

Daniel Chester French Biography

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Biography

Daniel Chester French (1850-1931) was one of America's leading sculptors of the late 19th century and maintained his popularity and fame well into the 20th century.

Daniel Chester French was born in Exeter, N.H. He grew up in Concord, Mass., and came under the influence of the intellectual circle of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott. French chose to become a sculptor early in life and had the benefit of study with the painter William Morris Hunt and the sculptors William Rimmer and John Q.A. Ward--a particularly fortuitous group of instructors because of the variety of their esthetic approaches and their sympathetic professionalism.

With Emerson's assistance in 1874 French received the commission for the statue *Minute Man* for Concord. This immediately brought him fame. Though based upon the classical *Apollo Belvedere*, the sculpture was totally in keeping with the then-advanced style of historical bronze monuments. In 1876 French went to Italy and studied with Thomas Ball, whose work combined the neoclassic heritage and the new naturalism.

Some of French's first works on his return to the United States were not unlike the plaster groups of John Rogers. However, French gained fame principally through the large public monuments he created for the custom houses in St. Louis and Philadelphia, the Boston Post Office, and, above all, the gigantic statue, *The Republic*, that dominated the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

French evolved a type of allegorical figure which became his trademark, although it was emulated by other sculptors. This was the statuesque, somewhat sexless female in long flowing gown, as in the *Alma Mater* at Columbia University or the *Spirit of Life* at the Spencer Trask Memorial at Saratoga Springs, N.Y. The heavy, voluminous drapery often flowed over the heads of these figures as well, as can be seen in his most eloquent and personal work, *Angel of Death and the Young Sculptor*, a memorial to his friend and fellow sculptor Martin Milmore, who died young. The figure of Death confronts an idealized sculptor, who is at work on a relief of a sphinx.

French's best-known works are his two statues of Abraham Lincoln. The first, a standing Lincoln in Lincoln, Nebr., is similar to one by Augustus Saint-Gaudens in Chicago. The second, completed in 1922, and French's most famous sculpture, is the seated Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., done as one of several collaborative works with architect Henry Bacon.