

BORGLUM'S WILSON: AN IRONIC FOOTNOTE TO HISTORY

DR. HERBERT JANICK

Gutzon Borglum is best remembered as a pioneer in gigantic, mountainside sculpture. Each year thousands of tourists marvel at the 60 feet high heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt carved by the Connecticut artist on the side of Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. An earlier monument to the Confederacy on Stone Mountain in Georgia, aborted by controversy, is currently being completed. Yet Borglum was more than a skilled, innovative craftsman; he was a passionate, if somewhat erratic, political activist. From 1910, when he moved into his studio in Stamford, until his death in 1941, Borglum participated in such varied political activities as: Bull Moose party campaigns in Connecticut, fund raising for the Non-Partisan League in the 1920's, a Nebraska Senatorial election, dispensing unsolicited advice to Presidents Coolidge and Hoover, and campaigning for Franklin Roosevelt--enthusiastically in 1932 and reluctantly in 1936.¹ Although some critics judged these diversions to be brakes on artistic productivity, in reality Borglum's political involvement was a vital component of his art, often determining both the subject and style of his work. The story of one of his least controversial commissions, a statue of Woodrow Wilson, illustrates the interaction between Borglum's art and politics. The ultimate destruction of this statue by Nazi soldiers provides an ironic footnote to history.

In 1928 Ignace Paderewski, the world famous pianist and the first premier of post-Versailles Poland, engaged Borglum to create a statue of Woodrow Wilson that would stand in the center of Wilson Park in Poznan, a city of 300,000 people situated in the Polish corridor. Two circumstances led Borglum to accept this task. He had long been a personal friend and admirer of the Polish leader. In 1919 the combative artist interrupted work on a statue of Paderewski to praise his subject as "the truly great figure" to emerge from the war.² The sculptor's sympathy for both Polish and Czech nationalism went beyond rhetoric. During World War I several thousand Czech volunteer soldiers used Borglum's 450 acre estate on the banks of the Rippowam River as a training camp. The second attractive feature of this commission was the opportunity to promote international understanding, another cause Borglum cherished. His support of Warren Harding for President in 1920 stemmed from the belief that the Ohio Senator would lead the United States into some type of international organization. During the 1920's Borglum was a vigorous advocate of American membership in the World Court. His entry in the Bok Peace Prize competition, outlining a plan for elimination of economic rivalry among nations, was one of those selected for publication.³

While Borglum relished the challenge of interpreting Wilson's expansive vision in stone, he also appreciated the complexity of the task, made more difficult by the fact that the artist had little

personal contact with the ex-President. At only one point, in 1917, when Borglum, an aviation buff, was called on by Wilson to investigate production problems in the airplane industry, did their careers intersect.⁴ In order to gain insight into the character of his subject Borglum sought the assistance of contemporaries. His request made by letter was simple - would the recipient be kind enough to give his impressions of the character of Wilson and the nature of his accomplishments? Borglum's choice of critics reveals a strong Republican bias. In fact, one wonders how intimate Calvin Coolidge, William Borah, and Reed Smoot were with the Democratic leader.

The replies varied in length and intensity. John Grier Hibben, Wilson's successor as President of Princeton University contented himself with a vague suggestion that Wilson standing between scenes of war and peace might be appropriate. The President's widow, Edith Bolling Wilson, did not offer advice but invited Borglum to her home to sketch Wilson's clothes and to examine his personal belongings. Others predictably villified Wilson. Senator Reed Smoot, a Republican partisan from Utah, bluntly answered that Wilson was so ignoble that he should not be deified in sculpture.⁵ Several offered analyses that were alien to either the actual achievements of Wilson or to the writers own attitude as he expressed it during Wilson's lifetime. Irreconcilable Senator Borah of Idaho mingled praise of Wilson with a tirade against the Versailles treaty:⁶

But if I were going to undertake to isolate any particular work upon the part of the late President Wilson it would be his fight at Paris to keep out of the treaty and the final adjustment, the vengeance of war.

The Paris Conference was saturated with the war spirit and the occasion was deemed a proper one apparently to divide up the earth in spirit not only of vengeance but of gain. Wilson stood against this in magnificent fashion. It is true that he was forced to compromise because the time came when he had to either yield to some of their demands or leave the world in utter chaos. But he made, in my judgement, a splendid effort.

This is one phase of his life, which for some reason or other, his most generous supporters and biographers have not sufficiently accentuated. If he could have accomplished what he desired to accomplish at Paris, the injecting of humanity and justice into the Versailles Treaty, Europe would have been today fifty years ahead of what it is in the way of recovery. The Versailles Treaty was a cruel destructive, brutal document. The only touches of humanity or justice which it had in it were placed there by Wilson.

In a more subdued tone Calvin Coolidge also altered his earlier characterization of Wilson when he wrote:⁷

I should think that you might very well interpret President Wilson in the figure of a European Lincoln. His service to the world did a great deal to release some of the people of Europe from a condition of servitude from which they were anxious to escape.

What interpretation did Gutzon Borglum draw from these varied responses? One suspects that an ego inflated enough to reject Calvin Coolidge's proposed inscription on Mount Rushmore with a brusque "I want it right", followed its own dictates.⁸ The Wilson statue that was dedicated on July 4, 1931 by President Moscicki of Poland with Mrs. Wilson present portrayed the architect of the League of Nations in a university gown covering a business suit. He stood with a sheaf of papers in his left hand pointing with his right hand to a map of reborn, reunited Poland carved in the granite pedestal. This defiant pose was deliberately "created as, and intended to be, a protest against barbarous invasions of any kind."⁹ This symbolism was underscored by the release of hundreds of carrier pigeons bearing peaceful messages at the moment of dedication.

The statue did not dominate the Poznan square for long. On September 7, 1939 Hitler's invading Panzer divisions destroyed the memorial fraught with such obvious political significance. An official Nazi spokesman justified the action on aesthetic grounds; an artistic monstrosity had been eliminated. "The American sculptor made the legs too short, the body too long and the head too large. Such an eyesore cannot continue to stand in the city", he proclaimed.¹⁰ Most American observers dismissed the issue of the merit of Borglum's work as irrelevant, and decried the German act as another small but telling blow against freedom of expression. The fate of Borglum's statue supplied one more argument for those who urged the United States to shed isolation in order to check the Fascist threat to civilization. A worried New York Times editorial writer placed the incident in perspective when he asked "What if the Germans did not like the Statue of Liberty?"¹¹

* * * * *

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of a former student, George Curtis, in the research and writing of this article. The photograph of the statue of Woodrow Wilson comes from the Gutzon Borglum Papers, Library of Congress, Box 130. The New York Times published a picture of the statue in the July 5, 1931 issue that carried a credit of Wide World Photos.

Footnotes

1. Mary Borglum and Robert Casey, Give the Man Room (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1952) is a favorable treatment of Borglum's career co-authored by his widow. The two most dramatic incidents of a stormy life are covered in Gilbert Fite, Mount Rushmore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952); and Donald Johnson, The Undefeated (New York: Milton Balch and Company, 1927). The artist's political activity is analyzed in Herbert Janick, "Government for the People: Leadership of the Progressive Party in Connecticut", unpublished PhD dissertation, Fordham University, 1968.
2. New York Times, August 24, 1919.
3. Ester Everett Lape (ed.) Ways to Peace (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1924), 117-126.
4. The most complete story of this bizzare episode is Seward Livermore, Politics is Adjourned: Woodrow Wilson and the War Congress, 1916-18 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 126-134. The role of two other participants is outlined in Daniel Beaver, Newton D. Baker and the American War Effort, 1917-19 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 161-165; and Merlo J. Pusey, Charles Evans Hughes, I (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), 374-79.
5. John Grier Hibben to Borglum, December 29, 1928; Edith Bolling Wilson to Borglum, May 31, 1929; Reed Smoot to Borglum, December 22, 1928, Borglum Papers, Library of Congress, Box 87. Senator Reed's reply was so tart that his son refused to permit direct quotation. Ernest Smoot to George Curtin, April 29, 1969.
6. Borah to Borglum, December 22, 1928, Borglum Papers, Box 87.
7. Coolidge to Borglum, December 10, 1928, Borglum Papers, Box 87.
8. New York Times, November 20, 1930.
9. Borglum to editor, New York Times, no date, 1939, Borglum Papers, Box 87.
10. New York Times, November 10, 1939.
11. Ibid.