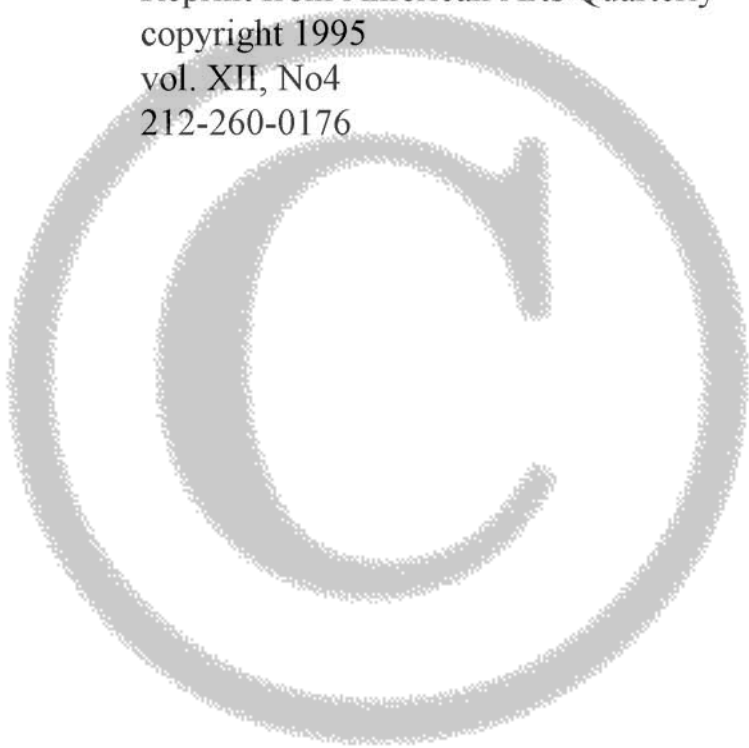


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Architect of Symbol: Raymond Kaskey

by Charles S. Bergen

It is early October. Washington, D.C.-based sculptor and architect Raymond Kaskey has just returned from Portland, Oregon, where he has been participating in ceremonies commemorating the ten-year anniversary of the installation of *Portlandia*. Hailed by local laymen and worldly critics alike, this immense hammered copper sculpture (thirty-six feet in height by sixteen feet in width) has become a widely recognized symbol both of the city of Portland and of the ongoing revival of the centuries-old tradition of figurative architectural sculpture.

Ten years after his career-making success in Portland, Kaskey has completed a large number of elaborate classical sculptures and is in the process of creating more. Heralded by Portland's own Municipal Services Building, postmodernism has dramatically changed the way many American architects design buildings, with the welcome effect of increasing collaborations between artists and architects. Kaskey is one of the most active artists in this reawakening of architectural figuration.

In the forty years prior to Kaskey's selection for the Portland commission, architectural sculptures such as *Portlandia* were rare. The last grand statement of the traditional Beaux-Arts principle of integrating architecture and sculpture in America was in the seven elaborate buildings in the Federal Triangle, in Washington, D.C.¹ During the 1950s and into the 1960s when American corporations and municipalities began building again on a large scale, it was abstract rather than figurative art that adorned their bare concrete plazas.²

In the 1970s and early 1980s the art selection process was increasingly dominated by art bureaucrats, as well as by the National Endowment for the Arts' Art in Public Places Program and the General Services Administration's Art in Architecture Program. Public sculpture, largely abstract, often had little to do with or was even outright hostile to the urban spaces it occupied. Two of the most outrageous pieces from this era were a 1976 Carl Andre sculpture consisting of thirty-six large rocks for the city of Hartford, Connecticut and Richard Serra's 1981 *Tilted Arc*.

While not as visually threatening as Serra's *Tilted Arc* (the seventy-three-ton piece appears to be on the verge of falling over), Kaskey's early sculpture was clearly Abstract Expressionist. His twenty-four-foot by twelve-foot ferrocement *Pyramid* (1972) at the University of Maryland, where he held a post as Assistant Professor of Design (1969–76), employs a hard geometry softened by organic forms.³

As a member of the first generation to be schooled solely in abstract formalism, Kaskey received little or no formal training in classicism or the figure. Nor did he apprentice himself to a master sculptor to learn his art. Architect Paul Schweiker, an admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright and Mies van der Rohe, held the deanship at Carnegie Mellon when Kaskey was pursuing his Bachelor degree in architecture and followed a tightly focused Bauhaus curriculum.⁴

Kaskey did however study sculpture—clay modeling not of the figure but of large cow bones—in a class taught by Kent Bloomer. When the young architecture student enrolled in the class, Bloomer spotted him early on as a sculptor because Kaskey was the only student who fully circumambulated the room, got down on his hands and knees and then stood on a chair to consider the large cow bone before commencing work. In 1964, when Bloomer received a commission to sculpt a Brancusi-



Raymond Kaskey, *Justice Delayed, Justice Denied*, 1994–95

U.S. Court House, Alexandria, Virginia
Photo: Nick Merrick © Hedrich Blessing.

like bas-relief for a synagogue in Pittsburgh, he hired Ray Kaskey as his assistant.⁵

At the Yale School of Architecture, where Kaskey went for his Master of Environmental Design degree the curriculum was modernist, but not Bauhausian. Charles Moore was Dean at Yale during Kaskey's years in New Haven and brought

such faculty as Robert Venturi, Serge Chermayeff and Kent Bloomer to the school. Along with his architectural studies, Kaskey again studied sculpture—in classes similar to these taught by Bloomer—under Erwin Hauer.

After graduating from Yale in 1969, Kaskey moved to Washington to teach architecture at the University of Maryland. In 1976, after seven years of teaching, Kaskey was denied tenure. He still continued to practice architecture. In his sculpture he started to move away from the abstract vocabulary. At the age of thirty-three, working mostly in a small studio over a carriage house, with his wife Sherry (she later modeled for the face of *Portlandia*) as his model, Kaskey began the slow and laborious task of teaching himself the figure.

Kaskey's submission for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial competition was a twelve-foot-high bronze sculpture of one soldier half-dragging and half-carrying the body of another, alluding to Book XVII of Homer's *Iliad*, in which Menelaus retrieves the body of the dead Patroclus. Patroclus, protected by Achilles' well-known armor, had swept the Trojans from the Achaen ships but had also gone beyond the boundaries set by Achilles and slaughtered many men, finally falling while trying to storm the high gates of Troy. Kaskey had seen a classical sculpture of the subject and felt that it spoke both to America's escalation of an unjust war and the need to honor the dead, whether or not involvement in the war had been right. Kaskey did not win the Vietnam Veterans Memorial competition, but his next competition entry—a female figure representing Portland's fascinations and the pursuits of Commerce, Agriculture and the Sea—was more successful.

While the number and importance of the commissions Kaskey has now received is impressive, Kaskey's work speaks for itself. Rich in detail and human scale, its symbolism is readily accessible to informed viewer and observant layman alike. Kaskey's sculpture also works with and commands the scale of large buildings, such as Michael Graves's Portland Building. His *Justice Delayed, Justice Denied*, just recently installed at the U.S. Court House in Alexandria, Virginia, acts as the focal



Raymond Kaskey, *Portlandia*, 1982–85
Portland Public Service Building, Portland, Oregon

point of the building's entry but also educates people about the nature of the justice that lies within. His male and female lions for the National Law Enforcement Officers Monument, powerful figures which serve to convey meaning and remembrance, also frame space and convey dignity. His tongue-in-cheek fountain and figure of Queen Charlotte for the Charlotte/Douglass International Airport in Charlotte, N.C. tell a story about the origins of the name of the city; they also allude to Charlotte's modern-day prominence and location.

For *Portlandia* the original iconographic source was the engraving "The Ancient of Days" by William Blake. The challenge for Kaskey was translating a powerful two-dimensional image into an equally powerful three-dimensional figure. With her hair and form shaped by the port-city's wind, her right arm lowered and extended in welcome, her left holding a trident, and her downward looking gaze, *Portlandia* engages the eye and the imagination of all passers-by. It is for this figure, which so clearly symbolizes the energetic west coast city of Portland, that Kaskey is best known.

Portlandia is the first sculpture to be fabricated with the laborious *repousse* method of hammering flat sheet copper into sculptural form since Frédéric-August Bartholdi employed the technique in his fabrication of the Statue of Liberty over a century ago. *Portlandia* is the second largest hammered copper figure in America and fully one-third the scale of the statue that stands in New York harbor. For his initial entry into the first stage of the competition, Kaskey prepared a six-inch maquette. After he became one of five finalists with an additional four months to develop his scheme, Kaskey presented a three-quarter-life-size figure. In consultation with members of the selection committee, Kaskey strove to make the face less severe and the gesture more appropriate and welcoming.

Upon winning the competition, Kaskey employed a three-dimensional pantograph—an instrument developed by sculptors in the nineteenth century to accurately enlarge sculptures—to increase the figure to an intermediate size. This clay version was then cast in plaster, cut up in pieces, put back on the pantograph and enlarged again to its final size on plywood templates. The full-size face was then sculpted in clay.

Once Kaskey and his assistants had completed hammering the copper to fit the plywood forms, they built the steel armature which holds the figure together. Strong enough to withstand gale force winds, this interior frame was made up of a huge box truss, two secondary trusses and hundreds of struts connected to the copper with plates specially designed by Kaskey to prevent electrolysis. For Kaskey, the construction of the armature inside of the structure was a remarkable feat—he likened it to building a ship within a bottle. But the trickiest part was not having a space large enough to assemble the sculpture before shipping it out from Washington, D.C. to Portland, Oregon. Kaskey's architectural talents were up to the task. All of the intricately sculpted and designed pieces fit. Assembly went smoothly, and *Portlandia* was an immediate sensation.

In 1988, Kaskey was asked to enter a competition for the Charlotte/Douglass International Airport in Charlotte, N.C. The organizers of the competition also invited Maya Lin (designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial) and Ellen Zimmerman (another abstract artist) to submit designs for the airport piece. Proposing a sixteen-foot-tall bronze sculpture of Queen Charlotte, wife of King George II, falling back off a column as if held up only by air, Kaskey won the competition.

This exquisitely sculpted figure of the English queen caps an eight-foot-tall

column which is part of a much larger fountain below. The entire piece then sits on a marble and brass compass. From the momentum of her falling backward Charlotte's crown has come flying off, and she catches it in the outstretched fingers of her right hand. Her head, shoulders and arms shoot back towards the center of the column, counterbalancing the lower half of her body which is projecting out. The sculpture is not closely based on history but intended by Kaskey to be fanciful and lively. The sculptor chose Queen Charlotte to recall the roots of the city's naming and founding. Her billowing dress looks like a weathervane, and the brass and marble compass at the base completes an appropriate symbolic program for an airport and for a city so close to the border of the two Carolinas. In 1990, when Washington, D.C. architect Davis Buckley was chosen to design the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Judiciary Square, Washington, D.C., the first two people he called were landscape architect James Urban and sculptor Ray Kaskey.⁶

The collaborators' proposal for figurative sculpture as part of the memorial was rejected out of hand by the National Capital Planning Commission. The Commission gave no official reason for their rejection, but possibly feared a repetition of the polarizing arguments over the addition of sculpture to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

In addition to the rejected figurative sculpture, there had always been the concept of a family grouping, a pride of figures. The idea of placing figures to mark the entrances to the curving pathways that run through the proposed graceful oval space had not been rejected, however, only their rendition as humans. To represent the ideas of service, sacrifice and vigilance, the designers proposed groups of lions.

These four groupings have single adult animals each alertly watching two resting cubs. Massive and over life-size, the lions are exquisitely modeled and posed. Kaskey executed the two adult males and two adult females, while assistant George Carr sculpted the pairs of cubs. Placed at the entrances and exits to the low-walled pathways that curve through this beautiful site, these powerful figurative sculptures symbolize the virtues and define the space of the memorial.

The memorial's oval plan is reminiscent of Michelangelo's Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome. Fluid curving walls, metal pergolas and tightly trimmed rows of linden trees transform the once abandoned Judiciary Square into a new type of memorial for Washington. Instead of a traditional monument in a park, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial is a contained urban pedestrian space—rare for Washington—where passers-by can stop and reflect, members of the slain officers' families can come to mourn and remember, and local workers can meet to eat, converse and passively absorb the meaning of the memorial.

Raymond Kaskey's largest and most complicated collaboration to date has been with former teacher and now collaborator Kent Bloomer on the new Harold Washington Center in Chicago, Illinois.⁷ Working with architects Hammond, Beeby and Babka, Kaskey and Bloomer were finally able to fully integrate figurative and representational forms into the design of a monumental public building.

Beeby's concept from the start was a literal iconographic ornamentation of the building. Bloomer and Kaskey in turn produced highly specific sculptures for the building. Fashioned in cast stone, carved granite and fabricated aluminum, Kaskey's barn owls—symbolizing knowledge and learning—nestle within Bloomer's cast aluminum acroterions, palmettes and foliation at each of the building's four corners. A central great horned owl with an eighteen-foot wingspan sits above the building's main entrance. Kaskey's putti blowing air ("Mr. Windy City") alternate with sculpted heads of

Ceres (the ancient Greek goddess of grain) and swags full of the bounty of a midwest harvest (squash, pumpkin and sheaves of wheat) to tell the viewer something of the qualities of the building, the city and the surrounding countryside.

Justice Delayed, Justice Denied is a twelve-foot bronze of a blindfolded Justice figure balancing on one foot. The figure, wrapped in gracefully sculpted drapery, holds out two pans of a symbolic scale while her arms act as the beam. The concept of Justice reflected in Kaskey's sculpture draws on sources that frequently provide inspiration for his work: antiquity, folktales, and parables. The traditional image of Justice portrayed in courthouses throughout America—a blindfolded woman holding scales in her outstretched arms—derives from Plato's vision of Justice as regulating the lives of citizens. The Romans added scales to the image to convey impartiality. The theme was further reinforced by the addition of a blindfold in the sixteenth century. In Kaskey's sculpture, the figure of Justice acts as the beam and balance for the scales; this arrangement allows the language of gesture to express the concept of impartiality.

Kaskey has counterposed this classic image of Justice with a symbol that recalls the fable of the tortoise and the hare. The tortoise with a billowing sail on its back was the heraldic device of Cosimo de Medici, whose motto was *Festina Lente*, "Make Haste Slowly"—be slow but sure. In this sculpture, Kaskey has placed Justice with her billowing draperies, in lieu of the sail above the tortoise, to emphasize the concept of deliberation in the administration of justice. The same message is conveyed by the story of the tortoise and the hare, with the moral, "Slow and steady wins the race." To signify movement, Kaskey has broken the arc of the hare's leap into four parts, suggesting the time-lapse in four individual frames of a film.

Finally, Kaskey has inscribed the base of the sculpture with the epigram "Justice Delayed, Justice Denied." This statement evokes tension with the message of slow-but-steady conveyed by the tortoise and hare; to give real protection to the rights of individuals, the process of justice requires expedition as well as deliberation.

In combination, these images are designed to elicit from citizens a new perspective on the traditional images used to express justice. In particular, the sculpture signifies two opposed concepts in our tradition: swift justice, on the one hand, and calm deliberation, on the other. By stimulating thought about the meaning of justice, Kaskey hopes this work will enrich and deepen the experience of those who enter the courthouse to participate in its processes, as well as the many thousands of people who admire the building as passers-by.⁸

Despite his success, Raymond Kaskey does not approach his art from an overly theoretical or formulaic position. Nor have foundries run endless series of his sculptures to be randomly deposited in public places. Extremely site- and culturally-specific, Kaskey's public sculpture is conceived for a particular place with a particular symbolism in mind.

Just as the Statue of Liberty has captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of Americans and would-be Americans in the past one hundred years, in the ten years following her installation, *Portlandia* has equally engaged the hearts of millions of Portland's residents and visitors. Let us hope that there are many more *Portlandias* in our futures.

(see notes on page 45)

Charles S. Bergen received his architectural education from Yale University and the University of Cambridge. He lives in Washington, D.C., where he practices architecture and sculpts.