



## *Interview*

# Sculpting the World War II Memorial

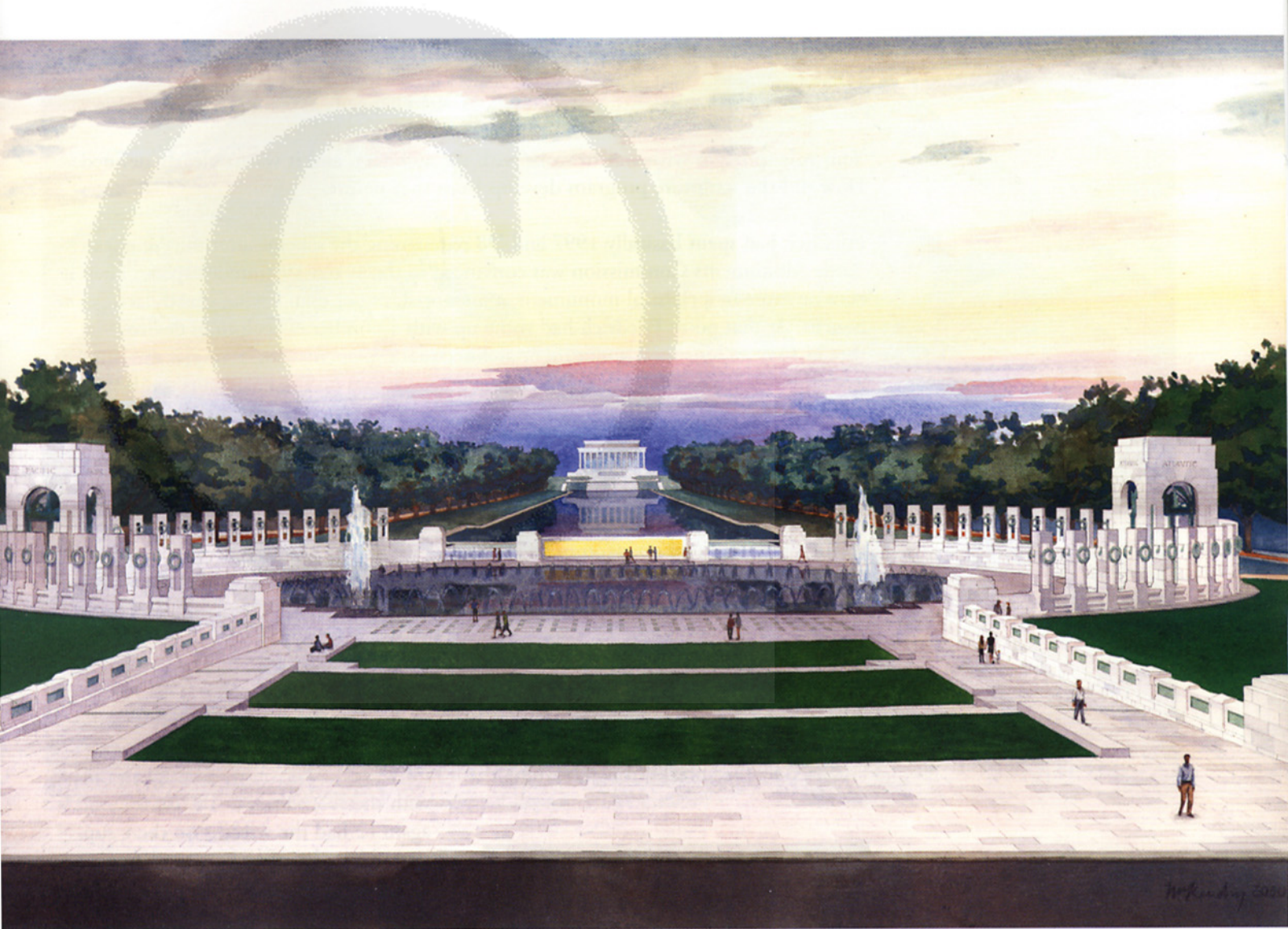
## *A Conversation with Raymond Kaskey*

George Gurney

Raymond Kaskey came to national attention in the mid-1980s as the sculptor of *Portlandia*, a thirty-six-foot-tall allegorical figure that kneels on the third-floor landing of Michael Graves' postmodern Portland Building in Oregon. His contributions to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 1991, include groups of lions and cubs guarding two low walls inscribed with the names of those slain on duty. He has since completed other significant projects in the Washington metropolitan area, where he now lives. Born in Pittsburgh in 1943, Kaskey is a graduate of the Yale School of Architecture and cites that training as good preparation for his work on large-scale projects. In 1997 Kaskey Studio Inc. was chosen to create all of the sculptural elements for a grand-scale World War II memorial in Washington (fig. 1) designed by architect Friedrich St. Florian. The sculptural aspects evolved over several years as St. Florian revised his plan in the face of initial controversy about siting and size. Ultimately, they came to include memorial arches representing the Atlantic and Pacific fronts, twenty-four bas-reliefs, elaborate flagpoles, wreaths, patterned water drains, and a wall of stars. Within each of the memorial arches, four eagles in a baldacchino hold garlands from which a two-and-one-half ton wreath floats. Photographer Gene Young and I visited Kaskey's Brentwood, Maryland, studio early this year to document work in progress and to learn how the sculptor's role on this project evolved.

**Gurney:** Let's start by asking how you obtained this commission. Did you have to compete, or were you chosen by the architect?

**Kaskey:** Well, a little bit of both. The competition to design the monument was an open one, with some four hundred entrants, and I was initially working with a team that didn't make the final cut, so basically I forgot about it. But then I got a call from Friedrich St. Florian, who was one of the six semifinalists chosen to go to stage two of the competition. Florian had chosen Leo Daly to be the architect of record on his team. But he also wanted an architect in Washington who knew the ropes, and that turned out to be George Hartman of Hartman-Cox, who was a former member of the Commission of Fine Arts as well as a practicing architect with over three hundred projects completed around the world—George had been around the block. And then Friedrich needed a sculptor. Hartman, whom I had worked with on another project,



1 Joe McKendry, *West View of World War II Memorial*, Washington, D.C., 2003. Watercolor showing main features of the memorial, including twelve bas-reliefs on each side of steps leading down to the monument. Photo courtesy of the American Battle Monuments Commission

recommended me. So I got on the team, and we competed at that point with another five semifinalists and we won.

**Was there any sculpture at that point?**

Yes, there was. Friedrich had in his original scheme a location for four large allegorical groups that would symbolize “Democracy,” “Victory,” “Valor,” and “Freedom.” I produced a maquette for “Victory” (fig. 2), a figure about sixteen feet high that had an eagle in it, and it worked with a waterfall in that part of the scheme. That was when the whole plaza level was sunk about fifteen feet below grade; now it’s about six feet below. But after the first go-round with the Fine Arts Commission, the program was changed to get rid of interior space that had originally been envisioned—an auditorium and an exhibition space. That part of the scheme disappeared, and the sculpture with it.

So you started over again?

Yes. They picked a designer, not a design, as often happens in competitions like this.

Your role to begin with was to work with the architect, and it wasn't clearly defined. How did the sculpture program develop from that point?

Friedrich had spent basically 1997 and '98 redesigning the scheme after the American Battle Monuments Commission was convinced to throw out any interior space. Then it became more of a classical monument, a memorial, rather than having this didactic component. At that point Friedrich had come up with a number of sculptural devices, or should I say architectural sculpture or architectural ornament—for example, the laurel wreath symbolizing victory and the two memorial arches on the north and south side. He had suspended the wreath horizontally inside the arch somewhat like a chandelier, with a kind of architectural device to hang it. And he asked me to come up with a more sculptural way to do it, a way to make it more dramatic. That's when I came up with the idea of the baldacchino (fig. 3), which consisted of four columns from which to hang the wreath so that it looked as though it was floating. This idea was immediately accepted by the Battle Monuments Commission's Site and Design Committee, the Fine Arts Commission; everybody liked it right away. So that was the easy part, an idea that I got overnight in 1998, and then it took four years to make it happen.

And the pillars?

Well, we went through a number of different designs for the fifty-six pillars, which represent the forty-eight states and eight territories during World War II (fig. 4). Finally Friedrich had his breakthrough, turning them into what they are now, rectangular pillars with the curved slot in the center. And again he had the wreaths on there supported by a lot of architectural devices, but that didn't really work out too well. So I came up with the idea of the bracket that hung the wreath from the top, rather than supporting it from several points. I also suggested the content of the wreaths. One should be an oak leaf to symbolize the military and industrial strength, and the other a wheat wreath to symbolize the agricultural and breadbasket functions that the United States played during and after the war. Each state would have both.

Was this before the bas-reliefs? Your idea of military and agriculture ties into their theme.

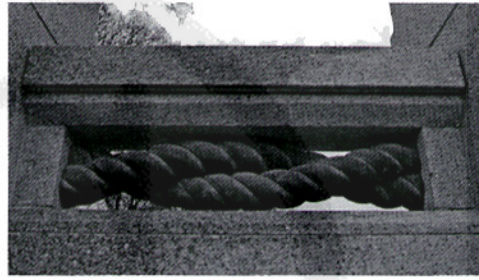
Yes. It's the home front as well as the military in both cases. But the idea of the bas-reliefs came fairly late in the project. The whole idea of the pillars was to symbolize



- 2 Raymond Kaskey, maquette of Victory figure for World War II Memorial, 1996. Tinted plaster, 22 in. high. Kaskey Studio Inc.
- 3 View upward within baldacchino, where a wreath is suspended from ribbons held by four eagles
- 4 View of state pillars and Pacific Arch, World War II Memorial



5 Bronze rope designed for World War II Memorial



the unity and bonding of the nation during World War II. This was further reinforced by a kind of rope that goes through the balustrade, which started out as a guilloche [a braidlike band] with a rope in it because it was more classical, but then J. Carter Brown [chairman of the Commission of Fine Arts] said that was too classical, too old hat, forget the guilloche, just concentrate on the rope. So we

did and went through a dozen iterations before coming up with something that satisfied Carter Brown (fig. 5). He approved the model for the rope in the hospital before his death [in 2002]. He was deeply concerned about these kinds of details and was a great enthusiast for the memorial.

**At what stage did a more evolved sculptural program come into the site? And why?**

Well, it just happened piecemeal, in a sort of evolutionary sense. Friedrich's ideas about which part of the memorial symbolizes what were always there in his mind, but they didn't really have any physical correlative at that point. Things just happened through a lot of design charrettes.

**Charrettes? That's an old Beaux-Arts term.**

Yes, a *charrette* is a "cart" in French. Now it applies to every neighborhood meeting, but originally it was the cart that Beaux-Arts students would ride as they were trying to finish their projects for judging. On the way to the academy they'd sit on the cart and be working on drawings at the last minute. We did have a few design charrettes.

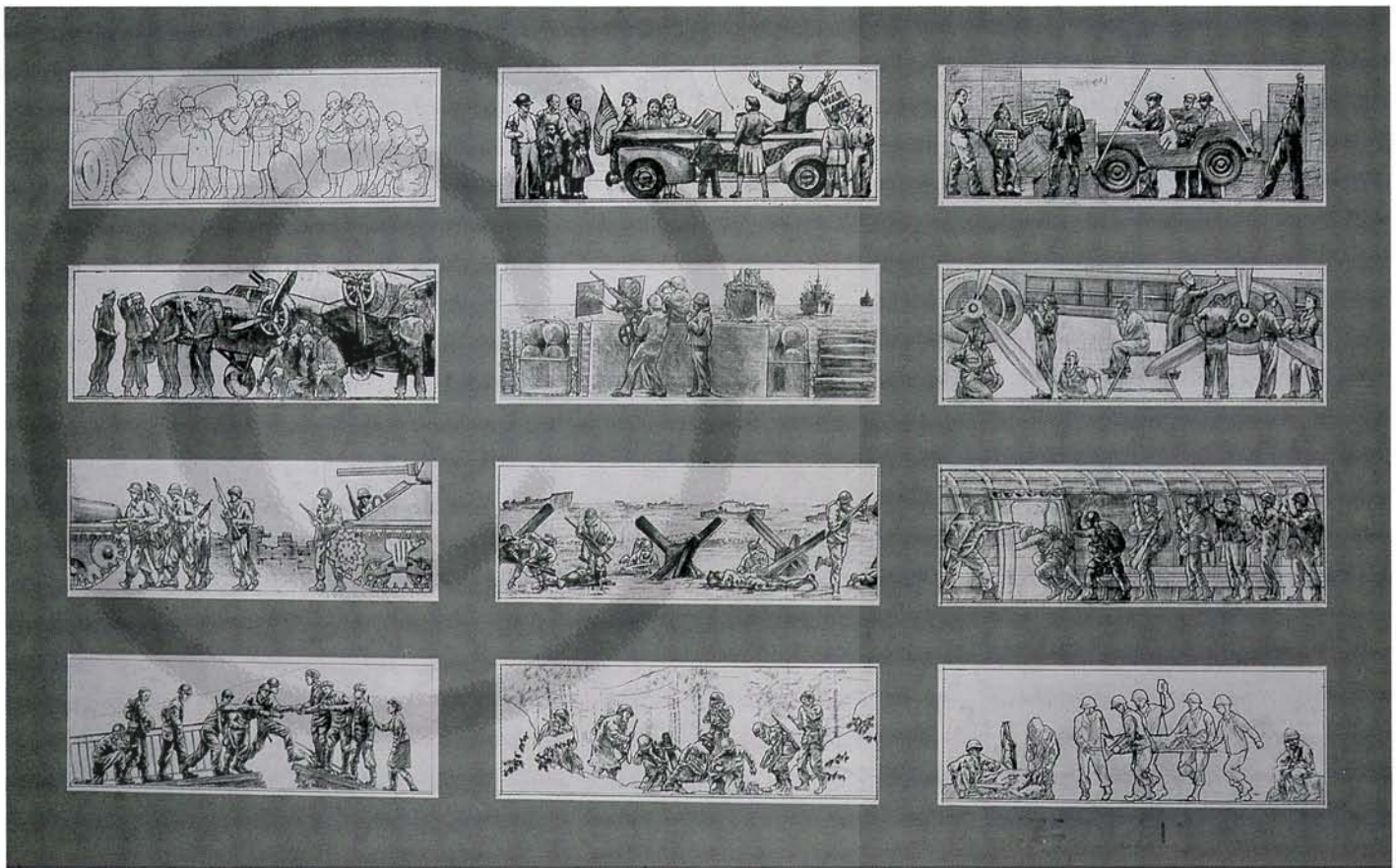
**So you were continually asked as a team to come up with ideas for various elements.**

Yes. And then the bas-reliefs idea just came up. I'm not quite sure whose idea it was. Friedrich had an idea of various things that would happen with the balustrade as you went into the memorial Plaza. One was to do it with figures. I really liked that because there were no other human figures in the memorial at that point; there were the allegorical eagles, wreaths, ropes, stars, and so forth, but no human figures.

There are twelve reliefs on each side, related to the Atlantic and Pacific fronts. The Pacific panels include themes like shipbuilding, agriculture, submarine warfare, naval air war, storming a beach, and jungle warfare. The Atlantic side starts with Lend Lease aid in 1941 and ends with the Russians and Americans meeting at the Elbe. The whole idea behind this was not to tell the story of World War II but to depict the transformation of America caused by World War II. That was an idea suggested by an architect named John Hart who was a project manager at the time for Leo Daly. Everybody thought that was a good way to organize it: to talk about the home front as well as the military aspects of the war.

**Was there pressure from the American Battle Monuments Commission or the military to have some kind of figurative element?**

Well, you know, I think there was a desire to do it, but there was no pressure per se, not on me at any rate.



6 Preparatory drawings for twelve World War II Memorial bas-reliefs related to the Atlantic front

### How did you develop that bas-relief program?

It took about two years to come up with it. Friedrich and I and Ambassador Haydn Williams and the Site and Design Committee. The committee suggested each of the episodes, and we'd try to hammer that out. We went to the National Archives and got some good help there from the woman who is curator of still photography—she happens to be a World War II buff. We looked at hundreds of photos and looked for inspiration there. You know, it's okay to write an idea down on paper, but if you don't have an image that's compelling you don't have anything. So often the image would suggest a change in the program, and we went back and forth between the images and what people thought should be there.

### Were the photographs military photographs?

Yes, they were Office of War Information photographs. There were some things that would jump off the page, like the Joe Rosenthal photograph of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima, which we obviously didn't use, and others less known. We would make drawings (fig. 6) and use the photographs or, like the panel of the Russians and Americans meeting, we would flip the figures around so they would make more sense in our context. Later we had reenactors come in and we reposed everything and then they would give us ideas, too. So we got, I hope, pretty far away from the photos.



7 Clay model for a bas-relief in progress at Kaskey Studio, Brentwood, Maryland, in March 2004 depicting Russian and American soldiers meeting at the Elbe. Photographs of reenactors who posed for the panel can be seen at the base of the relief, and an enlarged photocopy made from one snapshot appears at left

When you found an appropriate photo, you'd do a drawing and then you would submit that to the committee for approval?

Yes, the Site and Design Committee, and then after they approved it we would submit it to the Commission of Fine Arts.

Who was on the Site and Design Committee?

Well, at first, when most of the major decisions were being made, Ambassador Haydn Williams was chairman of the committee. He's a World War II veteran who was an ambassador at large under every president since Eisenhower. They had four other people: Pat Foote, one of the first female generals, now retired; a woman named Helen Fagan who was a Polish concentration camp survivor and had done a Holocaust memorial after coming to the U.S.; Roland Kidder, a Navy vet and author; and Frank Moore, who was an assistant to President Carter and vice president of a Fortune 100 company. Helen Fagan and Haydn Williams were both American Battle Monuments commissioners and the others were administration appointments.

Once you had the drawings for the bas-reliefs, what inspired you to get the reenactors?

Well, that was just a happy accident. I was wondering where I was going to get the uniforms and the know-how about what goes with what. And then an article came out in the *Washington Post* about these reliefs, and I got a call from this guy named Brooks Tegler, who

is a musician, has a swing band, and he is a World War II reenactor who has been collecting uniforms and forties' clothing for the past thirty years. He said, "Do you need help?" And I said, "Damned right I do," because the American Battle Monuments Commission had put me onto some people in Hollywood who were going to loan me this stuff for \$100 a day per uniform, and that was pretty steep. And then I'd have to get the right sizes and models. So when the reenactors called, I said, "Come on over." A half dozen of these regulars would come in and pose for six of the panels at a time; so we would spend three or four days photographing them, and then they'd go away and we'd try to do the sculpture. That was just good luck, because otherwise I don't know how I would have done it.

**So you'd pose them more or less in the same positions as the drawings, which were inspired by World War II photographs?**

I'd show them the drawings and they would say things like, "No, you wouldn't be doing that," or "This uniform doesn't go with that airplane, because this didn't happen until 1943." They know all these things.

**These reenactors were volunteers? They did it for enjoyment?**

I paid them the going rate for models. But they got to use the materials they had been collecting for years. I didn't even know there was such a thing as World War II reenactors. Revolutionary, Civil War, yes. But there are Russian and German World War II reenactors too, Americans who collect this stuff. One or two of them have been to Russia; it's a passion.

**Will they be able to recognize themselves in the panels?**

Oh yes. But with the same six people, we got tired of those heads, so we used other people for some of the heads. But they'll be recognizable.

**Talking about recognizable, how exactly are you working out the period details like insignia and so forth?**

At the cartoon stage, it was vetted by military historians, and they pointed out some of the obvious. Since then I've relied pretty much on the reenactors to keep me out of trouble. I'm sure there will be a lot of gaffes that people are going to point out, but this is a work of art, not an army manual or a history book. I think we avoided some of the more glaring mistakes, but we took liberties, too—for the sake of composition, or if something looked better, draped better.

**Once you got the small drawings approved, the reenactors came in and you photographed them, then blew up the photos to scale by photocopy.**

We made a lot of changes at that point (fig. 7). Photographs provide information but they also can distort things when you use them literally for bas-relief. Every time we finished six panels, the Fine Arts Commission came over so that we could point out the differences between the cartoon [drawing] and the final thing and explain why we needed to make changes.





8 Sculptor Raymond Kaskey works on clay model for a bas-relief depicting Americans celebrating on V-J Day

Historically, sculptors sometimes had assistants who specialized in drapery, hands, etc. How much of the modeling did you do yourself?

My studio really operates as an atelier. I'm the principal designer and planner, and for this project I had three assistants. Aaron Sykes did most of the enlarging of the eagles and the wreaths. Perry Carsley came on after that, and Joanna Blake. All three of them worked on the reliefs. I think I was better at blocking out the figures, making sure they were right spatially. I like working big. Working at this [small] scale is not my cup of tea, but I'm getting better at it. Basically I do hands-on as time permits (fig. 8).

How did you find your assistants?

Aaron had worked on the Leonardo da Vinci horse, which Tallix Foundry created. I found him through Nina Akamu, the sculptor of the Leonardo da Vinci horse and the Japanese American Memorial in Washington. He worked for me for a year, in 2000. Then Perry came on. Perry went to the Schuler School [of Fine Arts] in Baltimore, so he had traditional, old-fashioned training. Aaron went to the Lyme Academy of Fine Arts, a similarly traditional school in Connecticut. Joanna went to Auburn, and while they aren't as traditional, she just does it. She had been working next door doing ornamental modeling, and doing it very well.

**You mentioned that you and your assistants switched off in order to create a uniform style.**

Yes, on the bas-reliefs in particular it had to look like one hand when there were four hands making it. So I tried to resolve that by having everybody work on every aspect. It didn't always work out that way in practice. I would try to come up with the conceptual design and the layout, and later on after we had the photos I would control whatever changes occurred in the design. In the relief, we all discovered that no matter how good your drawing is, it really doesn't count; if it doesn't look good from the peripheral views, it ain't very good. I think I became good at figuring out how to make things look good three dimensionally. Then Joanna Blake, for instance, would come after me and make the eyes look right and so forth.

**Was there any pressure to depict diverse groups of people in the reliefs? Or people doing different things?**

Yes, in the bas-relief panels there is a sort of by-the-numbers representation effort. And we tried to cover all the bases with the type of positions represented, from radioman to paratrooper, but we're limited—twelve panels each to represent the Atlantic and Pacific fronts inevitably left out a lot.

**Was there a suggestion that all elements of the military be present?**

Yes, and that's in the flagpole bases. We had to come up with a flagpole base that had all six service seals on it. The charge was to make this the World War II flagpole base like the flagpole bases in front of the Supreme Court, which are highly ornate. That took about a dozen tries. Friedrich wanted to make the flagpoles a meeting place, and so he put in a circular bench, which also has an inscription on it in granite. Resting on the benches is the flagpole base my studio designed with the service seals. Then there is an architectural shaft that relates to the state pillars, a series of voids. Then at the top it has the arrows and olive branches of the Great Seal that signify peace through strength, and a big globe to symbolize the global nature of the war. It's got a lot of symbolic freight.

**In a more traditional sculptural program of this nature, the baldacchino, eagles, etc. would be one contract, the wreaths would be another contract, and so on. Did you ever have a contract in this way?**

No. In the beginning, from '98, '99, and 2000, I was a consultant, I was called principal artist, and technically a consultant to the Leo Daly office. I just billed for my time. And then when the project got Fine Arts Commission approval, I got a contract with the GSA [U.S. General Services Administration] to do everything sculptural—my studio, Kaskey Studio Inc., did. I had to do it for a fixed price at that point.

**We might close by considering the role of the twenty-first-century sculptor on a project like this. It's still a Beaux-Arts concept—it's architecture and sculpture together, or architectural sculpture.**

Yes, I believe that—that's not a modern idea. I like to think that I have an atelier like Tiffany Studio or the one Augustus Saint-Gaudens had. I'm an architect as well, and collaborating with the architect comes naturally to me, as does farming out aspects such as the enlarging, casting, carving, and so forth, because that is the only way projects of this magnitude can be done. Unlike a lot of other projects like the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt Memorial, which has a lot of sculpture, you know—it was done by five different sculptors—or the Navy Memorial [both in Washington, D.C.], or other similar-scale projects.

**Do you think, as things have worked out, that this memorial is more unified?**

Yes, that is the prize for all this collaboration. People like [baroque sculptor Gian Lorenzo] Bernini worked collaboratively. It didn't put a crimp in my style. When I started out, my first Portlandia sculpture was with Michael Graves. And the architect, Michael Graves, said the building and the sculpture are better off for each other, and that has always been my goal.

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