



CHRISTOPHER SLATOFF:

Gifted Hands

by Molly Siple

*Author Ray Bradbury with
sculptor Christopher Slatoff*

THIS PAST SPRING, CHRISTOPHER SLATOFF won the Gold Medal for Sculpture at the 97th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition of the California Art Club, an honour that came to him easily. Chat with him for a while and it becomes obvious that he is in that sort of place, grounded and at ease, that comes to those doing exactly what they were born to do, and with mastery.

Slatoff is a fourth generation Californian, raised in the town of Hayward in the East Bay area of San Francisco. An ancestor on his mother's side was cook for General Winfield Scott (1786–1866) in the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and eventually opened a hotel in Hayward. Slatoff's father, Howard Slatoff, a painter and designer, was Dean of Men at California State University, Hayward and later taught art at the school, helping set the stage for the younger Slatoff's career that also has included teaching.

Slatoff has taught sculpting at California State University Long Beach and has worked as an Artist Facilitator at Metropolitan State Hospital. In addition, he received a State of California Artist in Residence Grant in 1986 to work with special needs children in public schools and volunteered in the public schools, setting up after-school art programs. For the past two years, Christopher Slatoff has been providing dynamic sculpture classes at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena for the Art Center at Night Programs.

Slatoff began studying art in high school, following a curriculum that did not include three-dimensional work, and had to wait until college to study sculpture, his natural talent. "The gift is in my hands," he says, "not in my eyes." He sketches ideas for new works in clay, but not with pencil. He attended Long Beach State because at that time it was the only institution he knew of that taught figurative sculpting. Here, Slatoff also immersed himself in art history and language classes,

and still retains fluency in French and Spanish. His 'junior year abroad' in Aix-en-Provence was a perfect fit. Graduating in 1978, Slatoff's life became divided between sculpting and his day job in research and development in the aerospace industry.

Slatoff has always opted for creating figurative



Christopher Slatoff
Pieta, Station 13 of the 14 Stations of the Cross (detail), 2001
Bronze 11" × 15" × 5"
Collection: Mission San Diego, San Diego, California
Photo credit: Victoria Pearson



Christopher Slatoff
Sheltering Wings, 1996
 Bronze on concrete base 96" × 84" × 84"
 Commissioned by the Port District of San Diego for Shoreline Park, Coronado Island, California

sculpture over non-representational, but his exploration of this has taken many forms. In the 1970s he became fascinated with the possibilities of working in strong colours using plastics, spurred by the work of sculptors at that time using opaque and translucent coloured plastic. The recent exhibit at the **Norton Simon Museum**, *Translucence*, featured their work. The sculpture of Los Angeles artist **Robert Graham** was also a key influence, helping to prompt Slatoff to settle in a city that considered a figurative sculptor to be its most celebrated visual artist.

Then in the 1980s Slatoff turned to sculpting fragments of the human form. "We see the moon in phases," he explains, "and feel we're familiar with it in its entirety by knowing its parts, and the same can apply to the human body. I also like series of images which can express certain ideas better than a single sculpture. My favourite works of sculpture are the figures by **Michelangelo** (1475–1564) in the **Medici Chapel** in Florence, representing the passage of morning to night. The *Gates of Paradise* by **Lorenzo Ghiberti** (1378–1455) on the doors to the **Baptistry** in Florence and the sculptures on the south porch of **Chartres** also tell a story in this way, the parts making up a whole."

At this time, Slatoff also began working with paper, actual and cast paper, to create literally bed sheets and shrouds around his figures and also to suggest sleep and the written word. The seeds of the power of paper as an image were planted in his mind when, after waiting in a long line, he got a glimpse of the shreds of the

Dead Sea Scrolls, which were on display at the 1964 **World's Fair** in New York.

Such draping quite naturally generates the rounded, undulating forms that Slatoff contends mark him as a California artist. "I once read that **Henry Moore** (1898–1986) said that his sculpture showed he was from **Yorkshire**, his signature convex and concave shapes the same forms as the rocky landscape of that region. I thought this notion was way too limiting and certainly did not apply to me until I was returning from a trip to **Yosemite**, perhaps the greatest natural landscape on the planet, when I came over the part of the freeway nicknamed "the grapevine," heading into Los Angeles. I was surrounded by typical California rounded hills marked by indentations and creases where rivulets had carved into the land. The terrain looked like a thick fabric that someone had taken and fluffed, and I realized that these were exactly the shapes I favoured in my own work, reflecting my native terrain just like Moore!"

Slatoff's career took another turn, when in 1994, a church in **San Diego** commissioned a piece of sculpture entitled, *Our Mother of Confidence*. Since then, Slatoff has executed more than a dozen monumental public works of art based on religious themes, and became the official sculptor for the **Via Dolorosa Society** for its project to retrace the Passion of Christ by creating fourteen life-sized bronze renditions of the *Stations of the Cross*. His sculpture group, *Jesus Being Nailed to the Cross*, (Station 11) was exhibited at the **Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels**, in downtown Los Angeles, as part of the California Art Club's group exhibition, *Spiritual Spectrum*. The Cathedral then kept this work on display for more than a year. The sculpture was so realistic that Cathedral visitors were often seen and photographed intently holding back the right arm of one of the centurions who is nailing Christ to the cross. The sculpture is currently on view at **Fuller Theological Seminary** in Pasadena.

ONE REASON SLATOFF HAS PRODUCED A SIGNIFICANT body of religious sculpture, as he explains, is that "churches have been the only groups today brave enough to commission large public works in a figurative manner. Commissions for figurative fine art municipal projects are practically non-existent. Cities want non-representational sculpture because it can be interpreted in so many different ways and doesn't run the risk of being politically incorrect. And if they do approve figurative art, it usually consists of cartoonish figures." Slatoff adds, "Great art meets you, whatever emotions you are feeling and takes you beyond. An artist needs to leave room for the viewer to become involved."



S LATOFF ACKNOWLEDGES THAT HE IS MOST known for his religious pieces, but emphasizes that his creative interests are broader than this and that he is foremost a sculptor of the human form, whatever the theme. Yet he is quick to say, “All art is religious art. The scenes of domestic life by **Johannes Vermeer** (1632–1675) are religious paintings because of their strength and humility.” For Slatoff, the notion of “sheltering” has religious overtones whatever the specific theme. He considers his *Pieta* of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus, which is located at the **San Diego Mission** and his work, *Sheltering Wings*, a composition of two great blue herons commissioned by the **Port District of San Diego** and installed on Coronado Island, to both be examples of “love” taking form. As he says, “All my art is pietas.”

Carrying this approach into his teaching, Slatoff tells his students, “All art should ask the big questions or else why bother making the effort to express something?” And he continues, “If the only question you are asking yourself is how to make your piece look exactly like the model, you’re not asking yourself the right questions. Never confuse a life-study with a sculpture.” In this vein, he also likes to quote the artist **Ben Shawn** (1898–1969) from his book, *The Shape of Content*. “Shawn advised artists to select forms according to what they want to say, and I agree with him.”

A stunning example of this is Slatoff’s sculpture, *Fr. Electrico*, the bronze that earned him his Gold Medal. Slatoff attended one of the salons that CAC member **Carol King** and her husband **Richard King** have been hosting now for many years in their Pasadena home on Sunday mornings. That day, author **Ray Bradbury** was the speaker. A close friendship developed between Slatoff and Bradbury who found that they shared much in common in their views on creativity and also similar relationships with their fathers.

Slatoff offered to sculpt a portrait of Bradbury, but the author eventually came up with another concept inspired by events in his youth. On a particular day when Bradbury was only twelve, not just one, but two circuses were opening in his home town. Up at 5:00 a.m., he headed for the smaller of the two and was given the chance to help unload the circus animals off the train—in exchange for free admission. Later, he

took in the big **Ringling Brother’s** show with his father. It was midnight before the two set out to return home, his father carrying his exhausted son the mile and a half home. “Here was the image for the sculpture,” says Slatoff. “Bradbury had seen my *Pieta* and it



LEFT:
Back view detail of *Fr. Electrico*

BELOW:
Christopher Slatoff
Fr. Electrico, 2008
Bronze 36" × 18" × 18"
Winner of CAC 97th Annual Gold
Medal for Best Sculpture, 2008
Private Collection
Photo credit: Victoria Pearson





reminded him of being carried on that night, the ultimate symbol of his father's love for him."

The imagery in the sculpture also springs from a special day at a carnival. The popular carnival magician, **Mr. Electrico**, walked up to Bradbury and touched him on his forehead with a mildly charged metal wand that made the boy's hair stand on end. As this happened, Mr. Electrico said, "live forever." Bradbury says the next day he began writing and has done so every day since. That day the magician also introduced him to other carnival personalities, including a tattooed man who later inspired Bradbury's renowned book, *The Illustrated Man*.

From all this material, Slatoff constructed the final work. The front view tells of the father who helped carry Bradbury into life, while the back view, in effect, an illustrated man, portrays the creative force that has carried the writer through his career. The father's back incorporates all sorts of three-dimensional illustrations—lions, astronauts, and firemen from Bradbury's novels and even images from Slatoff's conversations with the great writer. It also includes the pocket watch that Bradbury's grandfather gave to his grandson as a gift of confidence. Slatoff comments, "These of course, are all the things that await the sleeping boy as he leaves his father's arms to assume manhood." The piece is a collaboration of the two men, incorporating images of their combined concepts, but ultimately expressing the creative and destructive forces, as well as the sense of adventure that is present in both men's work.

SLATOFF IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON A HEROIC scale version of this piece which conveys special meaning. Slatoff used his own son, **James**, now eleven, as the model for the young Bradbury. The boy's body is already too long and heavy to easily carry, very near puberty, Slatoff's way of showing what he poignantly describes as "that last quiet sleep in your father's arms" before all the cares and passions of adulthood begin. And the body of the boy is six-feet while the father is eight-feet tall. "With this scale, the viewer experiences the sculpture as a child would feel it," explains the artist.

In the context of such substantial work, it may seem surprising to hear Slatoff refers to sculpting as "playing with clay," but this he does with a big smile and a gentle voice. No doubt such lightness of spirit has given him a useful balance to his work as sculptor and teacher. It also has allowed him the freedom to devote time to working in sand, beach sand that is. He is a world-class builder of sand-sculptures. Slatoff was part of the team once cited in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having constructed the largest sand-sculpture ever, the highest sandcastle and the largest in Europe. Slatoff contends that Ray Bradbury helped him to realize that "there is no division between high art and low art."

Today, as Sculpture Chairman for the California Art Club, Slatoff plays an active role in promoting figurative sculpture and sculptors. "What **Peter Adams** did for the whole club I'm trying to do for the sculpture division, to create a place where sculptors feel welcome, where they can share information about materials and even go on 'sculpt-outs.' I also want to make arts patrons more aware of the truly skilled sculptors in our midst. People who need to commission pieces don't know where to find sculptors. Like the ad about the wrong way to find a dentist, they shouldn't just ask a friend, 'Hey, do you happen to know any sculptors?' I'd like those intending to commission a sculptural work to learn that they can contact the California Art Club to find a good artist."

Slatoff was out in full view, when he presented an "Artist's Point of View" talk at **The Getty Center Los Angeles**, speaking on the travelling exhibit of **Bernini** sculptures on view there. He recently returned from conducting a class organized by **Fuller Seminary** on "Medieval and



Slatoff and Bradbury collaborating on Fr. Electrico



Christopher Slatoff
Pregnant Sleep, 2006
Cast stone 20" x 48" x 20"
Photo credit: Victoria Pearson



Christopher Slatoff
Lazarus, 2007
Bronze 38" x 12" x 12"
On loan to the Library of Fuller
Theological Seminary

Renaissance Spirituality and Art” in Orvieto, Italy. Next summer Slatoff will return to Orvieto to teach a three-week workshop on sculpting, where the class will begin by studying life-sculpting in a magnificent twelfth-century monastery, followed by a tour of the great sculptures of Florence and Rome, concluding with one more week of sculpting built on the knowledge gained by having just viewed the great Masters of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque eras.

Presently, he’s working on a monumental public sculpture for **Pepperdine University**. But most days you’ll find Christopher Slatoff in his studio, a lofty corrugated tin structure that fills half the garden area of the former **Huron Substation** for electric power at the base of Mount Washington. Here, figurative sculpture and the great tradition from which it stems are alive and thriving in Los Angeles.

Notes:

Contributing Editor Molly Siple studied painting and art history at the University of California at Berkeley. She has also taken formal training from master artists Shuqiao Zhou and Jove Wang. Ms. Siple is a regular contributor to American Artist and Workshop magazines, and contributes to various other art publications including Southwest Art magazine. In addition, she co-authored, along with Jean Stern and Roy Rose, the book, Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island. To learn more about sculptor Christopher Slatoff, go to www.slatoffsculpture.com. For information on the 2009 Orvieto Workshop, go to www.americanlegacyfinearts.com; For information on the Bernini and the Birth of Baroque Portraiture exhibition at The Getty, please see the Exhibition Listings in this Newsletter.

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