

WORTHY OF THEIR

Minnesota's Literary Tradition in Sculpture

On a chilly September afternoon in 1996, a parade of authors crossed Rice Park in downtown St. Paul. Led by Garrison Keillor, the group headed to the new bronze sculpture of writer F. Scott Fitzgerald waiting to be dedicated on the centennial of his birth. Fitzgerald, hat in hand and coat over his arm, stands on a small base at the northeast corner of the park. As Keillor noted, it was the right spot: “The library is there, the St. Paul Hotel is there, the (Ordway) theater is there. These were three great, constant loves in Fitzgerald’s life. He loved books, bright lights, plays and parties, so he

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OWN ASPIRATION



Amid banners and flags, a crowd gathered in Minneapolis's Minnehaha Park for the unveiling of the statue of Swedish poet, composer, and statesman Gunnar Wennerberg, 1915

would be in his element.”¹ The work by Michael B. Price, a professor of art at Hamline University, is the most recent in a long tradition of literary sculpture set outdoors in Minnesota.

Over the span of a century, Minnesotans have determined that many works of art deserve a place of honor in parks, plazas, and public buildings. Residents have long been proud of their state’s writers but may not realize that the world of literature has provided inspiration for sculptors as well. Jacob Fjelde’s portrait of Hiawatha carrying Minnehaha over the stream is one of the state’s oldest examples of sculpture with a literary source, although it was not placed on the edge of Minnehaha Creek in Minneapolis until 1911 and dedicated the following year. Fjelde, who emigrated from Norway to Minneapolis, modeled the statue first in plaster for exhibition in front of the Minnesota pavilion at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Mrs. L. P. Hunt, chair of the Minnesota Women’s Division for the fair, then launched a fund-raising committee that sought pennies from schoolchildren to pay for the cost of casting the sculpture in bronze, a task completed almost two decades later.²

Hiawatha and Minnehaha still stand by the creek in Minnehaha Park, but across Hiawatha Avenue the site of a tribute to their literary creator, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, has changed. *Longfellow*, carved in Bedford limestone by Minneapolis artist Andrew Gewont, was once surrounded by the flowers, gazebos, and paths of Longfellow Gardens, which stretched to the south of a house built in imitation of the poet’s own residence. In 1908 entrepreneur Robert “Fish” Jones commissioned the statue



Artist Michael B. Price’s study for the bronze statue of Jazz Age author F. Scott Fitzgerald, now standing in St. Paul’s Rice Park

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for his new Longfellow Gardens, which, with its own zoo, was for many years a prime tourist attraction. The gardens were closed in 1936, most buildings were razed, the animals were given to other zoos, and the statue was left standing forlornly amidst the green grass sloping down to Minnehaha Creek.³ *Longfellow* has not weath-

¹ *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Apr. 10, 1996, p. B1, 4.

² Marian Shaw, *World’s Fair Notes: A Woman Journalist Views Chicago’s 1893 Columbian Exposition* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1993), 17; *Minneapolis Tribune*, Oct. 6, 1912, p. 35. The plaster version of the statue was displayed in the Minneapolis Public Library from 1902 until it was cast in 1911.

³ Joseph W. Zalusky, “Fish Jones and His Irresistible Longfellow Gardens,” *Hennepin County History* 27 (Fall 1967): 8–10; Jane King Hallberg, *Minnehaha Creek: Living Waters* (Minneapolis: Cityscapes Publishing, 1995), 97–106. The Longfellow house was moved across the street to Minnehaha Park in July 1995 in advance of planned expansion of Hiawatha Avenue. Other plans include recreating gardens, both formal and informal, around the Longfellow statue and perhaps restoring or casting a new version of the badly eroded figure; Sandy Welsh, Minneapolis Park Board, telephone interview with author, Feb. 10, 1997.



LEFT: Hiawatha and Minnehaha at Minnehaha Falls, 1916



RIGHT: Statue honoring poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, garbed in a toga, which stood near the intersection of Hiawatha Avenue and Minnehaha Parkway in Minneapolis when this picture was taken in 1936

ered the years well (his hands are missing, for example), but the concept of a poet in the park is by now well established.

Minnesota's pantheon of literary sculptures is not limited to figures connected to the state. Descendants of various immigrant groups have placed statues in parks to commemorate their heritage, as well. Early in this century immigrants often founded clubs, fraternal societies, musical groups, and newspapers to share memories of their homelands and spread knowledge of their cultures. As people met in parks to celebrate national holidays with music, dance, oratory, and food, they agreed that their gathering place should be graced by an appropriate sculpture. During the first decades of this century, they formed committees to raise funds for statues of literary figures celebrated in their homelands, thus emphasizing the cultural con-

tribution that they as Swedes, Norwegians, or Germans had brought to America. A statue of Swedish poet Gunnar Wennerberg now stands in Minnehaha Park, while a bust of Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen and a statue of the famed German poet and playwright Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller were both placed in St. Paul's Como Park. All were private commissions for art in public spaces, chosen to celebrate ethnic heritage.

Creating a likeness that will please a committee and be appreciated by the public can be difficult for a sculptor who does not have the luxury of working from a living subject. In Fish Jones's statue of Longfellow, the poet is improbably wrapped in an ample Roman toga over his nineteenth-century dress. The eighteenth-century Schiller fared better. After much debate, the German-American monument



Schiller statue and an admirer, near the Como Park Conservatory, St. Paul, 1955

committee chose an artist in Berlin, Ignatius Taschner, who based his statue on a drawing by Carl Marr, a Milwaukee-born artist working in Germany. Taschner's Schiller, wearing the costume of his own time, vigorously strides forward as if about to deliver his newest poem to an eagerly awaiting audience.⁴

When the Schiller monument was dedicated in 1907, the committee received a congratulatory message from the German emperor, and the public listened to various speeches including one delivered by Dr. Theodore Barth, a former member of the German parliament. A *St. Paul Dispatch* editorial, grateful that some group was beautifying otherwise empty parks, noted:

It is a fact, worthy of more than passing comment, that every particle of the ornamentation, beyond the work of nature and the gardeners, placed in Como Park, is the gift of a man whose name shows his German parentage. . . . Its fountains and bronzes will perpetuate the names of the Elsingers, the Schiffmanns and the Mannheimers, and soon it will bear aloft a statue-monument to testify to the German love of a German poet: Schiller.⁵

Larger than life, the statue of Schiller stands in a grove of trees on the crest of the hill near the Como Conservatory. At the bottom of that hill, hidden in another small forest, is the carved stone base of Jacob Fjelde's bronze bust of Henrik Ibsen; the sculpture was stolen in 1982. A gift to the park from the Sons of Norway in 1912, the bust was completed in Norway in 1885 by the immigrant artist whose other contributions to Minnesota, besides *Hiawatha and Minnehaha*, included Norwegian violinist *Ole Bull* in Minneapolis's Loring Park and *Minerva*, located inside the Minneapolis Public Library. Like *Hiawatha and Minnehaha*, *Ibsen* was cast after Fjelde's death, along with two other bronzes from the same mold that were eventually purchased by Norwegian groups in Tacoma, Washington, and Wahpeton, North Dakota. St. Paul's missing bust was discovered in a Robbinsdale video store in 1993 by an art student working as a volunteer for the SOS!

(Save Our Sculpture!) program of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art and the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property. Later positively identified by an art conservator, the Ibsen bust will be returned to its plinth, possibly by the summer of 1998.⁶

Sculptor Jacob Fjelde's bust of Henrik Ibsen in Como Park, 1936



⁴ Moira F. Harris, *Monumental Minnesota: A Guide to Outdoor Sculpture* (St. Paul: Pogo Press, 1992), 8–9.

⁵ *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 6, 1905, p. 6 (quote), July 6, 1907, p. 7. Schiffman Fountain, on Lexington Avenue, was given in 1896. Its major figure, a seated water nymph, was commissioned by Dr. Rudolph Schiffman after he saw a similar fountain in Barcelona. The Mannheimer marble memorial bird bath, erected in 1906 and designed by Cass Gilbert, stands in the park.

⁶ David A. Wood, "An Artist's Odyssey," *Twin Cities*, Mar. 1986, p. 69; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 16, 1912, p. 12, May 20, 1912, p. 10, Sept. 11, 1997, p. 1, 8, which gives an incorrect date—1907—for the dedication of the bust.

While Schiller and Ibsen are well-known authors, Gunnar Wennerberg (1817–1901), the Swedish-American choice for a statue, remains rather unknown to this day. A composer, poet, educator, and statesman, he had also served as minister of education, director of the National Museum, and provincial governor. On June 24, 1915—Svenskarnas Dag, the annual midsummer festival—25,000 people including Swedish Americans and Canadians, members of the Vasa Order (a fraternal society), and the American Union of Swedish Singers witnessed the unveiling of the bronze statue in Minnehaha Park.⁷

Carl Eldh, an artist from Stockholm, posed the bronze of Wennerberg in a relaxed, somewhat pensive posture, leaning on a rock. Since 1915 the statue, set atop a base of red St. Cloud granite, has often been the center of activities for the annual midsummer festival, just as the *Ole Bull* statue has stood as witness to the celebrations of Syttende Mai (Norwegian Constitution Day) in Loring Park.

After these committees had finished their work in the 1910s, no other groups immediately followed their lead. As historian Henry Hanson pointed out in discussing the Vasa Order, the 1920s were a time of anti-immigrant hysteria. Stressing links, even literary ones, to any mother country became suspect. The emphasis was on assimilation of immigrants, not their continued existence as hyphenated citizens. Only after World War II, when seeking out one's roots once more became acceptable, did nationality-centered philanthropic activities resume.⁸

This pause in Minnesota's growing tradition of literary-inspired sculpture ended in the 1950s when Major Svante Pahlson decided that the state needed a statue of Sweden's Nobel Prize-winning author Selma Lagerlof (1858–1940). The statue was a second casting of a figure by Erik Arvid Backlund, originally commissioned for the sculpture garden on Pahlson's Rottneros farm in Värmland, Sweden. Lagerlof had lived nearby and depicted the farm as "Ekeby" in her novel *The Saga of Gösta Berling*. Pahlson and the province of Värmland first offered the seated



⁷ Here and below, *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 25, 1915, p. 1; souvenir program, Wennerberg Centennial Festival concert, Sept. 29, 1917, p. 4, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

⁸ Henry Hanson, "The Vasa Order of America: Its Role in the Swedish-American Community, 1896–1996," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 47 (Oct. 1996): 238. More recent statues in Minnesota, dedicated to Danish, German, German-Bohemian, Swedish, and Finnish pioneers, celebrate ethnic heritage by portraying the immigrants themselves.



Members of the Vasa Junior Folkdancers and assorted dignitaries, gathered at the American-Swedish Institute for the unveiling of the Selma Lagerlof statue, 1955

figure to the University of Minnesota and then to the city of Minneapolis. For two years the work sat in storage while a location was sought. The sculpture was finally installed in the garden of the American Swedish Institute in Minneapolis in 1955.⁹

In the decades after Lagerlof, at least two statues of beloved literary characters appeared in the state's parks and neighborhoods. One of the most charming is hidden away on a boulevard strip in St. Paul. Chainsaw carver Dennis Roghair, whose growing sculpture garden at the Minnesota state fairgrounds enchants visitors

each summer, was asked to transform a dead tree into the world of British author A. A. Milne. Since 1993 Christopher Robin, Piglet, and Pooh have stood at the corner of Benhill Road and Lombard Avenue. For their first Easter someone equipped them with an Easter basket, and ever since they have been adorned with items suited to upcoming holidays.¹⁰

Two different sculptures honor Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg (1898–1973) and his creations. Moberg made his first trip to the United States in 1948, researching what would become four novels dealing with the Swedish

⁹ "Institute Benefactor is Dead in Sweden," *Bulletin of the American-Swedish Institute* 15 (Winter/Spring 1960): 28; *Minneapolis Star*, Feb. 25, 1954, p. 27, May 4, 1955, p. 41.

¹⁰ On Roghair, see Moira F. Harris, "Minnesota's Newest Sculpture Garden," *Chip Chats*, Nov.–Dec. 1993, p. 86–87; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 30, 1995, p. A1, 6, Sept. 2, 1996, p. E1, 4.



Chainsaw carving of Winnie the Pooh, Piglet (not visible), and Christopher Robin, St. Paul, 1997



Lindstrom's tribute to emigrants Karl Oskar and Kristina, sculpted in polyurethane foam and fiberglass

immigrant experience. The author spent time in the Twin Cities and the Chisago County communities of Lindstrom and Chisago City.¹¹

Once his novels were in print and films based on them were released, Chisago County residents realized that their local history was of interest to other Swedish Americans and visiting Swedes. Karl Oskar and Kristina, the fictional characters in Moberg's novels, became Lindstrom's town symbols. Using a model of a work by Swedish sculptor Axel Olsson that stands near the harbor in Karlshamn, Sweden, local artist Roger Davis created the pair in polyurethane foam covered with a fiberglass skin. For several years Karl Oskar and Kristina rode on parade floats until their owner determined to spare them further wear and tear by donating them to the town. Since 1970 they have stood on a pedestal in front of the offices of the *Chisago County Press*.¹² In Sweden, Karl Oskar looked out to sea and America, while Kristina turned back toward home. In Lindstrom, Karl Oskar looks east down Main Street, which joins Highway 8 and is known as "The Emigrant Trail," posted with signs depicting the characters. Kristina's view is now of the unknown land to the west.

When plans were announced to celebrate 1996 as the 150th anniversary of Swedish immigration to the United States, Chisago City needed some way to indicate its own historic involvement. The town was refurbishing its park along Highway 8 with a stepped gateway, planters, and a sign. That seemed the perfect location for a statue of Vilhelm Moberg, which Lindstrom artist Ian Dudley was commissioned to create. Dudley based his work on photographs of the author and memories of those who had met him on his research trips in 1948 and 1950. Since Moberg had traveled the flat roads of Chisago County on a Schwinn, Dudley posed the writer with his bicycle, a concept perhaps unique in the history of literary portraiture.¹³

With the 1996 dedication of the Fitzgerald and Moberg statues, literary sculpture in Min-



Author Vilhelm Moberg, posed with his trusty Schwinn, Chisago City, 1997

nesota has entered a new phase. These men, a native son and a visitor, wrote about the state. The sculptors are residents of Minnesota who knew well the settings in which their statues would be placed. In choosing F. Scott Fitzgerald and Vilhelm Moberg to be represented in bronze in city parks, perhaps Minnesotans have followed capitol architect Cass Gilbert's long-ago advice to the chair of the Schiller monument committee: to select writers and artists "worthy of their own aspiration."¹⁴

¹¹ Moberg's novels *The Emigrants*, *Unto A Good Land*, *The Settlers*, and *The Last Letter Home* were reprinted in 1995 by the Minnesota Historical Society Press.

¹² *Minneapolis Tribune*, Dec. 16, 1974, p. A1,7; *Chisago County Press* (Lindstrom), June 30, 1966, p. 1.

¹³ Ian Dudley, comments made at dedication of Moberg Park, Sept. 13, 1996; *Chisago County Press*, Sept. 12, 1996, p. 1, 4.

¹⁴ Cass Gilbert to Ferdinand Willius, Dec. 4, 1905, Schiller Monument Committee Records, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

The picture on p. 366 is courtesy Michael B. Price, p. 370–71 is from the collection of the American Swedish Institute, and those on p. 372 and 373 are from the author. All others are in the MHS collections.



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