

Portfolio: Jewel of the Mall

Photographer Stephen Brown spent considerable time and monies following the construction, installation and completion of the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. This portfolio displays a sampling of this work.

Text and photographs by Stephen R. Brown



An eagle is lifted into place before being lowered in the Baldachin.

As I was riding down the Mall last June, I noticed construction on the World War II Memorial was – after eight years of litigation – finally underway. I called the sculptor Ray Kaskey to congratulate him and kidded him about his aversion to press and photography. He said: “No problem...there’s been no press whatever.” After further inquiry, I realized that nobody was doing an in-depth project.

After all the planning and design by major architectural and construction firms and historical and fine art committees, no one had thought about documenting this historical project in the middle of the Nation’s Capitol! I decided to do it. I realized – after numerous rejections and “ho-hums” from magazines and institutions – that I would have to finance the project myself. This would give me the advantage of absolute and clear ownership of the material, but it meant I would be without income for ten months.

During June, July and August of 2003, I photographed the casting and manufacturing process of the eight-ton bronze eagles at the Laran Foundry in Chester, Pennsylvania. In September, Apex Piping, which had designed the internal structure and base of the eagles, did a “test” installation inside the foundry. Because they needed several cranes to arrange the 80,000-pound sculptures, I set up large studio lights as far away from the action as possible and worked unobtrusively and carefully, observing safety protocols.

In October and November, the eagles were shipped to D.C. Having gained the trust of the people from Apex Piping and Laran Foundry by staying out of their way during the test installation, I was allowed to work with them on the Mall site. It took three weeks to install the eight eagles and weld two laurel wreaths between them. I brought my own safety harness and was given access to the cranes when the eagles were lifted into the air and lowered into place into the Baldachins (structures where they are housed permanently).

The images in this essay represent decisive moments in the construction. You get a sense of the enormity of the sculptures from the image of them being lifted into the air with the D.C. skyline in the background. Now that they are in place in the Baldachins, these majestic bronze eagles seem “right-sized” to their place in the Memorial.

I was on the Mall sixteen hours a day throughout the installation period. After years of working “elbow-to-elbow” with other photographers in Washington, I was the only photographer on site most days. I am about to complete documentation of the finished project.

As you wander the site in the late evening, you can experience the genius of Ray Kaskey’s high-flying eagles, wreaths, rope and stars that adorn architect Friedrich St. Florian’s majestic design. Because of the Memorial’s low profile, as you look out through the 56 columns representing the states and territories that fought in World War II, they frame the other monuments on the Mall. This is truly a masterpiece, which I suspect will soon be recognized as the Jewel of the Mall. Its classical design, intricate bronze work, fountains and seating arrangements invite the visitor to rest and contemplate the price of freedom.

Stephen R. Brown is currently working on a book on the World War II Memorial. Brown handles his own stock and can be reached at his studio, 3715 T Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20007; phone: 202.667.1965; cell: 202.255.8635; email: srb@srbphoto.com; website: <http://www.srbphoto.com>. Stephen is an ASPP member. See <http://www.srbphoto.com/wwiimemorial> for stock images, unsigned prints, and a limited-edition set of prints on archival paper. Photos from this series appeared in Smithsonian magazine (April 2004) and in a 36-page commemorative advertorial in the Washington Post Magazine (May 2004).



A laurel wreath will soon be welded to the beaks of four eagles and will symbolize peace.



Sculptor Ray Kaskey began this project eight years ago. This is the largest bronze project in contemporary history.



Architect Friedrich St. Florian designed the Memorial. St. Florian is Dean of the Rhode Island School of Design.



After six years of debate, St. Florian's design got the go-ahead because not only did it not block the long Mall view, but it adds a few views of its own. From inside the Memorial, the 56 columns frame the surrounding monuments in the Mall.



Photography ©Stephen K. Brown 2003

An eagle is carefully lowered into the Baldachin, with only about three inches of clearance.



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Annapolis-based stone carver Joe Moss did the major carving on the Atlantic and Pacific Baldachins.