

14

Figures in the Landscape

IN LATE 1954, Ann and her mother made an extensive trip out west. It was the first of several trips they were to take together in the coming years, for after Ralph's death, Ann's mother spent much of every year with her daughter in Florida. This trip was to be transformative for the artist. Ann saw for the first time the spectacular rock formations and buttes, the gorges and canyons, of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, those natural sculptures of the southwestern desert whose colors and images were to burn into her consciousness for ever after. A photograph of the strange vertical rock shapes of Bryce Canyon, found in her papers, is a vital clue to her changed perceptions during that unforgettable, life-changing trip.

Before she left, she had contracted to design and build for the Norton Gallery a three-figure bronze sculpture as a memorial to Ralph, for which he had given his blessing. This was Ann's "project." At this point, everyone was in agreement about the work. Letters had gone out to the trustees of the Norton Gallery about the design, including to Daniel Catton Rich, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of Ralph's appointees on the board and charged with approving all projects the Gallery took on. He responded with great enthusiasm. In a letter to Willis Woods, director of the Gallery, he wrote, "I like Ann Norton's sculpture project. In fact, it is the best thing I have ever seen by her. Also I believe that its setting has been most carefully considered in relation to the Norton Gallery building." He

concluded, “I feel sure Ralph would have been most enthusiastic over the high quality and intense poetry which the scheme conveys.”

But what had Daniel Rich seen? No doubt the drawings of the three-foot-high work she had originally envisaged. During this time, all those involved assumed that the sculpture in its completed form would be that size. In December 1955 a contract was drawn up between Ann Norton and the Palm Beach Art League. The League would “procure, erect and maintain” the sculpture. Ann contracted to provide the League with funds during this year and in subsequent years to achieve this goal. Ann also required approval of the design, landscaping, and lighting of the work. In other words, the Palm Beach Art League would own and maintain the work, which would stand in Gallery Park, the original site approved by Ralph before his death.

So far, so good. But when the Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company of Chicago (Ralph’s bankers and trustees) became aware of this plan, a serious obstacle arose. The vice president of the bank (and Ann’s trustee), Cecil Bronston, pounced on the issue of the funds Ann had contracted to pay the League for the project, funds that everyone had assumed would come from her trust income. After consulting with lawyers, he wrote to Willis Woods with rather stern advice: “Our counsel state their opinion to be that legal considerations bar the use of such funds for the project. In addition, some question of propriety arises if funds coming rather directly to Mr. Norton are to be used to provide a memorial to him.” (In fact, Ralph had left Ann a separate fund to pay for the memorial.)

But all of these issues became moot after Ann’s return from the Southwest. “As I travelled through the rough deserts of Arizona and New Mexico,” she told Susan Hubbard of the *Palm Beach Post* in 1967, “I saw thousands of figures eroded in the rocks. Only an artist could see those mysterious shapes, those beautiful and impersonal forms.” To another reporter she expanded on her description of what she saw in Bryce Canyon. “They are ranged in rows, waiting for something marvellous and majestic to happen. I don’t know what.”

The exposure to such a dramatic landscape shocked her senses to the core, and when she got home she took a long, hard look at the memorial sculpture she had designed for the Norton. Her visit to the Southwest had changed everything. She felt now that it must become far larger in scale than the original work she had discussed with her late husband. Instead of

creating a small sculpture approximately thirty-six inches in size, as originally envisaged, she wished now to carve a grouping of seven figures, the tallest of which was to be twelve feet high. The complete work would ultimately take up nineteen-and-a-half feet of space, a very different prospect from the first concept. Moreover, after considering bronze as the material, she decided that the work must be carved in pink Norwegian granite, whose coloration perhaps reminded her of the glowing rock formations she had seen in Utah.

Ann knew she was embarking on something very controversial. She was also perhaps a little nervous about how Ralph's family would feel about the changes. She carefully kept them in the loop as events developed, writing reassuringly about the plans to put the project in the park, "an enlarged version so the architects can work with us for exact locations, size etc." The only one who seemed to take an interest was Ralph's daughter, Beatrice, who liked Ann and gave her \$5,000 to continue the work.

But it was going to take more than money (and lots of it) to do what Ann wanted to do. The challenge, like the work, was monumental. Even if Ann had been a hulking seven-foot giant of a strongman, let alone what she was, a diminutive, frail woman about to enter her fifties, this enormous work could not have been done without help.

Enter Gene Leofanti, the man who was to work closely with her on all of her projects until the end of her life. Gene Leofanti was born in Lucca, Italy, in 1910, and grew up in New York City. He became an accomplished wood carver but decided to specialize in the enlargement of sculpture, in particular monumental works. Many well-known sculptors visited his studio on Staten Island over the years to work with him, including George Lober, William Zorach, José de Creeft (all part of Ann's circle), and Jacques Lipschitz. It was often said that Leofanti was more of an artist/collaborator than a technician.

Some time in the early 1950s, Ann visited his studio on Staten Island, as so many of her colleagues had done. She watched him work for a while without interrupting. When the shy, reticent Southern artist finally showed her her portfolio, Gene was astonished. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing."

It was at first as a technician that Ann hired him. To enlarge sculptural figures is an enormously complicated business of proportions, extensions, weight, and balance. What looks good in a small size often looks top-heavy or off-kilter in an enlargement. Models were made in Plasticene,

then expanded and enlarged to the size the artist required. Leofanti's skill was in finding the right measurements accurately to reflect the artist's original piece in all its proportional perfection.

Granite is one of the most forbidding materials to carve successfully. Moreover, pink Norwegian granite was not exactly the easiest material in the world to obtain. And what about transporting huge blocks of it to West Palm Beach? And once in West Palm Beach, how was Ann herself going to make the basic carvings from this stone? She was not deterred. With Gene Leofanti on board, she hired his friend, Rene Lavaggi, a distinguished stone-carver, to help hammer the forms that she required.

But all this took time. In 1957, having at first thought that she would make the castings in bronze, she collected several estimates, ultimately choosing the Bruno Bearzi foundry in Florence, Italy, to make the initial castings of the figures. She decided on the granite a year or so later. (She had begun in the meantime to make other pieces in bronze.) The small plaster models that she produced in her studio were transcribed by means of a three-dimensional pantograph machine onto full-size wood and Plasticene models, from which the stone-carvers worked on the stone.

The granite, quarried in Norway, was shipped to Vermont, where it was carved into the rough size of the figures, and then transported by truck to West Palm Beach. The labor and transportation were considerably more expensive than the granite itself. The large team of Norwegians, Italians, and Americans, often bogged down by the bureaucratic paperwork required, all contributed to the effort to get the project up and running. There were endless hitches. Ann had to make several trips to Italy to visit Bruno Bearzi. Shipments from the foundry arrived in West Palm Beach damaged or broken. For a time, granite blocks were stuck in customs in New York, requiring a court order to complete their journey.

The most difficult part remained the technical aspect of the enlargements. To enlarge a model from three feet in height to twelve feet was a challenge that continued to slow down the project. As late as 1961 Gene and Ann were still struggling with these issues. In February of that year Gene wrote to Ann: "This may sound far-fetched, but casting two figures together of this size requires all the planning and knowledge of casting that we can put into them to have them come out perfect."

In May 1961, her old and dear friend Ade Bethune, on her way to Portugal and Spain, visited her in West Palm Beach. With her shrewd artist's eye, Ade at once saw the difficulties Ann and Gene were dealing with