

Sculptor fondly recalls making Charlotte art

NEIGHBORHOODS
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If you've passed through Charlotte/Douglas International Airport or navigated the city's center at Trade and Tryon, you've undoubtedly seen Raymond Kaskey's magnificent outdoor bronze statues, "Queen Charlotte" and the four statues at Independence Square.

While Kaskey's name may not be immediately recognizable to many Charlotteans, his work is seen and enjoyed by tens of thousands of residents and visitors daily.

The sculptor is internationally known and heralded for his work on the National World War II Memorial architectural sculptures at the National Mall in Washington and a growing body of large-scale civic artwork, including "George Washington at Mt. Vernon," "Justice Delayed, Justice Denied" at the U.S. Courthouse in Alexandria, Va., and "Portlanda" in Portland, Ore.

Flanking each corner of Trade and Tryon Streets in uptown Charlotte are four 5,000-pound bronze statues resting 25 feet high on granite pedestals. Kaskey said he was tapped for the project as a result of his earlier work in creating "Queen Charlotte" for display atop the large, outdoor fountain at Charlotte/Douglas International Airport.

Based in the Washington area, Kaskey recalled fondly his time in Charlotte when I recently spoke with him.

"It was a pleasure to collaborate with a group of private citizens who showed such an interest in their community," Kaskey said.

He was referring to members of the Queen's Table, the philanthropic group that provided the statues as a gift to the city in the mid-1990s.

"Charlotte's community leaders apparently enjoyed working with me, liked my work and wanted someone who could help capture in artwork the history and background of the city's origins," Kaskey said.

His work often follows in the genius loci tradition, drawing its form, content and power from historical, cultural and social context of a particular setting. Kaskey did considerable research on the origins of the Queen City and incorporated his findings into his final design, he said.

H. Woodward "Woody" Middleton is a principal architect with SFL+A Architects, a longtime Charlotte resident and a member of the Queen's Table.

"Many in the community felt the square had become fragmented, with no real definition," Middleton said. "We worked with Ray on 'Queen Charlotte' at the airport and were very pleased with his work and approach. He was the ideal choice for the four statues on the square.

"So much historical detail is

incorporated into these works, from the Hornet's Nest, a Revolutionary War reference, at the base of the 'Future' statue, to the feather-encircled eagle on the transportation statue representing air travel. We couldn't have been more pleased with the results."

Three of the four figures represent important components of Charlotte's past and the city's economic growth.

■ **"Commerce"** depicts a 19th-century prospector panning for gold. A whimsical Kaskey feature is found in the likeness of the secondary figure in this piece. Look closely and you'll see a strong resemblance to Alan Greenspan, the former Federal Reserve chairman. This figure is a nod to Charlotte's strong banking ties. Middleton said that when the former Fed chairman was in Charlotte some years back, he made a special visit to the statue on the square to check on his likeness.

■ **"Industry"** features a female mill worker from Charlotte's early textile factories. Children at her knees represent child laborers, who often worked alongside their parents before the establishment of child labor laws.

■ **"Transportation"** shows an African-American man representing the builders of Charlotte's first railroads. Kaskey said this figure was his favorite of the four because it is so well-defined and features subtleties in its context. Of particular note is the clasping of the man's hands with interlocking fingers into the shape of a "U."

"This element was inspired by a specific train coupling in use at the time," Kaskey said. "The number on the train engine depicted in the statue is also the same number of the actual train engine from the period, the Charlotte, on display at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington."

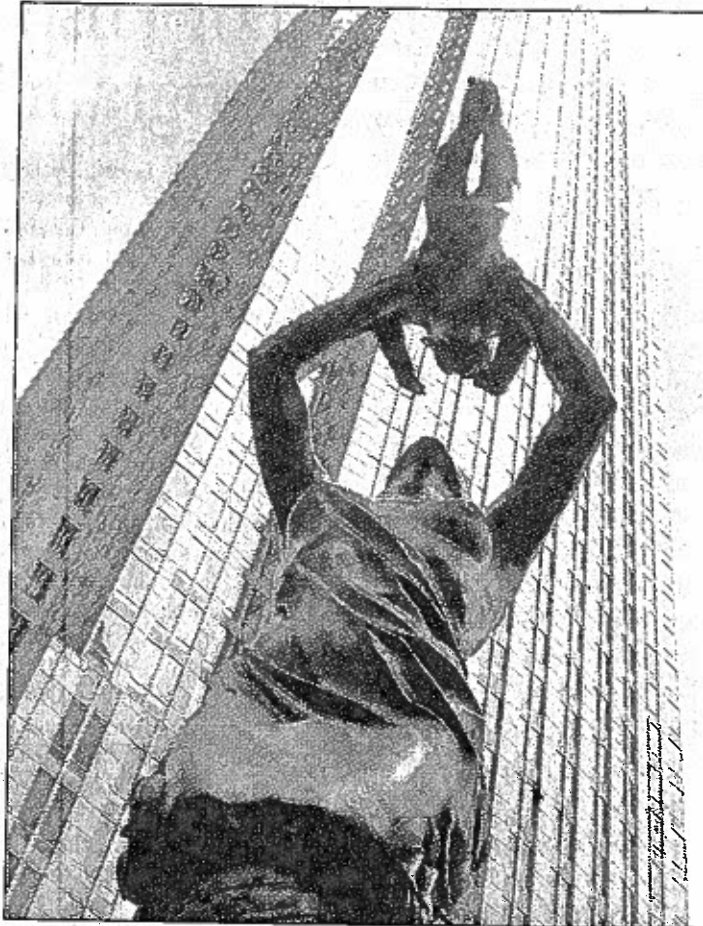
■ **"Future"** is the fourth statue. Each of the other three statues directly face this statue, representing the look to building upon the city's past for a strong future. Kaskey said the model for the primary figure in this piece was actually a woman from Charlotte who posed for him in his D.C.-area studio, the only nonprofessional model he used.

Kaskey said the bronze works were cast at a foundry in Pennsylvania, assembled into two separate parts per statue and shipped to Charlotte for the final installation.

"Just about everything that could go wrong during that weekend did," Kaskey said. "We had trouble with the welding equipment and some of the local help disappeared one day after lunch. We had a heck of a time rousting the local contractor on a Sunday morning, but it all worked out OK in the end."

The city of Charlotte is certainly better off for his efforts.

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COURTESY OF THE QUEEN'S TABLE

Ray Kaskey's "Future" is one of the four statues at Independence Square in uptown Charlotte.