

Figuring It Out



Photo by Ron Holz.

When asked for the turning point in his career, sculptor Ray Kaskey doesn't waste a moment's thought: "It was Portlandia. I made her and she made me." Certainly the large-scale public commissions he's undertaken since are direct results of the 1983 competition to create the statue that plays off Michael Graves's controversial Postmodern Portlandia Building in Oregon.

Kaskey's winning design was based on the Portland city seal showing a woman in Neo-Classical garb. "She was called Lady Commerce but Graves changed that to Portlandia. I picked up the idea of using the same kind of attributes for the statue that she had on the seal—a trident signifying sea trade and fishing, a sheaf of wheat. . . ." He leans back and swipes at his Beethoven-like mane of prematurely white hair: "Broad civic attributes, you know, not very subtle. But that's what makes them public and accessible."

The project attracted extensive press, and even better, four commissions. "I got two of the jobs I'm working on now from people who read about it in *People*," he grins sardonically.

Now Kaskey and his assistant, sculptor George Carr, are deep into the creation of sculpture for what Kaskey calls "probably the most ornamented Neo-Classical building of this century"—Chicago's new Harold Washington Public Library by Hammond Beeby and Babka. His design for the rooftop calls for five enormous owls, symbols of wisdom, placed above the massive cornice of this palace of books. The barn owls at each of the building's four corners, and a central great horned owl with 18-foot wingspan, will be fabricated in either aluminum or fiberglass.

Chicago has been good to Kaskey—he's also just finished an elaborate fountain for Kohn Pedersen Fox's Burnham Plaza building, again based on the city seal ("I figured if it worked once it might work twice").

Another fountain is on the drawing board, this time for the Charlotte, North Carolina, airport. It will center around a large bronze and granite figure of Queen Charlotte, George III's wife, for whom the city was named. Kaskey intends to portray her in mythological terms, rather than "true to life." And in Pittsburgh he's commemorating Art Rooney, the former Steelers owner who died a year ago, in bronze. "He's definitely a mythic figure for Pittsburgh."

Kaskey's career may also be the stuff myth is made of. Trained as an architect at Carnegie-Mellon and Yale, he taught seven years at the University of Maryland before being denied tenure. That led to six years working as an architect until, in 1967, he became interested in architectural ornament and started sculpting in earnest.

Why the figure? "I looked around Washington at all the statues and found that I liked them."

At the moment he's awaiting the final design of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial planned for Washington. If there's an emblematic element, it will be his.

Does all this activity mean we're entering a new era of commemorative sculpture and memorials? Kaskey throws back his head, one outflung arm embracing the clutter of the studio. "I certainly hope so," he laughs, "I don't see it particularly now, but I hope it will be." ■

—Lee Fleming