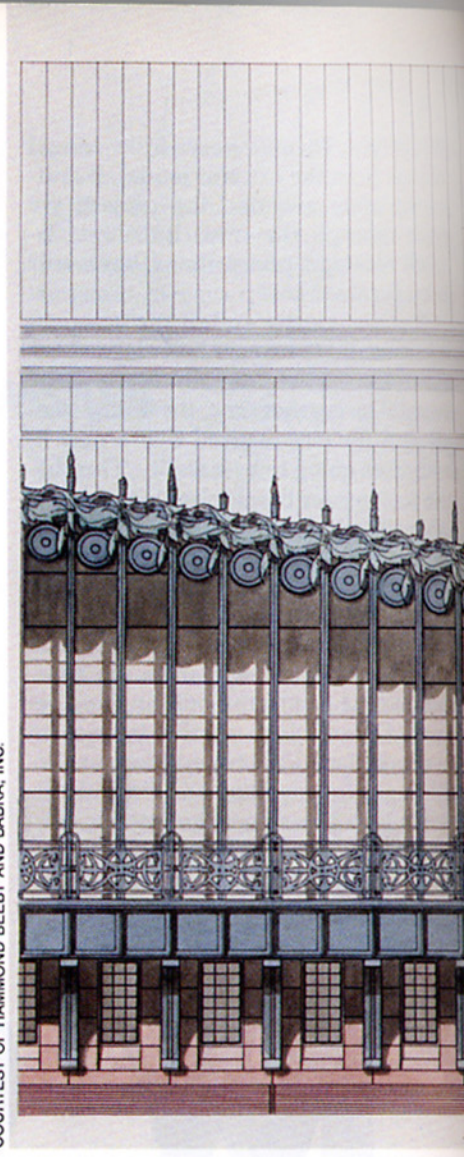
By Kent Bloomer

SPATIAL LANGUAGE

The Ornament of the Harold Washington Library



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It is apparent that, contrary to popular assumption, the life of architectural ornament did not succumb to the currents of the 20th-century rhetoric governing architectural design. Yet few would deny that the advocates of ornament were effectively silenced within the curriculum of architecture schools from about 1950 to at least 1965. In most schools, that silence has persisted to the present day.

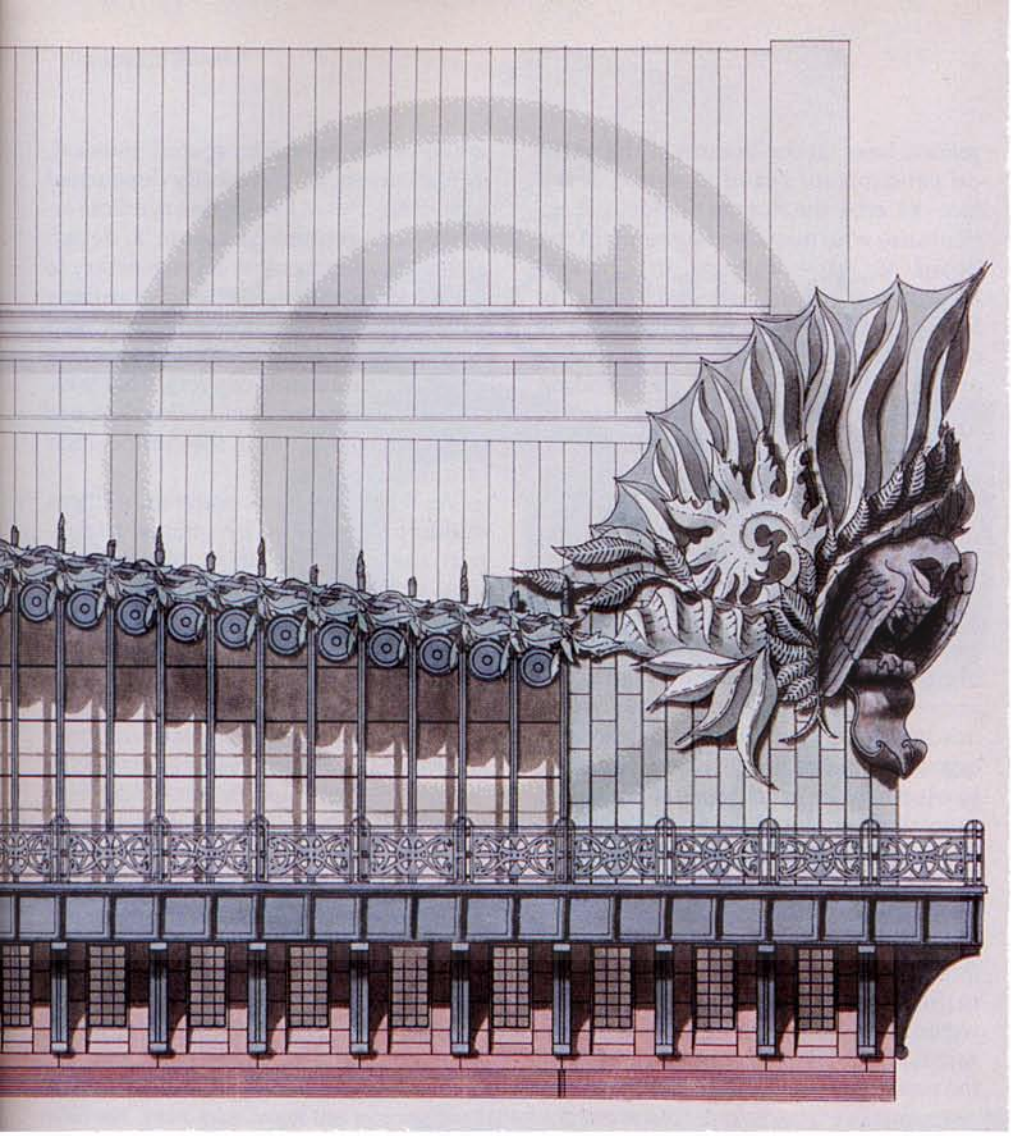
In 1965, Thomas Beeby was writing a paper[1] at Yale University in which he suggested that the early Modern masters did not actually abandon ornament but, rather, moved away from the millennial practice of "structure-ornamented" to a procedure approaching "ornament-constructed," i.e., a condition in which the entire building performs as a free-standing element-of-ornament somewhat like a modern, autonomous, and abstract piece of sculpture. But what is an element-of-ornament?

Ornament may be understood as a spatial language that provided "perhaps the first alphabet of human thought to come into close contact with space."[2] That alphabet or, we might say, "vocabulary" belongs to a communication system in which the basic linguistic elements are the *ornaments*—figures or things that represent certain actions originating in the larger world beyond the building. To become a property of architecture, the figures of ornament must grammatically combine with the most fundamental expressions of the structural and spatial forms of the building. Thus, the ornaments receive an impulse from the structure of the building while simultaneously giving additional significance to the architecture. The process of combining figures and actions found outside of structure with figures and actions innate to the forms of construction creates a species of hybridistic figures that may be classified as *conventionalized-ornaments*.

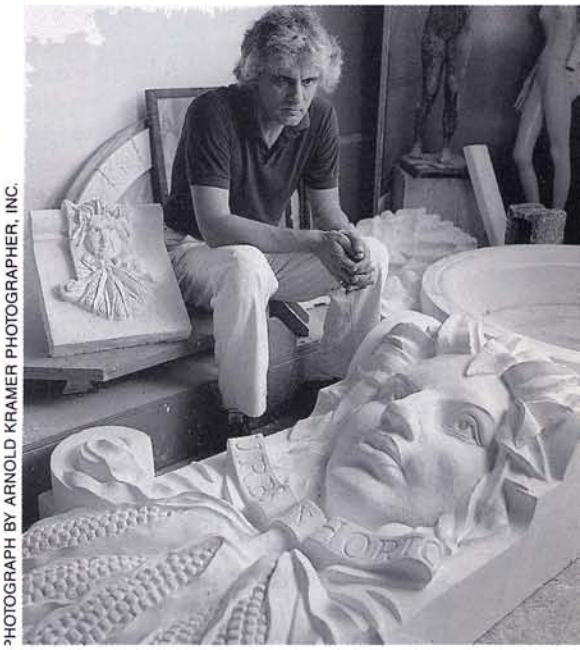
While Beeby observed that there was a powerful and fashionable trend away from the distribution of conventionalized architectural ornaments in the designs of late-20th-century architecture, he also understood that "ornament constructed or structuralized" must necessarily lead to a drastic reduction in the narrative potential of architecture by limiting its figural expressions to shapes derived from typical construction. Thus, in the library, he chose the strategy of "structure-ornamented." In this manner, he could signify properties of a memorial library with an expanded and transcendent vocabulary.

The narrative program of the Harold Washington Library Center expresses its function as a repository of a timeless collection of books and as a memorial to the culture, place, and persons who dedicated the collection to Chicago. The Classical language of architecture was chosen to reflect a slice of time from ancient Greece to the present, commensurate with the traditions of scholarship underwriting the history of Western literature. Furthermore, Classicism provides the richest extant vocabulary of conventionalized ornaments in the Western world, many of which, in one form or another, can already be found in the existing architecture of Chicago.

To articulate the Classical idea, as well as to provide an economic plan, the entire building is conceived in the outline of an immense Greek temple. The ancient columns are replaced with a rhythmic colonnade of vertical pendants suspended from giant festoons immediately below a bracketed ornamental railing, which occupies the horizontal band of space once assigned to the entablature above the ancient capitals. Upon the



An owl with fanning palmettes (left), emblematic of wisdom and life, marks the roof corner. An eave detail of vegetation (bottom and left) intertwines spearlike mullions, subduing their military imagery. Below, sculptor Raymond Kaskey with his face of Ceres.



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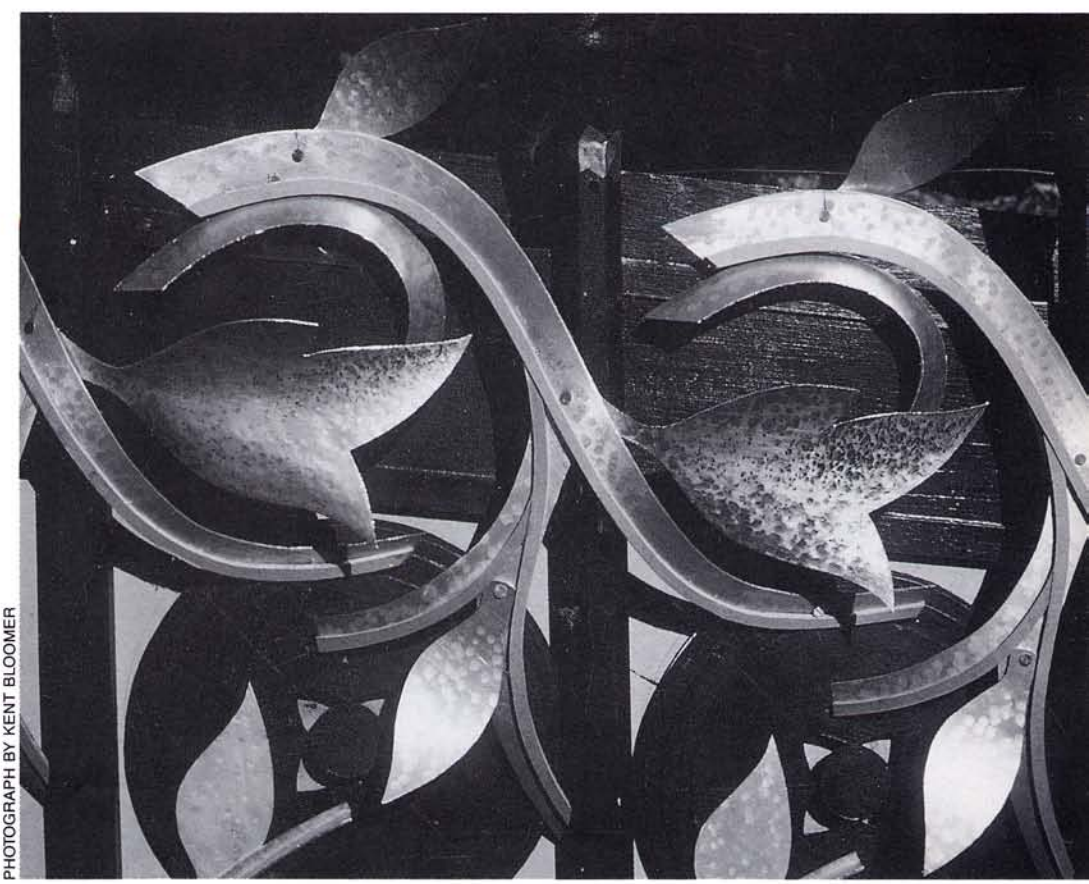
pediments and at the corners of the roof are metal sculptures representing the ancient Greek antefix and acroterion silhouetted by the immense feathered outline of palmettes, which are probably descended from conventionalized representations of leaves of the ancient Egyptian lotus. In ancient Greece, a burgeoning of foliage above a temple form expressed a renewal of life after a death or a sacrifice. Foliated palmettes often embellished the roofs of monuments in which venerable beings (perhaps the authors and books belonging to this library) are enshrined.

Signaling the entrance and guarding the four corners of the roof are the figures of five owls, emblematic of wisdom. A horned owl prepares for flight above the principal State Street entrance while grasping a book from under which leaves sprout and curl up into the foliated eave surrounding the library. The eave unites the roof ornaments into a cartouche that rhythmically engages and absorbs the finials of the fluted vertical mullions. The mullions, configured as spears between shields, are reminiscent of designs by Frederick Schinkel representing warriors standing at attention along the horizon.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KENT BLOOMER

However, by fluting the shafts of the spears and overcoming the finials with vegetation, the military image is rendered subordinate to the force and wisdom of nature. Centered within the palmettes over the pediments on the narrow sides of the library, seedpods take the place of the owls. The seeds replace the book to speak of efflorescence and the growth of knowledge, while paying homage to the legacy of Louis Sullivan.

Like Sullivan's Wainwright Building in St. Louis, the material expressions of the library are most massive at the granite base and lighten gradually as they move through brick walls to a glimmering glass curtain wall in the pediment. The glass curtain wall typifies modern technology and has the potential of being fantastical in its image of weightlessness and reflectivity. The familiar glass and aluminum mullions provide an ideal material setting for the location of owls and ethereal foliation that we might associate poetically with the sky. Indeed, the transition of the curtain wall into the fabric and domain of the roof ornaments belongs to the modern age, while obeying the ancient principle of positioning ornaments at the joints and boundaries of idealized vernacular construction.

Surrounding the entire granite base, like a chain, a guilloche geometrically anticipates the foliated scrollwork above. Within the stone arches over the entrances, the spiraling geometry of voussoirs begin to leaf inwardly toward their repeating vortexes. These formal and urbane street-level ornaments set the stage for the allegory that unfolds as the structure ascends.

That allegory, inspired by Classical memorials, also proclaims the "garden" in which the City is located. Above the granite base, at the bottom of the vertical pendants (or spandrel strips), is the face of Ceres, the Roman Goddess of agriculture, who may also be found on the Board of Trade Building in Chicago. Wearing a collar inscribed *"Urbs in Horto,"* she is necklaced with husks of corn. These icons represent the wealth of the outermost regions surrounding Chicago in which agriculture has replaced the prairie that Sullivan described as an emblem of pride, fertility, power, and graciousness.[3]

Rising continuously for nearly 80 feet within the vertical pendants are cast-stone stalks of corn, which terminate at a roundel encasing the head of the Windy City in the form of a Putto blowing air. Draped between the roundels are enormous cast-stone festoons of white oak leaves representing the official Chicago tree. Burgeoning from within the oak leaves is an abundance of fruits and vegetables centered by the medallion original to the old Chicago Public Library.

The intent of ornamenting the physical structure of modern building is to pursue the greatest wealth of spatial language innate to architecture. We know that, prior to the radical focus on the articulation of tectonic elements that has typified so much of our late-20th-century building, the practice of architecture maintained the grammar and legacy to deliver narrative content in the form of representational elements. The phenomenon of language, whether it is phonetic, spatial, musical, or mathematical, is critically dependent upon a lexicon of intelligible symbols arranged in a grammatical form. To design architectural ornament, it is necessary to gather, conventionalize, and distribute super-added or adventitious spatial symbols, many of which have been formulated over thousands of years. That is exactly what a writer does in the choice of words and grammar in the composition of a text.

As Beeby has demonstrated, modern building can indeed be utilized to support the millenial life of ornament as long as the linguistic logic, rather than merely the structural "facts" of Western architectural Classicism, is understood.

Formal and urbane voussoir panels located over the library's entrances introduce an ornamental allegory that unfolds as the structure ascends.

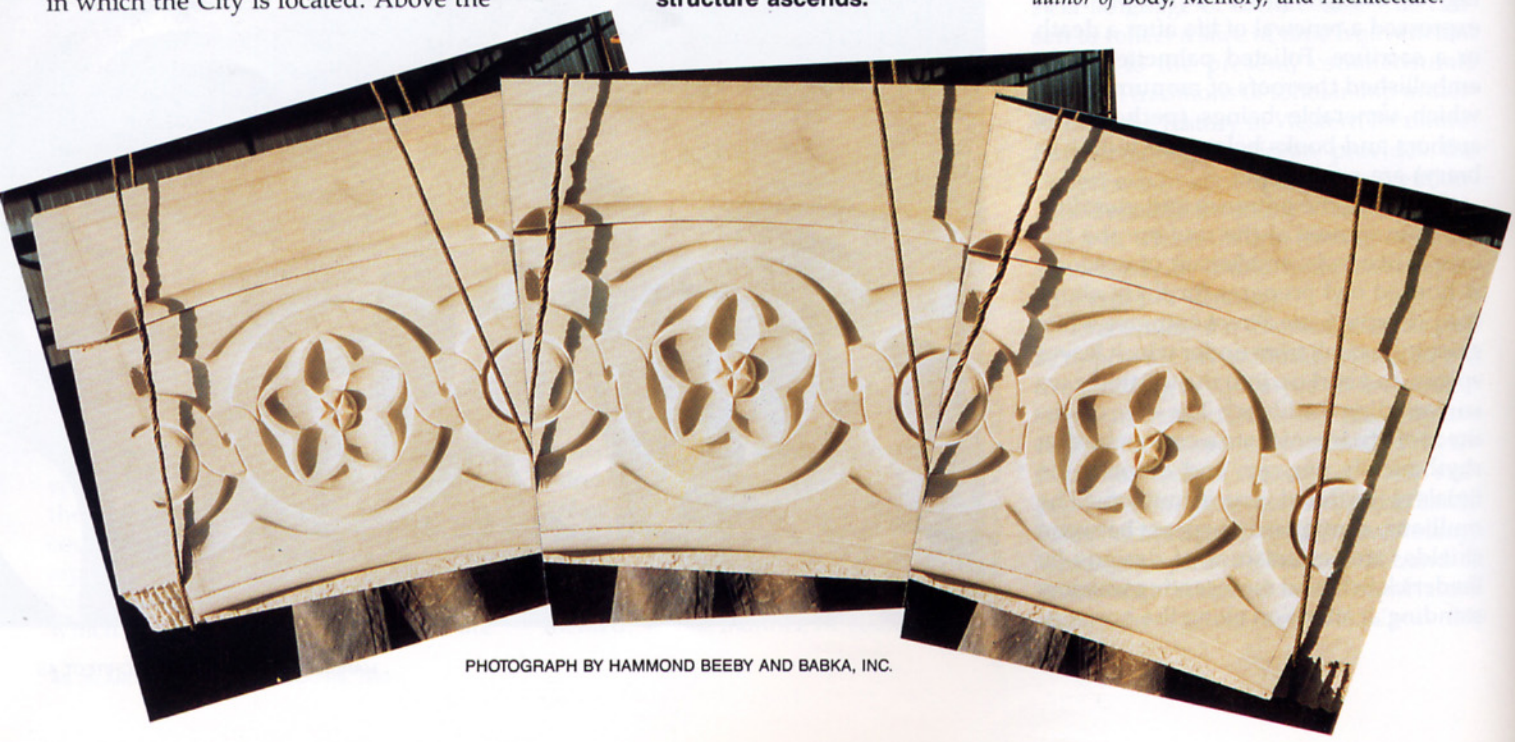
Footnotes

1. Paper ultimately published as; Thomas Beeby, "The Grammar of Ornament, Ornament as Grammar." *VIA III, The Journal of the Graduate School of Fine Arts,* University of Pennsylvania, 1977.
2. Henri Focilon, *The Life Forms of Art.* Wittenborn, Schultz Inc., New York, 1948, p. 18.
3. Louis Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats & Other Writings.* Dover Publications, New York, 1979, p. 110.

Attributes

The concept and architectural scheme of the ornaments were conceived by Thomas Beeby as they appeared on the competition model. The narrative was developed by Beeby and sculptors Kent Bloomer and Raymond Kaskey. The ornaments provided for the library were developed and modeled by Bloomer and Kaskey as follows: The antefix's and acroterion's palmettes and foliation, foliated eave, finials, shields, cornice railing, and seedpods were developed and modeled by Bloomer. The owls, guilloche, voussoirs, Ceres, cornstalks, Putto blowing air, and festoons were developed and modeled by Kaskey.

Kent Bloomer, adjunct professor of architecture at Yale University, is an architect and sculptor. He is the co-author of Body, Memory, and Architecture.



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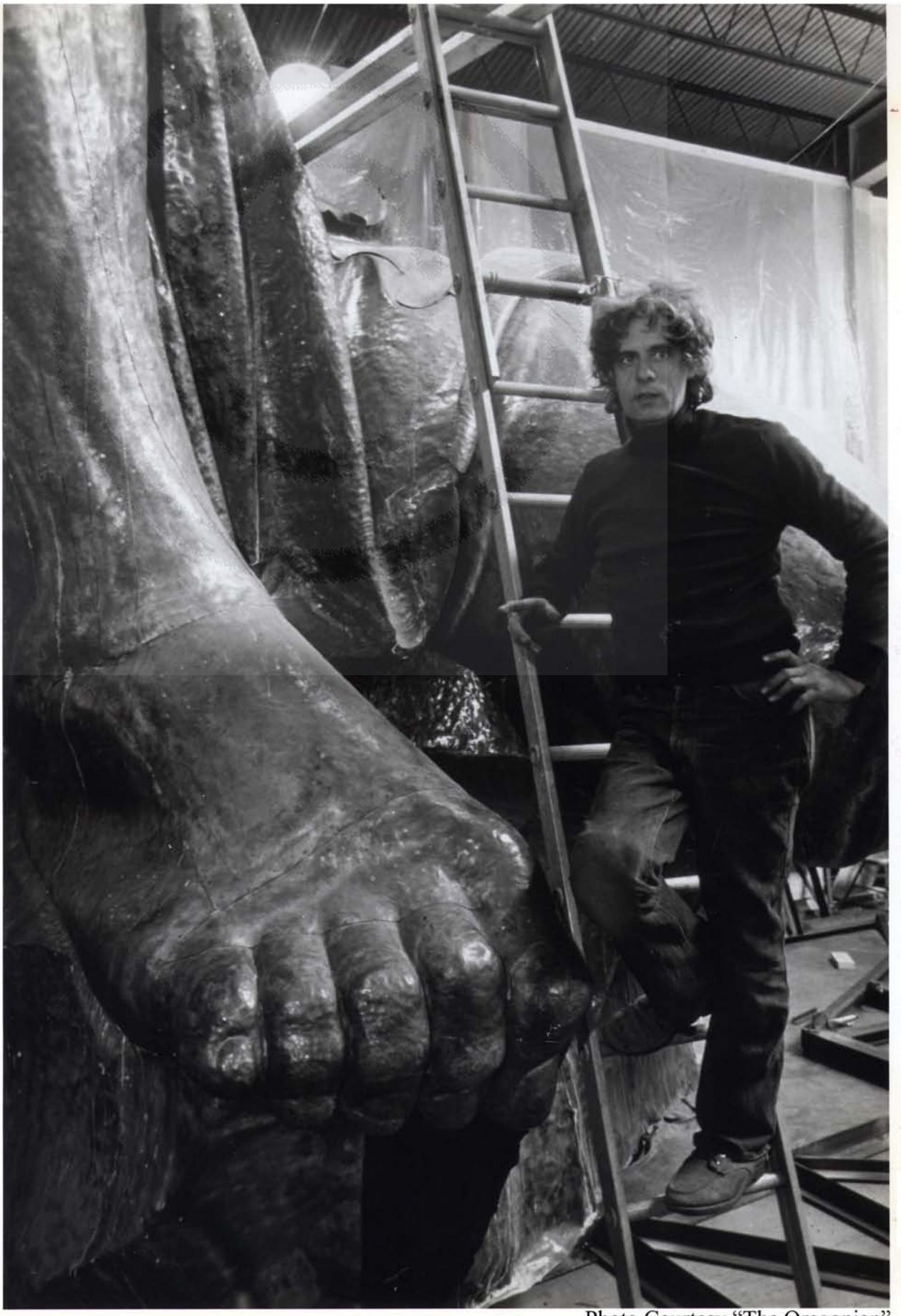

Photo Courtesy "The Oregonian"