

## Art in Plain Sight: Moline War Memorial by C.S. Paolo

Written by Bruce Walters

Wednesday, 09 February 2011 08:43

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A large cast-bronze war memorial has stood in downtown Moline for roughly eight decades. On the sculpture's north side is the imagery one might expect on such a memorial: an idealized soldier holding an American flag under the spread wings of an eagle. Rising through the sculpture's center is a towering flag pole.

This is not the oldest war memorial in the Quad Cities, nor is it the most prominent or grandest. It is, however, a thoughtful – perhaps even profound – sculptural group of five figures.

Flanking the soldier as he steadfastly looks forward are two women dressed in classical, robed attire. Their ancient clothing is in striking contrast to the soldier's military uniform.

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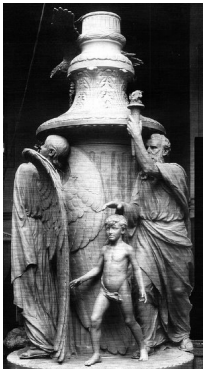
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One of the women, on the soldier's left, is a winged angel gazing confidently upward. Her left hand holds a palm branch that shelters the soldier's head. The palm branch is a traditional symbol of triumph and victory, and in Christian art, it also indicates a martyr. The angel's right hand is gently releasing (or reaching for) the soldier's hand. On the soldier's right is a stoic, shrouded woman, standing somewhat behind the flag he confidently holds. Her hands neither reach to comfort the soldier nor protect him. They hold, instead, a lowered wreath. Her somber bearings convey the sense of someone who has seen too many young men die.



On the south side of the sculpture, exactly opposite the soldier, is a nearly nude boy followed and protected by a robed, bearded man who holds a torch high. The torch and the positioning of his arm are nearly identical to those of the Statue of Liberty. Perhaps the artist intended to convey that the torch of liberty is being passed to future generations. But there is no sense of joy in either face. The stern resolve in the ancient man's gaze and his sheer size emphasize the child's frailty. And though the man holds his hand protectively over the child's head, one also senses in him the same hard resolve and sense of duty as in the Old Testament story of

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Abraham, who was preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac in obedience to God's command.

On the sculpture's base is written the artist's name, C.S. Paolo. Born in 1882 in Palermo, Italy, Paolo immigrated to America and set up a studio on Fifth Avenue in New York with his brother. Paolo moved his studio to Summit, New Jersey, after his brother's death in 1918, and it was there that this memorial was probably created in plaster. In addition to this work, Paolo created busts of prominent world leaders, including presidents Lincoln and Grant, Pope Pius XI, and Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier, a hero of Belgium during World War I.



This sculpture was begun in 1929, 11 years after the end of the First World War. Although America played a decisive role in the war, the sculpture doesn't seem to radiate with victory or pride. The optimism of winning this "war to end all wars" must have been tempered by the Wall Street crash of 1929, and then shaken by the emergence of totalitarian governments around the world.

By 1930, Mussolini was in power in Italy, and as an Italian emigrant, Paolo would certainly have been aware of this. Stalin had also risen to power in the Soviet Union. Hitler and the Nazis were seizing control in Germany. Japan was poised to invade Manchuria. In less than a decade, the world would be engulfed in another, even more devastating world war. When America was attacked in 1941 and entered World War II, the child depicted in the sculpture would, poignantly, be nearing the age when he could fight – and die.

It is only conjecture on my part, but this sculpture seems more than a memorial to the soldiers in past wars; it appears to also be directed toward the approaching war. The two women watch as the soldier goes forward into battle – one releasing him from her protection and comfort, and the

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other with the grim knowledge that many will die. Behind them is the preparation, perhaps even the sacrifice, of the next generation.



According to an e-mail from Jim Leonhirst, who is writing a book about the artist and several generations of artists in his family, the figures are based on Paolo's family. Perhaps they were simply convenient models. Regardless, it is apparent that the soldier and child especially are particular individuals, not just classic figures meant to represent all soldiers or all children. Using real faces gives a sense that the artist was invested in the ideas beyond simply completing another commission. These were, after all, members of his family.

The sculpture is in the center of Stephens Square, on 19th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues in Moline. Many of you will pass near it as you cross the I-74 bridge. It is worth your time to take a short detour to look at the sculpture yourself. I think it is vitally important that we step out of the routine of our lives on occasion and give consideration to skilled and thoughtful artworks such as this memorial.

*Bruce Walters is a professor of art at Western Illinois University.*

*This is part of an occasional series on the history of public art in the Quad Cities. If there's a piece of public art that you'd like to learn more about, e-mail the location and a brief description to [BD-Walters@wiu.edu](mailto:BD-Walters@wiu.edu).*