

A short history of the making of the Rémillard Angel

(a copy of the “Angel of Grief” by William Wetmore Story
in the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome)

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In the fall of 2002, James C. Smith, then president of the Campbell Monument Company in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, came to Rome at the request of Lucien Rémillard, our client, to photograph and measure the Story angel in the Non-Catholic Cemetery. M. Rémillard was then the CEO of RCI Environment Inc. (a waste management company) and the owner of the St. James Hotel, in Old Montreal. We were never certain whether he had seen the Angel in Rome in person or only pictures of it.

During the three days that Jim spent in Rome, he took hundreds of detailed photos and wrote precise measurements on each of them. When he returned to Belleville, we took these pictures, built a wooden platform conforming to the base and plinth of the original and began to make a plaster model based on the photographs. In order for the family to determine the final scale of the sculpture, several different-sized plywood cut-outs of the front profile were taken to the gravesite for comparison. After much deliberation it was decided that the final work was to be one-and-a-half times the size of the original.

Georgian marble from a quarry not far from Atlanta (the same marble as used for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.) was chosen. For aesthetic reasons M. Rémillard did not want granite used, and the Georgian marble was found to have low water-absorption properties which were better suited to a Canadian climate than all other marbles we had investigated. It is a dolomitic marble, which is more resistant to acid rain than traditional calcitic marble sculptural stone such as Carrara marble. It was planned that the final sculpture would be assembled from five separate pieces. This was for a variety of reasons: the difficulty of replicating Mr. Story’s incredible carving in the small space available to him, coupled with the limitations on the size of the blocks which could be taken from the quarry, as well as the complexity of the final setting process. The main block would be the rear two-thirds of the base, and the torso, head, right arm and wings of the angel. Another block would alone form the remaining third of the base. A third block would be the plinth on which she rests her arm and head. The last two were to be the back foot and the left arm.



(a) blocks before carving (b) the plaster model (left) and main block during carving

The reasons for the separate foot were two-fold: the extra 8-10 inches of stone would have meant the block would have had to be larger, which was not feasible, and the final installation would have been extremely difficult with this one member dangling unsupported at the rear (we had nightmares of the crane lowering her, touching down the foot first, even lightly, and having it break off). So we decided to attach the back foot under a fold of the gown, after everything had been completely set.

As for the other blocks, I came up with the idea that we could make the plinth separately, pin with stainless rods and epoxy glue the front part of the base and accurately carve the larger block, leaving a gap a $1/16$ - $1/8$ th inch greater than the height of the plinth. We would then slide the plinth in (on a scattering of sandblast abrasive, as it turned out), using fork lifts and car jacks. Then we would attach the already carved left arm (after she had been set on site) beneath the sleeve of the gown, again using a stainless steel pin and epoxy glue.

The model and the carving took almost nine months. I worked full-time on it while my co-worker, Peter LeBaron, split his time between this and his other responsibilities etching headstones for the company. Peter carved both wings entirely, as well as the head, right arm and much of the laurel branch. I carved both front and rear bases, the folds, torso and plinth, and did the final work on the feet and the left arm which had been carved, almost to completion, by Mr. Smith (he had also worked on the model with me, and had done all the original drawings and ordering of the stone).

Because the final sculpture was to be one-and-a-half times the size of the model, we decided to use horizontal laser lines as the comparative guide for carving (the lines, which you can see in some photos, were 2" apart on the model and 3" apart on the stone).



Vertical laser lines were projected from the centre-lines of each and then measured from there (often with the use of a carpenter's square). I removed much of the stone – up to a limit I believed to be close to the final surface – in a manner that resembles, to me at least, hillside rice-farms stepped down from the top. After this was done to our satisfaction, the excess stone – the steps – were removed and, once the greater shapes (masses) had been laid out, the folds were then carved into them.

We worked for much of the time with diamond blades attached to angle-grinders (the kind they use in auto body-shops). Most of these blades were 4 1/2" in diameter, but I often used 7" and 9" blades to carve larger flat surfaces (i.e. the bases) while once again using laser-line projections to facilitate staying level at all times. After many of the larger areas had been carved, we switched to working with pneumatic hammers (mostly Cuturis from Massa, Italy) and chisels of various sizes, finally smoothing everything out with Italian rifflers.

At last in May 2003 we were ready to set. A large grey granite base was prepared at the site. Because of the particular hilly location, a very large crane was required to lift her off the truck and set her down gently (I believe the crane was rated at 80 tons). We had to face another difficulty during setting. Because the sculpture was so heavy (over 8 tons), very large straps had to be wrapped beneath the base with which to lift her. These straps were nearly 1/2" thick. It was going to be impossible to set the sculpture down on boards thicker than that, take out the straps and then afterwards pull out the boards. Leaving a gap that large between the marble and granite bases would also have looked ugly. I had once heard from an old cemetery manager that, when large stones were brought in on horse-drawn wagons and hoisted with chains and pulleys attached to a lumber tripod, the only way to extract the chains and have the stone settle down closer to the base was to set it down first on blocks of ice, take out the chains and then let the ice melt with the stone lowering down naturally. So this is what we did. We froze

small pie-plates of water in our freezers at home, put them in dry ice and brought them to Montreal. Even though we made a wooden frame to hold it steady, the angel did slide around a bit on the melting ice once the straps were removed. Fortunately, we three sculptors and a few of the onlookers lent a hand to push it around until the ice melted, and we got it to rest almost exactly where we had hoped. We then attached the foot and arm as I mentioned earlier, and it has been there ever since in Montreal's "Côte des Neiges" cemetery.

Photos of the Rémillard angel have been published in the large colour hardcover book put out by the cemetery itself (a photo of the angel is on the back cover) and in a book about Québec cemetery history: "Cimetière: Patrimoine pour les vivants" by Jean Simard and François Brault. She also features prominently on the cemetery's web site at:

<http://www.cimetierenotredamedesneiges.ca/en/research/>

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