

# A NEW FACE



# F O R FINE ARTS

BY ANN CURRAN

After 80 years, the five niches on the front of the College of Fine Arts are finally near completion. They are a visual feast as interesting and entertaining as Indiana limestone, a computer and the hand of man can make them.

In the medieval niche, Eve considers the apple offered by a snake swollen to boa-constrictor size. The Queen of Sheba, bearing gifts, travels by donkey to pick King Solomon's brain. Solomon faces that ancient and still modern question: do you tear the child in two for the sake of justice? Would his sly question even matter today? At the center of the niche, a prim Mary Magdalene stands beside a bare-foot John the Evangelist, holding a communion vessel. (Christ and his apostles are the only barefoot statues in medieval sculpture, says master carver Nicholas Fairplay.)

There's a bagpiper—a stone salute to the world's first college to offer that major; a monkey with a drum; a figure depicting music; a woman with a birch branch teaching two students—one sleeps, the other slaps him awake. And yes, it's not your imagination, just under the cat and the fiddle, a guy up there is "moonin'" you. It's a German practice, says Fairplay. Cathedral carvers always inserted something rude pointing toward the home of the dean of the cathedral. The "moonin'" figure comes from the 13th century Strasbourg cathedral. (Even a careful examination by a stone carver of the 1913 Renaissance niche reveals a hound dog in a high state of sexual excitement hidden from the ordinary viewer.)

This mini-medieval world, which dizzies with its busyness, also contains a lion eating a Christian; Mary, Joseph and Jesus on their flight into Egypt; and Judas giving Christ the original kiss of betrayal.

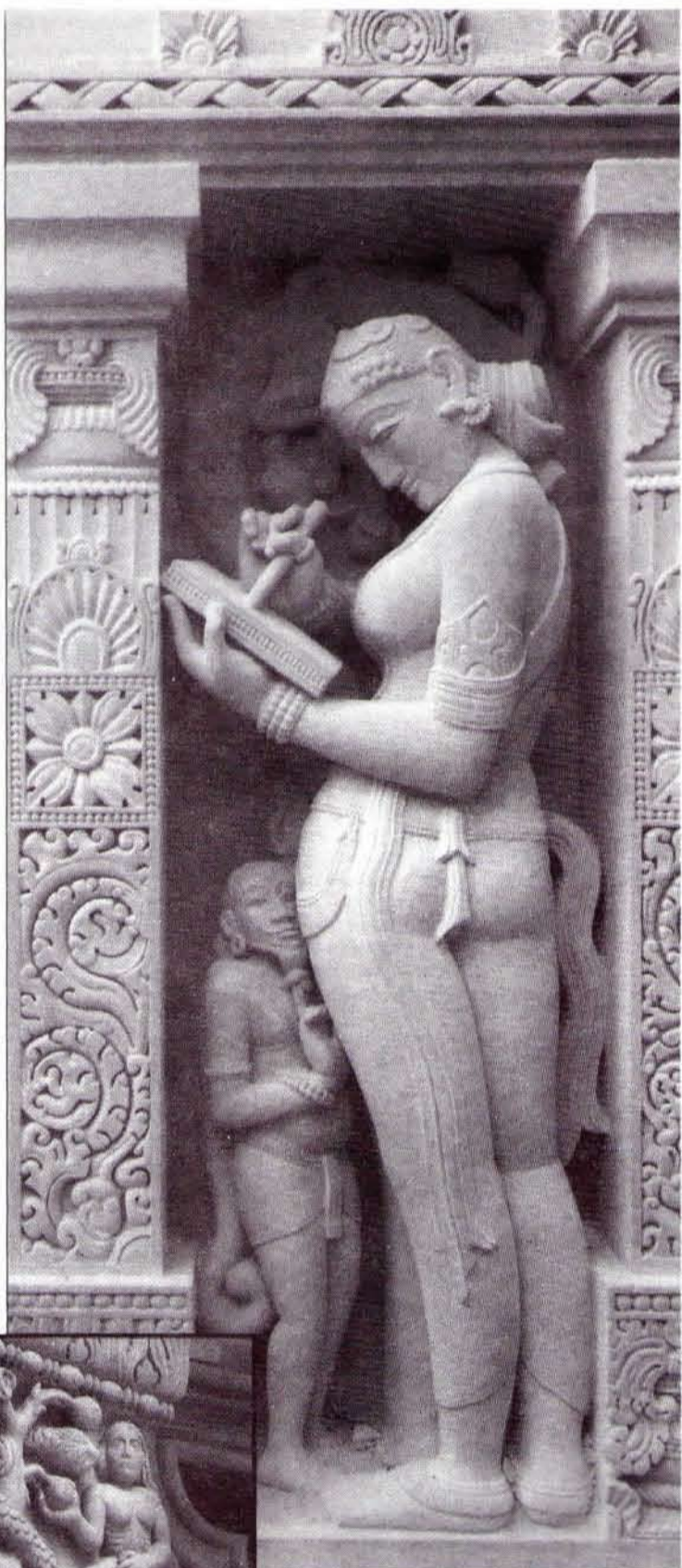
"This is the language the carvers are most fluent in," says project coordinator Richard L. Cleary, an associate professor of architecture. "They really love doing this stuff. They let themselves go, and we let them go a fair amount. But we really wanted to capture some of the exuberance that was implied in Henry Hornbostel's original sketches and the decorative richness that really is there as a key component in medieval architecture." It's a richness typical of 11th and 12th century Romanesque and 13th-15th century Gothic architecture in France, England and Venice.

Next door, moving from the left as you face the college, is the squeaky clean Greek niche with its free-standing Corinthian, Doric and Ionic columns (conveniently arranged, left to right, in alphabetical order), each with a simple frieze displaying beautiful nude male athletes, cavorting centaurs and draped females in the Temple of Athena Nike. Its quiet makes aesthetic sense and balances the relative placidness of the existing Renaissance niche beside the entrance. The noise of the medieval niche returns, to some extent, in the far right world niche.

The Roman entrance niche, located beside the Greek niche, was partially completed by the original sculptor A. Giammartini, who didn't even get a first name or a correct spelling of his last name in the university's first history. (It's



Photos by Bill Redic



Adam and Eve, left, make the fateful decision atop a 12th century Romanesque niche in the medieval niche. The carving is modeled after a piece in Nîmes, France.

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"Archille" for the record; "Archy" to his friends.) Giammartini is, incidentally, the grandfather of Adele Bauer Thompson (MM '45), a retired Pittsburgh Public School teacher.

The entrance niche salutes Roman architecture with the Latin infinitive "creare" (to create) dominating. It contains busts of Bacchus, representing the lively Hornbostel, original campus architect who conceived the idea of the niches as a teaching tool. Opposite Bacchus is the god Mercury, fashioned after student portraits of the late Verner S. Purnell (A '26), who donated \$1 million toward the \$1.4 million cost to date of bringing life to the naked niches. From the entrance dome shines a gold-leafed bronze of the sun, stars and an orbiting planet made by project architect Bruce M. Lindsey, who was named Man of the Year by Engineering News Record for his work on the niche project.

The carvers added little work to the Renaissance niche, which Giammartini dated with the inscription "Fecit anno domini MCMXIII." A bust of Lowry Burgess, college dean when the completion project began in October 1990, looks out from the 15th century Italian architecture section. Fairplay contends that is Giammartini's best work.

"There's been some misunderstanding about Lowry's head being up there," says Lindsey. "But it's part of the stone carving tradition to commemorate people who made the project come alive."

A similar rondel above the 17th century French baroque section in the Renaissance niche remains blank. Cleary says 60-70 years from now someone else can add to it. Fairplay thinks President Robert Mehrabian's image would work perfectly in the spot.

Far left, King Solomon, a Nicholas Fairplay sculpture, captures the transitional move from Romanesque to Gothic, seen in mid-12th century works in France. Smaller carvings by Thomas Trenchard suggest educational activities. Bacchus, in title, melds with Henry Hornbostel, campus architect, in the Roman entry niche. Right, an Indian woman by Fairplay, takes its inspiration from an 11th century Hindu temple statue in the Indian Museum in Calcutta. Some scholars think the woman is painting.



## NICHES



Hieroglyphics in the final niche come from the "Teachings of Ptah-Hotep" (circa 2300 B.C.) and read: "Do not be arrogant because of your knowledge. Consult with those who do not know as well as those who do know. The limits of an art can never be reached. No artist's abilities are perfect. Good works are more hidden than precious stones, yet may be found among servants at the grindstones."

The final niche, termed "Oriental" by Hornbostel and used for all "non-western" architecture, is referred to now as the world niche. It is a busy incorporation of architectural elements from six cultures: Chinese, Egyptian, Hindu (India), Islamic, Khmer (Cambodia) and Mayan. Its Islamic dome is a network of stars borrowed from the 12th century dome in the Hall of the Ambassadors in Alcazar, Seville, Spain. The niche combines an 11th century Indian statue, set in a 9th century aedicula from the Temple of Baital Deul; a 10th century aedicula from Banteai Sre, containing a figure of Buddha; Chinese columns; Egyptian hieroglyphics; a mihrab, which is a prayer niche in an Islamic mosque, indicating the direction of Mecca; Mayan columns from the 9th century settlement at Chichen Itza on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico; and calligraphy praising Allah.

B egun in 1912 at a cost of \$50,000, the niche project came to a halt after about two-thirds of the work on the Renaissance niche and part of the entrance niche were finished. The three other niches remained untouched.

"Everything seems to point to a real familiar story on campus—money," says

Cleary. "I think the priority at the time was to really get the College of Fine Arts building up and running."

For years the niches yawned their incompleteness to the world. And only the insistence of the late alumnus Purnell, an Art Department graduate and well-known Pittsburgh interior designer, brought life to the huge blocks of stone anchored to the building's steel frame.

Architect Hornbostel wanted the niches to teach just as the rest of the Fine Arts building does with its floor plans of St. Peter's in Rome, the Parthenon at Athens, Chartres cathedral in France and the Temple of Edfu in Egypt inlaid in the college corridors; its replica of the 17th century City Hall doorway at Toulon, France, brooding over the entrance to the dean's office; and its candelabra copied from the lamps in the park at Versailles.

The stonecarvers, led by master carver Nicholas Fairplay of the Cathedral Stoneworks of New York City, have worked through all four seasons of the past three years, shielded with protective tenting. They have included Thomas Trenchard from England; Emmanuel Fourchet and Jean Jacques from France; and Ruben Dario Llano and Juan Salazar from Colombia; and apprentices Julie Barbeta (A '91), Jason Brenner (A '92), David Caskey from the Czech Republic, Daniel Dailey from England and Richard C. Conrad (A '93).

Because the stones were placed in the niches and attached to the building's framework, most of the work was done in place. "It was much more time consuming and much more difficult because the dust is going into your face when you're doing the ceiling, and you're working upside down," says Fairplay. "When you're trying to get behind the carving, you may be damaging the carving next to it. It's not as easy as carving and cutting on the ground." Only the statues and free-stand-



An Ionic capital inspired by the Erectheum in Athens, 421-405 B.C.