

Daniel Chester French: American Sculptor

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Daniel Chester French was one of the world's best sculptors in his time. One could do a search on virtually any well-known search engine, and find the basic details of his storied career; the most notable being his sculpture of a seated Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial. The most intimate details of this man, however, are found in precious few pages; his meteoric rise to prominence in the field of sculpting born of humble origins, and his first masterpiece created from the flesh of a turnip.

Daniel French was born in Exeter, New Hampshire on April 20, 1850 to Anne (Richardson) and Henry Flagg French, a lawyer, Assistant US Treasury Secretary and author of a book that described the French drain (French, 1859). The youngest of four children, Daniel enjoyed the benefits of learning at the knee of his brother, Will and sisters, Harriette and Sallie. His mother, Anne was ill for most of Daniel's young life, as she grew thinner and more pale; the effects of consumption, or tuberculosis. In 1856, when he was only six years of age, Daniel's mother lost her battle with the disease and died, leaving the French household without its beloved matriarch (French Cresson, 1947).

French's father managed as well as any single parent could, dividing his time between Washington in the winter months and Exeter in spring and summer. But the children were occasionally divided up between other family members and the elder French knew this was not suitable living. Indeed the bright spot in young Daniel's year was the annual trip to Chester, New Hampshire, where the entire family spent each August with his grandmother. Each had personal reasons for enjoying the trip to grandma's, but for Daniel, it was the serenity of the country itself and the fact that they were together again (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel was so enamored with Chester, he adopted it for his middle name. “Daniel Chester French, he called himself, partly because it made him feel more important, but mostly because he loved the old place so, and wanted to keep his association with it” (French Cresson, 1947, p.22). And, until his death, Daniel Chester French was the name he carried as his own.

Over the course of a few years, Daniel’s father realized the importance of a mother in the lives of his children. As his travels took him to new places, French found himself in many homes, as a dinner guest, but he also noticed that a young lady seemed to be in many of the same places he was at. “Pamela was a maiden of 30 odd; she was plump and fair, and smart as you please” (French Cresson, 1947, p.23). The Judge found that he enjoyed keeping in touch with Pamela, sending her fruit from the farm and, thus, a romance was born (French Cresson, 1947).

Following a short courtship, the Judge married Pamela on September 29, 1859. This also happened to be his eldest daughter, Harriette’s 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the Judge forgot this important fact in all of the excitement. She wondered how a man could fall so far into love that he would forget his own daughter’s birthday. “This was a little mystery that Harriette would not soon forget” (French Cresson, 1947, p.24).

Pamela immediately took over the French homestead, making the changes she felt were in order, but she fit well into the lives of the Judge and the four children. They called her “Mother” with relative ease, and she seemed to enjoy their acceptance. Daniel responded especially well, having regained the mother he dearly missed, as well as the softness only a mother could give. For young Daniel, now about nine years of age, life was almost perfect, but his father’s announcement that they would sell the home in

Exeter and move to Cambridge caused him considerable angst. It was the first of two moves in a short period of time, with each moving Daniel closer to his destiny (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel's father was unhappy in Cambridge, suffering the loss of country style living, so the stay was short-lived. The decision was made to move to Boston, and after several trips to look for homes, he and Pamela settled on a smaller home in Concord, Massachusetts. They reasoned that they found the home suitable, primarily because it would be more manageable when the children moved away. And Concord was convenient to Boston, with good train service, but Daniel fell in love the instant he saw their new homestead. The sprawling farm was in the country, much like his grandma's home in Chester (French Cresson, 1947).

It was the summer of 1867, and Concord seemed a good fit to the French family. They found themselves among some of today's literary giants, including poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Alcott family (Louisa May Alcott penned, "Little Women"). Daniel kept himself busy with his studies, weekly games of charades, both at home and at the Alcott's, and the chores around the farm. Always true to his duties, Daniel was working on cleaning up a pile of turnips and noticed a large specimen near the apex of the pile. The turnip was large, round and smooth; and this single turnip was about to change young Daniel's life (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel studied the turnip intensely, certain that there was a figure within it. He quickly determined the figure was a frog. And so, with abandon he began whittling away at the turnip and it wasn't long before a dapper, jaunty frog, complete with tailcoat and trousers, emerged from the turnip. Daniel sought only to amuse his family with the frog,

but his father and Pamela raved about the talent shown in this first attempt. But he wondered how one could make a living carving turnips (French Cresson, 1947).

The following day, Daniel's frog kept hopping into his father's mind, as did the words of his wife, Pamela, who challenged him to do something about their son's newly found talent. Wanting to encourage Daniel's creativity, he remembered a little shop in Boston, which had paints and brushes in the window; perhaps they had some clay for sale. A short time later, the elder French was on his way back to Concord, with ten pounds of clay in tow (French Cresson, 1947).

That evening, the French family sat around the table after supper, experimenting with the mass of clay. Each made their best attempts at forming the clay, but Daniel worked more slowly and took great pains to bring detail to his sculpture of a dog's head. The Judge commented that the sculpture was clearly better than his and Pamela's and had possibilities, with a little more work. The encouragement was apparently all Daniel needed to continue his work (French Cresson, 1947).

Each day, once his chores and studies were completed, Daniel spent every available moment in his room, with his clay sculptures. His next project was one he called, "Wounded Deer", and when he presented the sculpture to his father, the Judge began to look at Daniel in a different light. He wondered how his son had acquired this profound talent, but he did not know the story behind the statuette. Daniel had never told the story of his hunting trip with a friend at Walden Pond (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel had shot his first deer and he was proud of the accomplishment of a good shot, but upon locating the wounded animal, he noticed it was still alive. Kneeling by its side, the deer raised its head, gazing at young Daniel with its great brown eyes, laid its

head on his knee, shivered slightly and died. At that moment, Daniel lost his feeling of victory, as well as his desire to ever go hunting again. In fact, he would not eat venison after that encounter (French Cresson, 1947).

Pamela was captivated by the sculpture and took it to Boston the next day, so she could show it to well-known architects and architectural sculptors, the Cobb brothers. When Cyrus Cobb saw the statuette, he exclaimed, “No one in Boston could have done this, and only one man in New York” (French Cresson, 1947). The teen had seemingly caught lightning in a bottle, and it did not take long for word to spread in Concord that a potential prodigy was in their midst. This news caught the ear of May Alcott, a friend of Daniel’s and an aficionado of sculpture.

May Alcott was a romantic figure in Concord, and word of Daniel’s talent reached her quickly. Already an accomplished artist and sister of Louisa May, May had spent several years on her studies in Paris, and she had also been responsible for the illustrations in her sister’s book, “Little Women”. And so, on a sunny day, May paid a visit to the French homestead, wanting to personally examine the work of Daniel Chester French. The young man was only too happy to share his work with Alcott, and invited her to his makeshift studio (French Cresson, 1947).

May studied Daniel’s “Wounded Deer”, the dog’s head and his new project, a panther on the prowl. It was immediately apparent to her that this young man had talent, but she was astounded that he’d had no formal training. After giving Daniel her evaluation of his work, she invited him to her home, where she would give him a large amount of clay, as well as some lessons in building an armature. She explained that an armature was important, because it gave structure to larger sculptures. Daniel accepted

her invitation and at the conclusion of their meeting, May presented him with a gift; his first set of sculpting tools (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel continued his studies with May Alcott, as well as Dr. William Rimmer, in Boston. Rimmer was a physician and sculptor of incredible talent, and when Daniel learned he was teaching a drawing class, he pled with his father to allow him to go. Despite Pamela's concern over his travel, the Judge sensed something new in his son. It was clear that he had found something he cared deeply about and he agreed to the study program. It did not take long for Daniel to realize that he had to expand his knowledge, and Boston was just the starting point (French Cresson, 1947).

The young artisan, now about 19 years of age, began working with Plaster of Paris, under the tutelage of Ms. Alcott. As his skills increased, he became braver about his work and even presented some of it to a firm in Boston, which produced porcelain figurines. The company agreed to sell Daniel's work, and paid him \$50 for his first effort, a pair of owls. He was so elated with his good fortune that he worked harder at the craft, and won first place at the Cattle Show, later that year. The premium of three dollars was his reward, but other people were beginning to take notice of the young man (French Cresson, 1947).

Daniel spent a month in New York, working with well-known sculptor, J. Q. A. Ward. It cost \$50 for the month, which was the money he'd earned from the sale of the owls, but Daniel saw the value in Ward's offer and accepted. Ward was immediately impressed with Daniel's seemingly immediate grasp of concept and structure, as well as his determination to pour feeling into his work. And, as the month ended, Daniel returned to Concord, satisfied that he'd spent valuable time with Ward. But, shortly after his return

to Concord, Daniel would find himself standing on the precipice of greatness (French Cresson, 1947).

The Centennial was approaching, and Ebenezer Hubbard left one thousand dollars in his will to erect a memorial to the Minutemen at Concord Bridge. The committee comprised of Mr. Emerson and two other local dignitaries would award the commission to a sculptor, but New England was not well stocked with sculptors in that day and age. Daniel felt this was his chance to make his mark in the town of Concord, as well as the world of sculpture, and his father encouraged him to produce a miniature of the proposed statue, and present it to the committee (French Cresson, 1947).

The committee was pleased with Daniel's entry and he was commissioned to create the statue in April, 1873. History would record that French's "Minute Man" was unveiled on April 19, 1875. The statue was cast using confiscated cannons from the Civil War by Ames Foundry of Chicopee, Massachusetts, the leading American bronze caster of the day (Tolles, 1999). It was to be the first among many sculptures by Daniel Chester French, but his most notable work is visible on today's pennies, as well as our five-dollar bills and in Washington, D.C.

Congress approved the Lincoln Memorial in 1910, but construction did not begin until 1914 (Unknown, 2009). Henry Bacon was placed in charge of the design and construction details, but there was only one sculptor he would have assigned to the statue of Lincoln. Daniel Chester French was commissioned with the highest recommendation from Bacon himself, and after some persuading, French resigned his post as Chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts and set about the task of creating the sculpture (French Cresson, 1947).



The completed project was opened to the public on May 30, 1922 and has attracted millions of visitor each year. The memorial is a masterpiece of architecture, and includes Marble from Colorado and Limestone from Indiana. Lincoln's statue includes Marble from Georgia, measures 19 feet tall and weighs 175 tons (Unknown, 2009). The Lincoln Memorial, without controversy, was French's crowning achievement, but there were many other notables, both before and after.

French was asked to create a reduced version of the "Minute Man", for the Navy gunboat Concord. "The Concord Minute Man of 1875" was commissioned by Congress in 1889 and installed in 1891. Around 1913, French agreed to allow castings of 32-inch reductions of the statue, as well as 14-inch reductions around 1917 (Tolles, 1999). He was also asked to design the Pulitzer Medal in the early 1900's and his work has graced the obverse of the medal, since its inception in 1917 (Strupp, 2004). Those wishing to see the medal will find it in Alan Stahl's "The Medal in America" (Strupp, 2004).

Yet another of his great works stands in Harvard Yard, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "The John Harvard Statue" was unveiled in 1884 and was dedicated to the University's founding benefactor, Rev. John Harvard (Unknown, 1884). The irony of the statue is that the subject is not John Harvard, but a Harvard student. All physical photographs of Harvard were destroyed by fire, forcing French to improvise on the substance of the sculpture (Unknown, 1884).

Daniel Chester French worked at his craft, until his death on October 7, 1931 at the age of 81 (French Cresson, 1947). The sum of his work included more than 100 sculptures, statues and miniatures, many of which are found scattered throughout the United State of America. French was a young man with a dream, and his families'

encouragement of that dream allowed the world to enjoy his diverse talents for most of 60 years; and the results of those efforts for many to come.

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