

The Portal of Paradise

Steve Zeitlin

In these years just before the millennium, New York evokes an image of Jerusalem before Christ, with its squawking chickens and ducks, merchants peddling in the dust. Here, cars crowd the streets like a herd of goats, taxis butt horns at intersections. On the archway leading into the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Bible's great prophets, carved in Indiana limestone, stare — but pass no judgement — on the roller bladers, the busloads of tourists, and the beggars for whom the church on 110th and Amsterdam is the first stop on the way down from Harlem. On one of the eloquently carved columns, cut into the stone beneath the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah by master stonemason Simon Verity, New York and Jerusalem are joined in an apocalyptic vision. Representing the prophets' prescience of the holy city's destruction, the World Trade Towers and Empire State are blown off their moorings in a vision of the final days.

The carved prophets beckon pilgrims and other visitors through the lofty frontal archway to the Cathedral. They are part of the Portal of Paradise, a sequence of Biblical figures from the Old and New Testaments, selected by an interfaith group of priests and rabbis, symbolizing the entrance to Christ's tomb. Visitors process beneath carved eight-foot-tall images of Jacob, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and smaller, three-foot-six sculptures of Ruth, Naomi, Jonah, Noah, Solomon. "The procession of prophets leads you through the Portal to be uplifted," says Verity. "We come in as ordinary New Yorkers, and leave as a bishop or a martyr or a saint." The west archway opens only for special occasions including Easter Sunday, and the Feast of St. Francis, when an elephant trudges through the Portal, leading a procession of pets and their owners for the Blessing of the Animals.

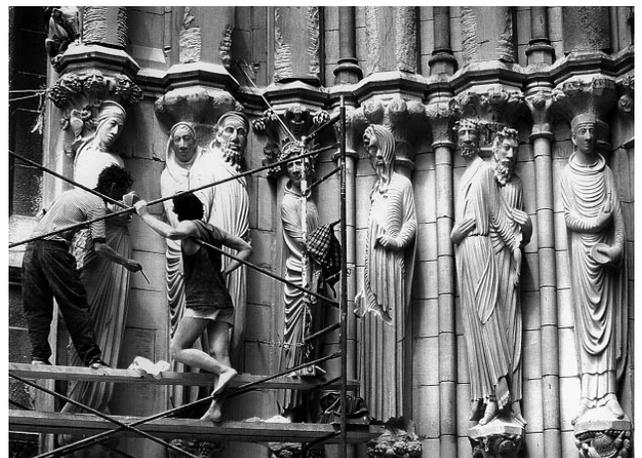
Up on the scaffolding like a latter day Michelangelo, sculptor Verity labored over the Portal for ten years. "In late 1988, I got called in to play here, on St. John the Divine. Why an Englishman? Well, if you build a Gothic cathedral in America you call in the English or the French, as we have a six hundred-year-old church in every village. And the French are impossible as we all know... ." As it happens, he's assisted by Jean Claude Marchionni, a Frenchman, whom he has grown to deeply respect. "The interior of this huge, glorious building," writes Verity, "has an extraordinary holiness that ebbs and flows. The exterior is flawed, ponderous, over-detailed and still unfinished. But for me here there were twelve eight-foot high blocks of fine Indiana limestone, waiting to be carved into prophets." For now, the ten year project is finished, though much remains to be carved when the angel of funding reappears on the Cathedral's gothic arches.

The blocks of stone were part of the Cathedral's original design by Cathedral architects Ralph Adams Cram and Bishop William Thomas Manning in 1925. This meant that the stone could not be carved in workshops (as is the norm today), but had to be cut right into the Cathedral's limestone arch. The work had to be done on the streets, and, as Verity put it, the work reflects the streets. "Our viewpoint from the scaffolding is the best in the world, the most pluralist collection of races... the rich, the poor." In the ten years that Verity became a fixture on the scaffolding, his thick sweater and hair covered with stone dust, movies were filmed on location, liquid sewage spewed out on a construction

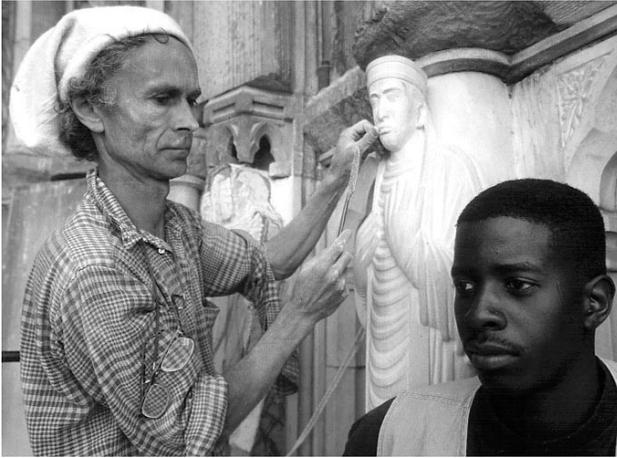
MAKING CONNECTIONS

So often when we pass a house of worship, we appreciate the beauty of the carvings and adornments, but forget the human hands that crafted them. City Lore's Director of Photography Martha Cooper has been documenting the stone carving at The Cathedral of St. John the Divine for the past three years. This project is part of our ongoing effort to recognize the artistry and the artists who enrich our city and beautify the world.

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Martha Cooper



Daniel, a Cathedral employee, poses for his namesake in the Portal.

site, wallets were stolen, beggars became impromptu guides offering imaginative and erroneous raps about his work, and tourist cameras clicked so often that he figures to be one of the world's most photographed men.

"There is a connection with every other cathedral in the world..." Simon writes in his introduction to Fitzgerald and Follett's *Pillars of the Almighty*. "The poverty, the beggars; the girl who abandons her baby in the Cathedral and runs away; the young man who watched me work for four days without moving from the steps and is later found dead at the gate; Clyde, who in putting up netting to stop the nesting pigeons, falls from a fifty-foot scaffold and, as in a truly medieval miracle, lives still. The distractions of tourists, the bone-chilling feel of a chisel in your hand in

December, the dust and pigeon dung blowing endlessly in our eyes in the fall winds — all these stonecutters have known from time immemorial."

Great art is always a vision of the past born in the present, and Verity's life in New York chipped its way into the stone. One of his friends, Naomi, with naturally sculpted features asked and was carved as her namesake on the Portal. Across the street, coffeeshop owner George Gross sat for a portrait of the prophet Simeon. Paula Jennings, the fundraiser for the Cathedral, with her page boy haircut, became the model for Jonah. "Other than my marriage and my children, being carved on the Cathedral was the nicest thing that ever happened to me," she said. The model for the exiled Hagar was a neighborhood Tibetan woman, in exile from her homeland. A close gaze at the intricate carvings reveals a two faced woman, with one of the faces kissing his anonymous stone butt — Verity's masterful and eternal revenge on a duplicitous lover, as well as a deft allusion to the Biblical harlot who married Hosea. The personal touches are in keeping with a Medieval tradition, where the gargoyles and carvings of famous cathedrals depict the carvers' secret lives and private jokes. On the Freiburg Cathedral in Germany, a 14th century stone buttocks points in the direction of the Prelate's Palace, the carver's revenge for some long forgotten grievance.

Since Verity sometimes works from photographs, he snapped a Polaroid of a friend named Jessica Durham as a model for Esther. In that moment, her dog named Cooper (she was a student at Cooper Union school of Design and named her dog after the school) intruded into the picture. Inspired, he carved the dog next to her on the Cathedral wall. But Martha Cooper, City Lore's Director of Photography, who documented the work over three years, was also named Cooper. So the dog was carved with a camera around his neck. The serendipity of the artistic process earned Martha the closest thing any of us will ever know to immortality on this earth.

In the faces of Jonah, Naomi, Noah and Ruth, we see the faces of 20th century New Yorkers, black and white, Latino and Asian in this Jerusalem before Christ, this apocalyptic city. On Easter Sunday we enter the Cathedral through the Portal of Paradise, our spirits elevated by the prophets. But we leave, too, through this carved masterpiece, passing the faces of coffee shop owners and Tibetan immigrants as we reenter this city of Biblical passions, replete with urban angels, connected in spirit and in blood to Ezekiel, Abraham and Sarah, just as Adam's blood runs through our veins.



New York City blown off its moorings in stone

Sculptor Simon Verity

