



4-1-1999

A Sculptor's Testimony in Bronze and Stone: The Sacred Sculpture of Avard T. Fairbanks Eugene F. Fairbanks

Norma S. Davis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Norma S. (1999) "A Sculptor's Testimony in Bronze and Stone: The Sacred Sculpture of Avard T. Fairbanks Eugene F. Fairbanks," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 38 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol38/iss2/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

EUGENE F. FAIRBANKS. *A Sculptor's Testimony in Bronze and Stone: The Sacred Sculpture of Avard T. Fairbanks*. Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1994. xi; 147 pp. Illustrations. \$21.95.

Reviewed by Norma S. Davis, Emeritus Associate Professor of Humanities, Brigham Young University.

In 1972, Eugene F. Fairbanks published a book on the life and work of his father, the sculptor Avard T. Fairbanks. Twelve years later, and seven years after his father's death in 1987, the author revised and published a second edition, completing the narration of the artist's long and successful career. As the title of this book implies, Avard Fairbanks devoted much of his life to expressing the message of the restored gospel through his art. He chose to do so by sculpting idealized men, women, and children who are handsome and strong as well as steadfast in their devotion to truth. Heroically, they face life and its often inexplicable hardships calmly and gracefully.

The first twelve pages of the book give a brief biography of the artist. The reader learns that Avard was born in Provo, Utah, in 1897 to a family of artists. His father, John B. Fairbanks, was one of the early pioneer artists in the territory. Avard's older brother, J. Leo, studied art in Paris and was a recognized artist in the Rocky Mountain region. Therefore, it came as no surprise when Avard showed exceptional artistic talent from a very early age. When John B. Fairbanks gained permission to work in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art making copies of masterpieces, young Avard soon followed. A few months later, the boy received a scholarship at the Art Students League, where he studied sculpture under the noted James Earl Fraser. According to the biography, his youthful talent attracted the attention of some of the best sculptors of the day. Motivated by this recognition of the boy's talent, John B. took Avard to Paris when Avard was about fifteen years old. While the son studied at various art academies, the father painted. Together they increased their knowledge by regular visits to the museums. This ideal experience was cut short by the advent of World War I. There follows an interesting account of their narrow escape from France just ahead of the advancing German army and a description of a harrowing trip home by ship. The unique quality of Avard's childhood convinced the young man and his family that he was to use his talents to fulfill a special mission for the Church.

J. Leo and Avard received a commission to erect four friezes for the LDS temple in Laie, Hawaii. The story continues with an account of Avard's marriage, his early commissions for sculptures, and his studies at the University of Utah. Based mainly on his accomplishments as a sculptor rather than his academic standing, Fairbanks was appointed an assistant professor of art at the School of Architecture at the University of Oregon in

Eugene in 1920. A leave of absence from that school in 1924 allowed him to attend Yale University to earn his bachelor of fine arts degree. He then returned to Oregon, where he continued to teach and sculpt until he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He took his wife and four young boys to Europe for the next few years. On their return in 1928, Avard taught at the Seattle Institute of Art and earned a master of fine arts degree at the University of Washington. The next year he was appointed associate professor and resident sculptor in the Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Michigan. During the next eighteen years, he produced a large quantity of sculpture and earned both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in anatomy. In 1947, Fairbanks returned to Utah with his family when he accepted a position as dean of the College of Fine Arts at the University of Utah. From then until his death in 1987, he was recognized as one of the leading artists of the state.

The remaining 133 pages of the book focus on some of Fairbanks's most notable religious sculptures. Each turn of the page introduces the reader to a new work of art, reproduced in black and white and accompanied by a brief descriptive text. Usually the text is confined to a few passages of scripture or a brief explanation of the history of the subject. The two most comprehensive coverages are associated with his work on the Hawaii Temple and his various sculptures of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Excerpts from the artist's correspondence during his work on some of the sculptures contain interesting and informative material. The book closes with a section titled "The Mission of Avard T. Fairbanks," which reminds us that this has been the central focus of the book:

The clay and tools were lifted from the sculptor's hands on the first day of 1987, at the end of a 78 year professional career. Avard Fairbanks left a legacy of influence and momentum to create high quality and dynamic art among his students and family which death cannot erase. His mission continues in bronze and stone. (147)

Although the book provides insight into the artist and his work, typographical errors and extensive use of the passive voice were annoying to this reader. The book is a limited, highly personal narration; the importance of the subject demands a more comprehensive study. Putting the religious works in context with Fairbanks's sculpture on other themes could have provided a broader evaluation of the artist's abilities. A more detached author could have documented in greater detail Fairbanks's training and traced the influences of his teachers and family members upon his content, technique, and style. More comparisons of his works with those of his contemporaries in and outside Utah would allow the reader to arrive at a more informed understanding of Avard T. Fairbanks's place in the history of sculpture. Having said this, the fact that this is a book written mainly under the influence of the artist himself and augmented by the personal observations of his son makes it a valuable contribution to the history of the arts in Utah.