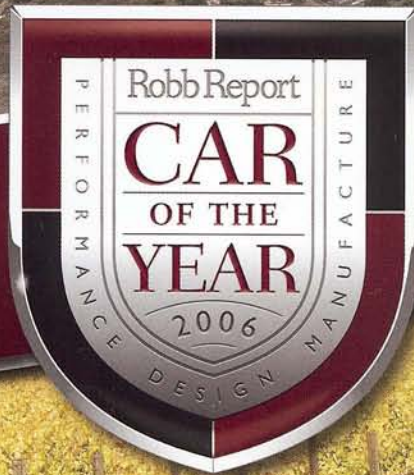


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Carving His Own Niche

Rock-solid determination drove this Illinois sculptor to master an ancient craft.



THE WAY A STONECARVER holds his chisel can reveal much about his skills and his training, and in the case of Walter Arnold, his grip earned him the biggest break of his stonecarving career. In 1971, Arnold, who now operates his own 3,000-square-foot home workshop and showroom in Elgin, Ill., applied unsuccessfully to join the small team of stonecarvers working on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., a project that would not be completed until 1990. Although he was just 17 when he applied, Arnold had been carving for five years, teaching himself the craft on chunks of limestone that he would haul home in a Radio Flyer wagon from demolition sites around his Chicago neighborhood. Undeterred by the refusal, he left America; apprenticed for several years in Pietrasanta, Italy, a town near the marble quarries of Carrara; and reapplied in 1980. During this second interview, the cathedral's master carver, Vincent Palumbo, barely glanced at Arnold's portfolio before leading him to the room where he kept his stonecarving implements. When Palumbo asked Arnold to pick up a tool, he complied, unaware that Palumbo was testing him.

"Not until after I'd been there a long time did he tell me why he hired me: That tool fit my hand," Arnold says, demonstrating by wrapping his middle three fingers around a chisel shaft and resting his thumb and pinky against it. "This grip gives incredible control and precision while keeping the tool very light," he says. "To [Palumbo], the way a chisel fit in a hand told him if the hand was used to working in the right way, and if it was trained the right way."

Palumbo gave Arnold a chance to finish his stonecarving education by helping to complete the National Cathedral. Arnold contributed to the *Ex Nihilo* triptych that appears over the front entrance, sculpted keystones and window decorations, and carved gargoyles and grotesques. (He notes that although all fantastically ugly stone creatures often are called gargoyles, there is a difference between the two terms: Gargoyles function as water spouts, and grotesques do not.) Arnold would apply the knowledge and experience he gained from working on the cathedral when, in 1985, he returned to Chicago and opened his first stonecarving studio. Fifteen years later, he cofounded the Stonecarvers Guild, a group of American artists who practice—and hope to preserve—the ancient craft.

Arnold did not quibble about terminology when the University of Chicago's class of 1999 commissioned him to carve as its gift to the school a gargoyle—one that would not spout water, but would become the first such figure added to the grounds in decades. The university's stone carvings were the first to capture the interest of Arnold, who grew up near the campus, and he recalls looking at them and wanting to create one of his own. "This completes the circle and feels very logical," Arnold says of his sculpture, which in 2000 was installed in a second-floor niche in Mitchell Tower, part of the university's student union. "It's where I was heading all along."

—SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY

Walter S. Arnold, 847.568.1188, www.stonecarver.com

Griffins are among the many fantasy creatures that appear in Walter Arnold's stone carvings.