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His best 'goyle Stone carver prospers in his ancient art

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F.N. D'Alessio ~ The Associated Press

BARTLETT, Ill. -- Walter S. Arnold was helping a monster break free of its stone prison.

"This is actually a grotesque, not a gargoyle," the stone carver explained as he used a hydraulic lift to position the heavy figure of Indiana limestone. "Most people call them all gargoyles, but a gargoyle, technically, is a waterspout attached to a building. This guy's a freestanding figure, so he's a grotesque."

The bat-eared beastie was grotesque, in any sense of the word, but his toothy smile indicated that he was a friendly monster.

"He's one of four I'm doing for the garden of a mansion in Milwaukee," Arnold said. "They represent the four seasons, and this guy's summer."

To add foliage on the sides of the figure, Arnold sketched in some leaves with a marker, then took a chisel and incised their outlines with a few practiced strokes of his wooden mallet. Next, he fit the chisel into a pneumatic hammer and began removing the excess stone, cutting it away as if it were cheese.

"One my other pneumatic hammers broke recently," he said. "It was made in New England in 1904, but the company repaired it for free -- turns out it was still under warranty."

That cavalier tone about the passage of years comes naturally to Arnold, who practices a time-consuming and time-defying craft. He says he can't understand why people want to spend their money on cars and big-screen TVs -- items he calls "disposable" -- when they could have one of his custom-designed marble fireplaces instead, and know that it would probably outlast the house they put it in.

Elements of one of those fireplaces, bound for a house in California, lay a few yards away in his suburban Chicago studio. And on the floor was a wooden case containing a repair or replication project; a broken 19th century gargoyle from Bowdoin College in Maine.

"This is a bit sad," he said of the gargoyle. "Some of it may be due to structural failure on the building, and some may be because its shape could trap water. Freezing water can crack stone easily. But the stone in these carvings lasts an amazingly long time if they're properly designed. If you wash the surface grime off this one, you can still see the original carver's chisel marks very clearly."

Carving convention

Arnold was doing a few bits of last-minute carving before heading off to the recent annual convention of the Stone Carvers Guild, of which he is president. This year's convention was held in August in the Vermont quarrying centers of Rutland and Barre.

Many of the 30-some members of the guild share two important experiences Arnold lists on his resume: training in either Pietrasanta or Carrara, Italy, and working on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

"Walter is the real ramrod of the guild," said Dallas stone carver Harold F. Clayton, who also trained in Pietrasanta. "He's the guy who got us all organized. He's also a very good carver."

Arnold, 51, said he became interested in stone carving as a child on Chicago's South Side. He lived near the University of Chicago's gothic-style campus and became fascinated by the gargoyles and grotesques on the buildings. He began carving at age 12, using pieces of limestone and marble filched from urban renewal projects.

"My late father was a freelance photographer, and he provided me with a role model of working for yourself creatively," he said. "Academically, I did as little as possible -- the last thing I graduated from was eighth grade. I managed to get into what is now the

University of Illinois at Chicago as an early entrant, but I already knew what I wanted to do, and it didn't involve a degree, so I just took every art history course I could."

At 17, Arnold decided he was ready for the National Cathedral, but the cathedral wasn't ready for him, so he returned to Chicago for a while, and then left to serve an apprenticeship in Italy.

"This was in 1973, and there were about 400 stone carvers in Pietrasanta -- there are maybe only 100 now -- so there were a lot of excellent people to learn from," he said.

Arnold returned to the National Cathedral at 27, and was accepted.

"I spent five years there," he said. "I assisted on Frederick Hart's 'Ex Nihilo Creation' on the west front, and did about three dozen gargoyles and grotesques, as well as carvings on various architectural elements -- about 100 different pieces, in all."

Cathedral's intense lessons

Guild member Franco Minervini, of Freehold, N.J., also worked on the cathedral, and said it beats art school "where you have six weeks to carve a leaf."

"At the cathedral, you have two hours," Minervini said. "The intensity of it teaches you a lot, if you can take it. And Walter learned a lot. He became a master of shadows and he learned to fool the eye with very simple lines."

Arnold's cathedral carvings are in a wide range of styles. Some are in the old gothic and baroque modes; others, like a gargoyle of a corrupt politician, are modern caricatures; while still others are futuristic robots.

The same stylistic range characterizes the pieces Arnold has done since establishing his Chicago-area studio. There are traditional gargoyles (though one of them proves to be eating a nontraditional hamburger), realistic portraits, and excursions into abstraction. A Killing Fields memorial he did for the Cambodian Association of Illinois is an exercise in stark geometric form.

The lack of an identifiable personal style doesn't trouble Arnold.

"Most artists these days try to be true to their personal visions," he explained. "I want to be true to the material, the tools and the techniques. I guess I want to do with carving what Duke Ellington said he wanted to do with his music -- 'make it seem inevitable.'"

These days, Arnold practices his craft in a rambling building on 2 1/2 acres he purchased recently in an unincorporated area outside this Chicago suburb. It doubles as his studio and the home he shares with his wife and business manager, Fely. It's probably one of the few Illinois residences furnished with hydraulic lifts and an indoor forklift.

For potential customers who cannot visit the studio, Arnold maintains an elaborate Web site wherein he defines his work as "carving limestone, marble and pixels." On it, Arnold offers information about stone carving, and sells both original works and castings of his more popular pieces. Some of the smaller castings are available for less than \$40, while the fireplaces can run upward of \$30,000.

The carving, selling and shipping keep Arnold too busy for much else.

"We don't have much time for television," he said. "Though I did splurge recently by buying the complete 'Great Jang-geum' on DVDs -- all 54 episodes."

True to Arnold's timeless tastes, the epic South Korean television series is set in the 17th century.

On the Net

n Walter S. Arnold: www.stonecarver.com

* Stone Carvers Guild: www.stonecarversguild.com

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