, middle-aged, and elderly man, Holzer creates a rich and nuanced study of a disciplined but sensitive New Englander who poured his repressed emotions into great art. French enjoyed a long and rewarding career that bridged two centuries, transcended new artistic movements, and spanned American presidencies from Grant to Hoover. He grows from ambitious, restless novice, aided by a strong and influential father, into an eager, former expatriate student struggling over ill-paid commissions. Eventually, he becomes America’s foremost sculptor—popularly, financially, and critically. Always, French subjects himself to painful self-scrutiny, somehow managing to direct personal doubts and occasional miscues into brilliant final works.

Along the way, French blossoms from Bohemian novice to competitive professional, spending his last 40 years as a major figure in the art world, capped by long service as a trustee of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the Met, he defends, builds, and all but curates that institution’s collection of American sculpture. At the same time, he resists Gilded Age political conservatism—the core source of lucrative commissions—to embrace progressive values against the advice of friends.

French is seen afresh through his associations with major architects like Charles McKim, Bruce Price, and above all Henry Bacon, designer of the Lincoln Memorial. Receiving overdue acknowledgment are assistants, stonecutters and marble-carvers—the students and artisans who transferred French’s inspired clay and plaster models into bronze and stone—like the Italian immigrant Piccirilli brothers of the Bronx, N.Y., who carved the Lincoln Memorial from 21 massive, marble blocks. French’s realistic sculptures are considered along with his allegorical works, and French is presented for the first time as a leading force in shaping Civil War memory from the Union perspective. In the current climate, in which Confederate memorials are undergoing renewed scrutiny, and in some cases, removal, the focus on French’s influential nationalism is timely and well-deserved.

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Model of Alma Mater, plaster



Ulysses S. Grant, *Philadelphia*

The sculptor's extraordinary business acumen is also revealed: his successful quest for fees so high they astounded even French; his skill at competing for commissions; his canny negotiations with committees and patrons; and his growing mastery of an assembly-line system that enabled him to work simultaneously on a number of sculptures, in different stages of production. French becomes a brilliant master of the art of public relations as well, using photography and journalism to promote his original works and the reproductions he spins off to popularize his famous pieces.

French's unusual personal life is explored as well, including his youthful (and mostly unfulfilled) flirtations, his congenial longtime marriage to his first cousin (and occasional model), and his quest to establish himself at successive studios in Washington, Concord, Boston, and New York. Ultimately he turns his energy and taste to his beloved estate, Chesterwood, at Stockbridge, Mass. (now a Historic Site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation), where he creates a professional and family paradise. Along the way, French meets and interacts with presidents, performers, and rivals—from Augustus Saint-Gaudens to Auguste Rodin—becoming the leading voice for sculptural realism without turning his back on emerging modernism. French ends his long and productive life as a revered artistic elder statesman, still working on commissions into his 80s.

French died before the Lincoln Memorial became a backdrop for national aspiration and activism—most famously the 1939 Easter Sunday concert by Marian Anderson and the 1968 “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But it was French's ambition, vision, persistence, and genius that elevated the Memorial's impact and reputation—and this accomplishment alone makes French's dramatic life and full body of work long overdue for comprehensive treatment.

Monument Man was specially commissioned by Chesterwood/National Trust for Historic Preservation.

About the Author

Harold Holzer is a Lincoln scholar and prizewinning author of numerous books on Civil War-era art and history, including *Lincoln and the Power of the Press* (winner of the Lincoln Prize), *The Lincoln Image*, and *Lincoln at Cooper Union*. Holzer appears frequently on radio and television, including on C-SPAN and CNN, and in Lincoln and Civil War documentaries for the BBC, NHK, and the History Channel. Formerly senior vice president for public affairs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and chairman of the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission and Foundation, he currently serves as director of the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College in New York. In 2008, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal.

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