

Culture Club

Inspiration in Sculpture

Harrisburg native returns home to create "Park Mother."

Rick Kearns



"Park Mother," a reassuring presence in Reservoir Park.

When traveling along the northern side of Harrisburg's Reservoir Park, down the hill and west of The National Civil War Museum, many people notice a remarkable sculpture on the hillside.

Unfortunately, few visitors get close enough to see an amazing 12-foot high statue of a resolute-looking woman, wearing a cape with her arms spread out to cover a bunch of kids and a little dog, all of whom are leaning in to her. She is the "Park Mother." Her creator, Deborah Masters, originally from Harrisburg, is a nationally respected sculptor who drew inspiration for the piece from medieval and Byzantine art.

Masters, whose work has been reviewed in *The New York Times*, *Art in America* and *Sculpture Magazine*, spoke to *TheBurg* about "Park Mother" and some of her local education.

TheBurg: How did the creation of "Park Mother" come about?

Masters: I remember going to Reservoir Park when I was young, and it was beautiful and elegant. Many years later, after I had started my career, I came back to Harrisburg to visit my mother, and I saw that the park had become shabby-looking, with lots of mothers hovering around their kids, with a few wild kids running around. That image stayed with me. But before that, I had become interested

in Byzantine and medieval art when I was studying at Bryn Mawr [College]. I was inspired by the paintings of the Madonna della Misericordia (Virgin of Mercy). In medieval society, everybody lived in a walled town and everything revolved around the church. The [Madonna] painting referred to somebody

protecting you in a scary time. I had her in mind when I did "Park Mother," and all of the kids in the piece are kids I met in the park.

TheBurg: When was this and from where did the funding come?

Masters: It was in 1991, when I found out that Mrs. Lois Glass (local patron of the arts) was searching for a sculptor to create a special work for Reservoir Park. I was teaching in California at the time, and I came out to meet with Mrs. Glass a few times. I was commissioned to do the work, and it was great, no real time pressure. It probably took two years to complete it.

TheBurg: How did you make such a large sculpture? What materials did you use?

Masters: It was made originally in clay; there were about seven or eight tons of clay in that piece. The base was strong enough, I welded the armature ... after that you make a rubber mold of it in pieces so as to replace them and then pour. We poured seven or eight yards of concrete. No problems in the making of it. The mold didn't break and it is such a big piece.

TheBurg: You mentioned something about local kids?

Masters: Yes, the kids really loved it. There were some little fights about whom I chose, but they loved

it. Folks around here were very helpful. I do a lot of work with the community wherever I am creating, and I was very interested in that part of Harrisburg. I've always been interested in the common man, and I try to represent them in my work. But whenever you do sculpture in public spaces, you have to make it strong and sturdy. It's funny, in New York people sometimes take sledgehammers to stone pieces but they leave the paper ones alone.

TheBurg: When did you become interested in the arts?

Masters: I went to the Harrisburg Academy, and we had art a lot. They were more craft classes than fine arts classes, but they did serve to boost my self-confidence. Drawing and painting, I did myself. I was very sick as a child and by way of entertaining me, my mother provided a wealth of art materials. I would go sit in the middle of our field with my dog and paint or draw whatever I was looking at. When I was too sick to go outside, I painted still lifes in the kitchen.

My father would sometimes drop me at the Philadelphia Museum when he went on business trips to Philly. I would be allowed to wander around the museum by myself for four to five hours. He would give me enough money to have lunch and buy an art book. These heavenly outings were probably responsible for my becoming an artist. I also lived in New Mexico and Mexico for a few months at a time with my mom when I was very young (after my father died). In Mexico you can't move without stumbling over sculpture and great architecture. I never did real artwork until I was taking a "materials and techniques of art history" class at Bryn Mawr when I was roughly 19. It was then that I realized my interest in art.

TheBurg: Thank you for your time.

For more on this Harrisburg native, visit www.deborahmasters.com.