

# Nineteenth Century



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# Preservation Diary

## The New Study Gallery at Chesterwood

Donna Hassler and Dana Pilson

This year marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Chesterwood as a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is the only artist's home and studio in the portfolio of 28 historic sites of the National Trust which distinguishes itself, past and present, as a site of creativity and inspiration for one of America's foremost public sculptors, Daniel Chester French (1850-1931). French is best known for the "bookends" of his career: *Minute Man* (1875, Concord, M.A.), and the seated figure of Abraham Lincoln for the *Lincoln Memorial*

(1922, Washington, D.C.). In addition to these distinguished works, during his prolific career French created more than 100 public sculptures located throughout the country and in Paris, France. Many of these works were modeled in his studio at Chesterwood before they were cast in bronze at a foundry or carved into marble by the Piccirilli brothers, Italian artisans who operated a studio in the Bronx, New York. The new biography, *Monument Man: The Life and Art of Daniel Chester French* by Harold Holzer, reviewed in this issue of *Nineteenth Century* magazine, includes a detailed geographical listing of the sculptor's public monuments and memorials, published for the first time.



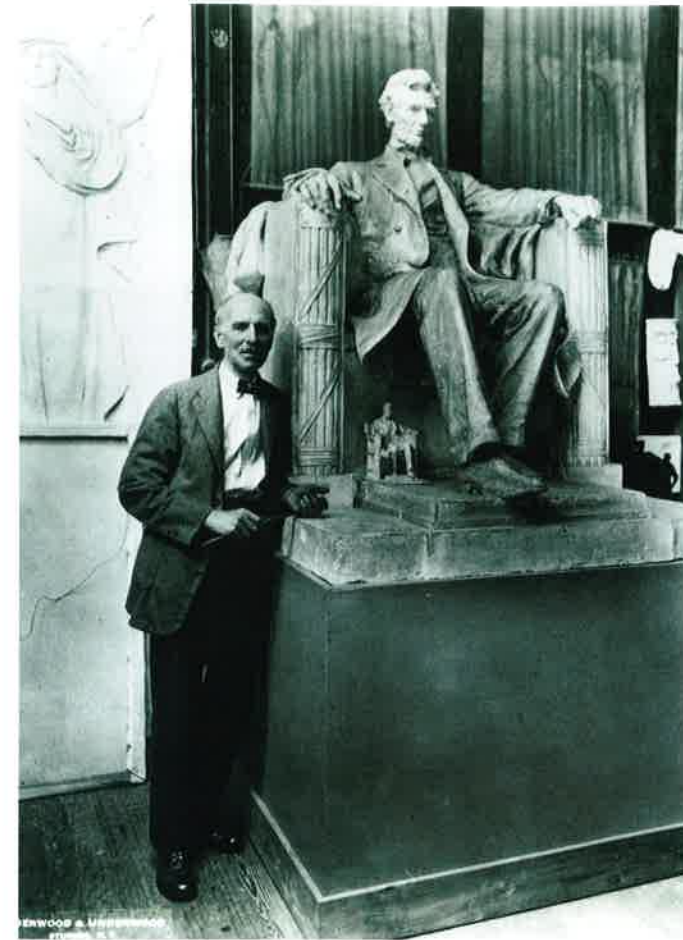
Chesterwood, the former home of Daniel Chester French. Stockbridge, Massachusetts.

Daniel Chester French and his wife, Mary Adams French, had purchased the Chesterwood property in 1896. The following year French enlisted the architect Henry Bacon (1866-1924) to design a purpose-built studio, with north-facing skylights and a 26-foot-high ceiling. When the original house on the property soon proved too cramped, Bacon designed a new English Georgian/colonial revival-style Residence for the family. French, his wife, and their daughter Margaret (born in Concord, MA, in 1889 and known as "Peggy") lived in New York City during the winter and spent idyllic summers in Stockbridge. French divided his time between tending the gardens and sculpting in the studio, often employing his daughter as a model. Mary entertained callers at weekly "at home" teas on the studio piazza.

As a young adult, Margaret French was at the center of the Stockbridge social scene. She had debuted in New York in 1909,

and throngs of young people from the city traveled to Chesterwood for weekends and extended stays. She entertained magnificently: during the day her guests played tennis and croquet, frolicked on the lawn, and enjoyed picnics and tea parties. Evenings were filled with revelry: charades and masquerades in the Studio, wine tastings and dinner parties, and late nights in the garden, lit by Japanese lanterns. In 1921, Margaret French married the Philadelphia-born William Penn

Cresson (1873-1932) in Taormina, Italy. An architect, diplomat, lawyer, professor, and writer, "Penn" Cresson had helped her recover from severe depression brought on by personal losses during World War I. The couple spent summers at the Dormouse, a small cottage down the road from Chesterwood. Having lost a child at birth in 1922, Margaret French Cresson turned her focus to involvement in the Stockbridge community and her own sculpting career. A talented sculptor in her own right, she achieved recognition for her charming bas-reliefs of children and realistic likenesses of artists, actors, and Stockbridge luminaries. She also received important commissions for memorial tablets and portraits, including *James Monroe* (1926, James Monroe Memorial Library, Fredericksburg, V.A.) and *Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd* (1928, bronze, formerly Corcoran Gallery, now in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.).



L to R: Daniel Chester French (1850-1931) in his studio at Chesterwood, with a model of Abraham Lincoln for the *Lincoln Memorial*. John C. Johansen (1876-1964), *Daniel Chester French*, 1926.

French died at Chesterwood in October, 1931, and Penn died a year later, in 1932. After Mary French's death in 1939, Margaret French Cresson inherited the house, studio, and all of the contents. She continued to spend summers in the Berkshires, but soon began to take in boarders. She leased the main residence and other buildings on the property to help pay the bills for maintaining the services of a caretaker and household staff. At one point, she told the caretaker not to buy any seeds to plant in the formal gardens, for she would later purchase the flowers if needed.

After she inherited Chesterwood, Margaret French Cresson mainly worked towards preserving her father's artistic legacy. She wrote a biography of Daniel Chester French, *Journey into Fame* (1947, Harvard University Press) and published numerous magazine and newspaper articles about his work. She amassed a collection of French's small preparatory studies and larger working models that had been languishing in museum basements and foundries. In 1954, she took the first step in the establishment of Chesterwood as a museum by donating the studio and eighteen acres to the Trustees of Reservations, a private, Massachusetts-based conservation and preservation group. Based on a mutual decision with the Trustees, in 1962 Margaret French Cresson decided to transfer ownership of the Chesterwood to the newly-created Daniel Chester French Foundation. In 1968, Margaret

French Cresson and the Foundation ceded the property (except the residence, to which she retained life rights) to the National Trust for Historic Preservation as a memorial to Daniel Chester French and the classic period of sculpture in the United States. After her death in 1973, the residence was also transferred to the National Trust.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, a former resource room and storage facility in an original carriage barn has been transformed into a climate-controlled exhibition gallery. It features approximately 150 rarely exhibited objects from Chesterwood's collection, including paintings; completed works in plaster, marble and bronze; and sketches, maquettes, and models created as preliminary studies for larger public commissions. As part of the Luce Foundation grant Monica Berry, Art Conservator, conserved many of the objects slated to be included in the new gallery. Jeff Daly of Jeff Daly Design designed the exhibition space and Anita Jorgensen of Anita Jorgensen Lighting Design created the lighting design.

The exhibition illuminates the development of Daniel Chester French's work and provides a window into the artist's working methods, techniques and creative processes. Works are presented in chronological order, beginning with highlights from the first half of Daniel Chester French's career, including two plaster, neoclassical-style portrait reliefs of French's older sisters,



L to R: Margaret French Cresson (1889-1973), *Girl with the Curls*, c. 1920. Marble. Bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.1431. *William Penn Cresson*, 1923. Bronze, marble base, NT 69.38.663. *Frances Thankful Warner*, 1929. Gilt bronze relief, NT 69.38.654. Gifts of the Daniel Chester French Foundation. Photos by Lisa Vollmer.

Harriette "Hattie" Van Mater French (1870) and Sarah "Sallie" Flagg French (1869); a bronze reduction of the *Minute Man*, (1875, Minute Man National Historical Park, Concord, M.A.); maquettes of *Architecture* and *Painting and Sculpture* (1896-97, Richard Morris Hunt Memorial, N.Y.); two different bronze casts of the head of *Mourning Victory* from the *Melvin Memorial* (1907, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, M.A.); and a bronze working model of the standing figure of *Abraham Lincoln* for the Nebraska State Capital (1910, Lincoln, N.E.). The exhibition continues around the room featuring works from the second half of the artist's career and includes the bronze working models of the *First Division Memorial* (1923, Washington, D.C.) and the *Spirit of Life* for the *Spencer Trask Memorial* (1922, Congress Park, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.); and plaster working models for the *Manhattan Bridge* groups (1914, final works now at the Brooklyn Museum, N.Y.). Placed among these works are lesser known plaster studies, small bronzes, and reliefs that invite exploration and add depth to the illustrated history of French's productive career in his New York and Chesterwood studios.

Oil paintings are arrayed along one wall of the gallery. It may come as a surprise to see that Daniel Chester French was just as talented with a brush and paint as he was with a modeling tool and clay. His masterful oil portraits of his daughter, Margaret and niece, Dorothy Schoonmaker (1890-1984), have never been exhibited. Also featured are works by French's artist friends,

including portraits of French and his daughter by the American Impressionist Robert Vonnoh (1858-1933). Highlights in this section also include French's sculpted portrait busts in plaster and marble of family and friends, beginning with one of his earliest portraits of his father, Henry Flagg French (1813-1885). Also included is a depiction of Margaret as a *Bacchante* (1907) by French's only female assistant and longtime confidante, Evelyn Beatrice Longman (1874-1954). Nearby is Margaret French Cresson's portrait of her husband in uniform, created shortly after their marriage. Chesterwood holds a large collection of Margaret French Cresson's work, including portrait busts and reliefs in plaster, bronze, and marble. Plans are underway to exhibit more of her sculpture in the studio and residence in the near future.

The Gallery features a portrait of Daniel Chester French by John C. Johansen (1876-1964). The sculptor is portrayed next to his plaster model of *Sky*, one of the allegorical figures from the *Admiral Samuel F. Dupont Memorial* (1921, Washington, D.C.).

The full-size plaster model of French's last work and unknown masterpiece, *Andromeda* (1929-30) occupies the central exhibition case. While the final marble *Andromeda* in the Chesterwood studio might be well-known to the frequent visitor to Chesterwood, this cast is closer to the hand of the artist, showing the sculptor's tool marks as he worked the surface of the plaster. In the case at the end of the right/east wall, earlier models for *Andromeda* illustrate French's progress from his initial



The Daniel Chester French Collections Study Gallery at Chesterwood, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, with French's last work *Andromeda* occupying the central exhibition case. Photo by Lisa Vollmer.

conception of a popular nineteenth century academic subject to a more developed large-scale version. Clearly visible on the full-size plaster are "pointing marks"—small x's and dots—drawn by the Piccirilli brothers, who skillfully transferred French's design into stone. They were the talented family who carved the twenty-eight blocks of marble for the sculptor's iconic nineteen-foot seated figure of Abraham Lincoln for the *Lincoln Memorial* in Washington, D.C. While Chesterwood's Barn Gallery permanent installation entitled, *Daniel Chester French: Sculpting an*



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**Dana Pilson** has been working on curatorial projects at Chesterwood since 2011. She researched the history of Daniel Chester French's studio and residence, and she has assisted with the organization of various exhibitions, including *From the Minute Man to the Lincoln Memorial: The Timeless Sculpture of Daniel Chester French*. Prior to relocating to the Berkshires, she was a research assistant in the American Paintings and Sculpture Department at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Chesterwood is the former summer home, studio, and gardens of Daniel Chester French, one of America's foremost public sculptors, and is a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The new collections gallery is funded through generous support from The Henry Luce Foundation in New York.