

Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment



National Gallery of Art

The *Shaw Memorial Project* is made possible by the generous support of The Circle of the National Gallery of Art



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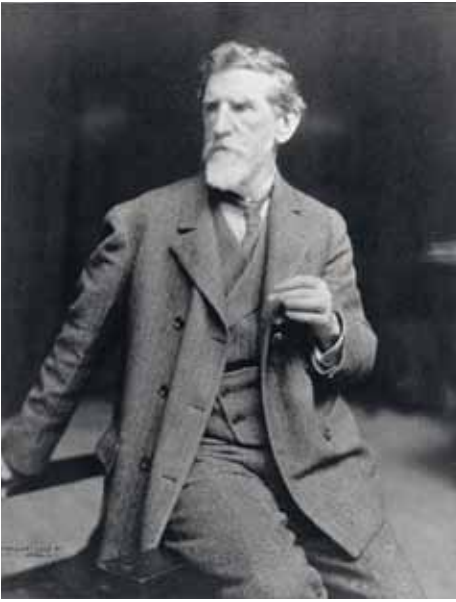
On July 18, 1863, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw was killed while leading the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Volunteer Infantry in a bloody assault on Fort Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina. Although nearly half of the regiment fell and was badly defeated, the battle proved to be an event of poignant and powerful symbolic significance, as the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth was one of the first African-American units of the Civil War. It would take nearly thirty-four years of public concern and more than a decade of devotion by America's foremost sculptor to create a fitting memorial to the sacrifice of these brave men (fig. 1). The result is the finest achievement of Augustus Saint-Gaudens' career, and arguably the greatest American sculpture of the nineteenth century.

The Sculptor

Born March 1, 1848, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (fig. 2) was brought to the United States from Ireland as an infant. His mother, Mary McGuinness, and his father, Bernard Saint-Gaudens, a Frenchman, settled in New York where Bernard began a shoemaking business. At thirteen Saint-Gaudens received his first training in sculpture in the workshop of a French-born cameo-cutter, and he later attended drawing classes at the Cooper Union School and the National Academy of Design.

In 1867 Saint-Gaudens went to Paris, where he supported himself by making cameos and copies of famous sculpture. He enrolled in the *École des Beaux-Arts* and, in museums, was exposed for the first time to European art of every age. At the

1. Shaw Memorial as installed at the National Gallery of Art



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onset of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 Saint-Gaudens left Paris for Rome, where he lived for five years. There he acquired a profound knowledge of classical and Renaissance sculpture. He was particularly taken with the clarity and naturalism of fifteenth-century Italian relief, an influence that found its way into his own low-relief portraits. In Rome, Saint-Gaudens established himself as a professional sculptor and received commissions for portrait busts. Of the more than two hundred commissions that he completed during his career, nearly three-quarters were portraits.

In 1875 Saint-Gaudens returned to New York, where he worked for Tiffany Studios and became one of a team of artists who executed the decoration for H. H. Richardson's Trinity Church in Boston under the supervision of John La Farge. His first major commission, and the earliest of his Civil War–related subjects, was the *Farragut Monument* (fig. 3), for which the architect Stanford White designed the base. A combi-

2. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1905



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nation of imposing realism and lofty idealism, the monument portrays the steely-eyed admiral David Glasgow Farragut, hero of the battles of New Orleans and Mobile Bay. With his coat flapping in the sea breeze, the admiral strides across an elegant base carved in low relief with the allegorical figures of Hope and Loyalty. It was erected in Madison Square Park, then one of New York's major public spaces, in 1881. The visibility and success of the Farragut memorial proved Saint-Gaudens' talent for public monuments, and he became the obvious choice for sculptor of the Robert Gould Shaw memorial.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, there was unprecedented interest in the United States in honoring its heroes through the public and permanent medium of sculpture. After accepting the Shaw commission in 1884, and while his ideas about its form were evolving, Saint-Gaudens produced a succession of other major pieces, including the dignified standing figure *Abraham Lincoln* (1884–1887, Chicago) and the equestrian monuments to Generals Logan (1897, Chicago) and Sherman (1892–1903, New York). In addition to these heroic public works, the sculptor created the graceful

3. *Farragut Monument*, 1881, bronze and granite, New York City. Gramstorff Archive, Department of Image

Collections, National Gallery of Art Library

Diana figure (1886, Philadelphia Museum of Art) that topped the tower of Madison Square Garden in New York and the *Adams Memorial* (1886–1891, Rock Creek Cemetery, Washington, DC), with its hauntingly poetic and mysterious hooded figure.

In 1885 Saint-Gaudens purchased a house and barn in Cornish, New Hampshire, now the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site. In subsequent years he was joined there by the artists Thomas Wilmer Dewing, George de Forest Brush, and Maxfield Parrish, among others, establishing an important artistic and literary colony in the area.

Saint-Gaudens' career thrived throughout the 1890s. He produced numerous replicas and reductions of some of his best-known work, such as the relief of the reclining figure of Robert Louis Stevenson. With many other artists, he worked on the decoration for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. When the McMillan Plan for the Improvement of Washington, DC, was adopted in 1901, he served as a consultant to the Board of Public Buildings. In 1905, at the request of President Theodore Roosevelt, he redesigned the United States coinage. Despite increasing ill health, Saint-Gaudens actively supervised numerous projects until his death on August 3, 1907. No other American sculptor of the post-Civil War era had approached his success in creating the grand and moving public monuments to the nation's heroes, as well as penetrating portraits of many figures of America's Gilded Age.

Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment

The Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Volunteer Infantry is the most famous Civil War unit of African Americans, but it was neither



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the first nor the only one. The First Kansas Colored was formed in August 1862, and by November of that year Colonel Thomas Higginson had mustered the First South Carolina Volunteers. Official government support of the call to arms for black troops, however, did not come until shortly after Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Within a few weeks, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton authorized Governor John Andrew of Massachusetts to raise the first African-American corps in the North.

Because Massachusetts had only a small African-American population from which to recruit, efforts were made to enlist men from all the northeastern states (fig. 4). Most recruits were free blacks. Some came from as far as Canada. Frederick Douglass, whose sons Charles and Lewis signed on with the Fifty-fourth, exhorted young men to give themselves to the cause. His inspirational appeal, "Men of Color, To Arms!" was widely circulated and was instrumental in filling Union ranks.

4. Recruiting broadside, 1863, Massachusetts Historical Society



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Aware of the importance of the success of the regiment in a climate of great skepticism, the staunchly abolitionist governor chose its officers from prominent Boston families with strong antislavery convictions, families that would lend moral as well as financial support to the endeavor. Although members of the African-American community objected to the army's practice of allowing only white officers, the long-awaited opportunity to fight for the destruction of slavery and the hope of being acknowledged as full citizens overcame the reservations of many.

For the colonel of the new regiment Governor Andrew and his advisers chose Robert Gould Shaw, a young Bostonian with impeccable family connections, strongly abolitionist parents, and substantive battle experience (fig. 5). Shaw, born on October 10, 1837, was the only son of Francis Gould and Sarah Sturgis Shaw. Socially conscious and deeply devoted to intellectual and spiritual pursuits, the Shaws counted among their friends and associates such thinkers,

writers, and reformers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. From 1856 until March 1859 Shaw attended Harvard University, but he withdrew before receiving his degree, entering his uncle's business in New York instead. After Lincoln's election and the secession of several southern states, Shaw joined the Seventh New York Regiment and marched with it to the defense of Washington in April 1861. The unit served only thirty days, but in the army Shaw had at last found a vocation that commanded his enthusiasm and respect. In May he joined the Second Massachusetts Infantry as first lieutenant.

During nearly two years of service in the Second, in which he rose to the rank of captain, Shaw was wounded at Antietam and saw some of his closest comrades fall in battle. But his resolve grew only firmer with each fight. In February 1863, Francis Shaw personally delivered Governor Andrew's offer of command of the new Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment to his son, then at Stafford Court House, Virginia. Not certain he was "equal to the responsibility of such a position," and no doubt reluctant to leave the regiment to which he was devoted, Shaw at first declined the offer. But his strong sense of duty prevailed. "Now," his mother wrote after he had accepted the post, "I feel ready to die, for I see you willing to give y[ou]r support to the cause of truth that is lying crushed and bleeding."¹

Although Shaw supported the idea of blacks in the military, his connection with African Americans had been more theoretical than actual, and he seems, at first, to have been surprised by the soldiering abilities of his enlistees. The men's accounts reveal that the respect and understanding between this very demanding commander

5. John Adams Whipple, *Colonel Robert Gould Shaw*, 1863, albumen photograph. Boston Athenaeum

and his troops grew steadily during their weeks of training.

On May 18, 1863, the Fifty-fourth Regiment received its flag from the governor, presented with the sobering words (later inscribed on the back of the bronze memorial), "I know not, Mr. Commander, where in all human history to any given thousand men in arms there has been committed a work at once so proud, so precious, so full of hope and glory as the work committed to you." Ten days later they marched through Boston to the cheers of an enthusiastic crowd. Detractors — and there were still some — drew their shades to the passing parade. As the twenty-five-year-old Shaw rode by his mother's family home at 44 Beacon Street, he raised and kissed his sword in a salute to his parents, sister, and his bride of less than one month, Annie Kneeland Haggerty. After boarding a steamer in Boston Harbor, the regiment sailed for South Carolina.

While waiting for engagement, Colonel Shaw wrote to protest the federal government's injustice of paying his troops less than white infantrymen. It would take the soldiers of the Fifty-fourth eighteen months of protest and the refusal to accept anything less than full compensation before they received full back pay.

The unit had its first test in battle on July 16, at James Island, South Carolina, where about 250 of its soldiers held their ground against 900 Confederates. A few hours later, the Fifty-fourth began an exhausting, muddy march in the rain to Morris Island, where the earthworks of Fort Wagner guarded access to the port of Charleston. Fort Wagner was the key to the Confederate defense of Charleston, and its capture was the cornerstone of the Union assault on that city. Union artillery

bombarded the battlements throughout the afternoon, and an attack was planned for that evening.

Asked by General George C. Strong if the Fifty-fourth would lead the attack on Wagner, Shaw could not refuse the opportunity to prove the regiment's mettle. Placing himself at its head, the young colonel led the charge. The Confederates, unscathed by the earlier shelling, easily cut down the exposed Union forces. Shaw and some of his men reached the parapet before he was killed by a bullet through the heart. Sergeant William H. Carney held the flag aloft throughout the battle, despite his severe wounds. He would be the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award. Union casualties numbered more than fifteen hundred, about ten times the number of Confederate losses. Of the approximately six hundred men of the Fifty-fourth who participated, almost half were killed, captured, or later died of their wounds. The Confederate general ordered Shaw's body stripped of its officer's uniform and thrown into a grave with twenty of his men. Several weeks later, when the fort was in Union hands, Shaw's parents explicitly requested that their son's body not be removed to provide him a proper officer's burial. They wanted, instead, to give him the more fitting honor of resting with his men.

After the July 18 assault, the bravery of the African-American soldiers was publicly recognized. The survivors of the Fifty-fourth went on to participate in the siege that eventually brought the fall of Fort Wagner, and they continued to serve until the end of the war. Their most important contribution, however, was their irrefutable example of valor and military skill. Had they faltered, recruitment of black troops

would have ceased and the war itself might have taken a different turn. Instead, nearly 180,000 African Americans fought for the Union, serving in infantry, cavalry, and artillery units, as well as engineering battalions. One-fourth of the Navy was made up of black sailors. The contribution of the African-American troops, Lincoln believed, had tipped the scales toward the Union's eventual victory.

The Memorial

Soon after the tragic events at Fort Wagner, the survivors of the Fifty-fourth raised funds for a memorial on Morris Island, but it was never built. In 1865, Joshua B. Smith, an African-American businessman who had once been an employee of the Shaw family, led the first movement to erect a monument to the Fifty-fourth's colonel in Boston. A committee of twenty-one was formed, intending "not only to mark the public gratitude to the fallen hero, who at a critical moment assumed a perilous responsibility, but also to commemorate the great event, wherein he was a leader, by which the title of colored men as citizen-soldiers was fixed beyond recall."² With the deaths of Governor Andrew and Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, the chief political supporters of the memorial effort, the project languished until the early 1880s. Saint-Gaudens, whose newly completed *Farragut Monument* had received great praise, was then introduced to the committee members by the well-established Boston architect H. H. Richardson. The sculptor began work immediately. By the end of 1883 he had produced numerous drawings and several small models of the proposed relief (figs. 6–8). A contract was signed on February 23, 1884, specifying a modest bronze relief to be completed in two years.



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6, 7. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, two early relief sketches for the *Shaw Memorial*, 1882, clay (no longer extant)

8. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, relief sketch for the *Shaw Memorial*, 1883, plaster



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The committee originally had proposed a free-standing equestrian statue (fig. 9), but Shaw's family believed that type of monument should be reserved for heroes of a higher military rank than their young son. Saint-Gaudens, accordingly, "fell upon the plan of associating him directly with his troops in a bas-relief, and thereby reducing his importance."³ But what started as a conventional relief eventually grew into an artistically challenging project of immense psychological and physical proportions. The commissioners became increasingly restless as Saint-Gaudens completed numerous other projects while the Shaw remained unfinished. The sculptor later explained:

In justice to myself I must say here that from the low-relief I proposed making when I undertook the Shaw commission, a relief that reasonably could be finished for the limited sum at the command of the committee, I, through my extreme interest in it and its opportunity, increased the conception until the rider grew almost to a statue in the round and the negroes assumed far more importance than

I had originally intended. Hence the monument, developing in this way infinitely beyond what could be paid for, became a labor of love, and lessened my hesitation in setting it aside at times to make way for lucrative commissions, commissions that would reimburse me for the pleasure and time I was devoting to this.⁴

Thus, the memorial continued to evolve for another twelve years. As the concept of including the men of the Fifty-fourth grew in importance, Saint-Gaudens created some forty heads of carefully selected models of different ages and varied features (figs. 10, 11), sixteen of which were incorporated into the final sculpture. It was a daunting feat to combine all the faces and figures in a harmonious yet dynamic whole. With the sea of legs marching in step and guns held at similar angles, Saint-Gaudens nevertheless created a tableau of variation, energy, and activity without a hint of awkwardness or confusion. At the same time, he suppressed unnecessary details that, while contributing to the work's realism, would have proved too visually distracting. He shows the young colonel (known to him through photographs) with an absolutely erect posture, which bespeaks the seriousness of his endeavor, his moral rectitude, and his acceptance of civic responsibility. Shaw rides with his sword drawn, not as in battle, but as he rode in the ceremonial parade down Beacon Hill, at which the Fifty-fourth publicly began its historic mission. He is central and static, a figure for the ages. The troops, in contrast, push forward, the diagonals of their legs providing an unstoppable directional thrust extending beyond the edge of the relief. The activity of the swarm of rifles behind the horse's head is balanced by the blank, open area above the soldiers in front, much as the tumult of the battle

9. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sketch for an equestrian Shaw monument, c. 1882, ink drawing



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found its ultimate conclusion in peace and the silence of death.

In addition to the difficulties of bringing together the forms of so many men, Saint-Gaudens was especially challenged by the allegorical figure that floats above them. He reworked it many times. By 1892, when the horse and rider had already been cast in plaster, he was still modifying the flying figure. In February 1897, he changed one of her attributes from the traditional palm branch of martyrdom to an olive branch, symbol of peace. She also carries poppies, symbolic of death, sleep, and remembrance, which give poignancy to the image. Hovering over the group, the allegorical figure acts as mediator between the real and the ideal, between the present and the past, between action and remembrance. Her

10. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Head of a Soldier*, 1883/1893, plaster



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ethereal presence makes the earthly palpability of the soldiers all the more startling and keenly felt.

The bronze monument, cast by the Gorham Manufacturing Company, was placed on Boston Common, facing the statehouse, in an architectural setting designed by Charles F. McKim (fig. 12). On the front of the sculpture, above Shaw's head, was the Latin inscription *Omnia Relinquit Servare Republicam* ("He forsook all to preserve the public weal"), the motto of the Society of the Cincinnati, of which Shaw was a hereditary member.

The memorial was dedicated in ceremonies on May 31, 1897. Veterans of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth and Fifty-fifth Infantry, and the Fifth Cavalry and Navy, marched in parade (fig. 13). Governor Wolcott of

11. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Head of a Soldier*, 1883/1893, plaster



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Massachusetts, Professor William James of Harvard, and the African-American leader Booker T. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute, all addressed the gathering. In the years to come the sculpture continued to be both a great civic monument and a spur to personal reflection. It became the subject of poems by Paul Laurence Dunbar, William Vaughn Moody, John Berryman, and Robert Lowell, and of Charles Ives' musical composition "The Saint-Gaudens in Boston Common" (1911–1912); it may also have inspired the motion picture *Glory* (1989), in which the memorial appears.

Even as the monument was being prepared for installation, Saint-Gaudens was refining its design in the plaster version,

the one now at the National Gallery of Art. When this full-size version in colored plaster was exhibited at the Paris Salon in the fall of 1898, it showed alterations to the horse's mane and to the allegorical figure. Two years later, at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris (fig. 14) — where the sculptor was awarded the grand prize — further changes were evident. Saint-Gaudens had adjusted the body and drapery of the flying figure and lowered it, as well as adjusting the final finish to lighten the appearance overall. He had also added the inscription that mistakenly gives the date of the battle of Fort Wagner as July 23 rather than July 18. Wherever it was exhibited, Saint-Gaudens' *Shaw* plaster elicited praise. It allowed the

12. Augustus Saint-Gaudens, *Shaw Memorial*, 1897, bronze. Boston. Photo: Carol M. Highsmith

13. Veterans of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment, May 31, 1897. Robert A. Bell Post Memorial photograph. Courtesy Commonwealth

of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Art Commission



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artist to bring the renowned sculpture to an international audience and served as his final statement on the subject.

In the United States, the *Shaw Memorial* plaster was enthusiastically received at Buffalo's Pan-American Exposition in 1901 (fig. 15). The following year it was purchased by the Buffalo Academy of Fine Arts (later the Albright, now the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) and was included in the Albright Art Gallery's inaugural exhibition in 1905. It remained on display until 1919, when, the victim of changing tastes, it was covered by a wall. In 1949, the Albright Art Gallery presented the sculpture to the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire, where from 1959 onward it stood in a three-sided building open to visitors and the elements alike. In observance of the centennial of the memorial in Boston, and to provide a lasting version of Saint-Gaudens' final statement that could safely survive outdoors, a bronze cast of the plaster was made. This cast has been installed at Cornish. The plaster was deposited at the



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National Gallery of Art in 1997, on long-term loan from the National Park Service, which now administers the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish.

There was no clear precedent for the audaciousness of the *Shaw Memorial*, nothing quite like it in its fusion of two major forms of public sculpture, the grand equestrian statue and the narrative relief. In Rome, Saint-Gaudens would have seen such works as the first-century reliefs on the Arch of Titus (fig. 16) with its processions of

14. Shaw plaster at the Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900

15. Opening Day, Pan-American Exposition, Buffalo, June 15, 1901. Courtesy of the William A. Coffin Papers, 1900–

1923, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



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marching soldiers, which surely would have remained in his memory. No other single example pertained as directly to the design problem posed by the memorial. In Paris, he saw modern works of sculpture memorializing the heroes of the French Republic, such as the dramatic high-relief figures of François Rude's *Departure of the Volunteers of 1792* (fig. 17), which decorate the Arc de Triomphe. No European monument, however, whether ancient or modern, could act as a prototype for such an American subject as that of the *Shaw Memorial*. Saint-Gaudens reinterpreted his sources to create a new and totally original public monument that democratically united a commander with his troops.

In his sculpture, Saint-Gaudens achieved a masterly balance of vitality and restraint in the evocation of rhythmic movement. The most affecting characteristic of the memorial, however, is the expressive modeling of the faces of the infantrymen, from the young drummer boy in the lead, to the bearded comrade behind him, and all of the other “marching faces of souls,” as the composer Charles Ives described them. Their visages suggest the intense determination and seriousness of purpose that motivated them. The highly differentiated features of each man serve as reminders that wars are fought by individuals with full lives, families, hopes, and dreams. It is this unprecedented level of attention to the living, breathing soldiers and, by extension, the acknowledgment of their extraordinary personal as well as collective sacrifice that Saint-Gaudens incorporated into his brilliant conception.

16. *Triumph of Titus*, first century, low relief. Arch of Titus, Rome. Alinari/Art Resource, NY

17. François Rude, *Departure of the Volunteers of 1792*, 1833–1836, high relief. Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, Paris. René Huyghe

Archive, Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library



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Conservation of the *Shaw Memorial*

Exposed for nearly forty years to extremes of temperature and humidity, dirt, and pollutants in a three-sided shelter in Cornish, New Hampshire, where it was installed in 1959, the *Shaw Memorial* was in need of serious conservation treatment. The original iron armature was rusted and deteriorated; many small cracks appeared throughout the relief; some sections were misaligned; chips in the plaster were evident along the edges of all figures; and the decorative surface—consisting of paint, gold and brass leaf, synthetic resins, and waxes—was flaking and no longer representative of Saint-Gaudens' delicate handling.

After conservators established through x-radiography the location of the original joints and internal structure, the monument was carefully dismantled in Cornish (fig. 18) and shipped to Boston for complete conservation. There, each section was consolidated

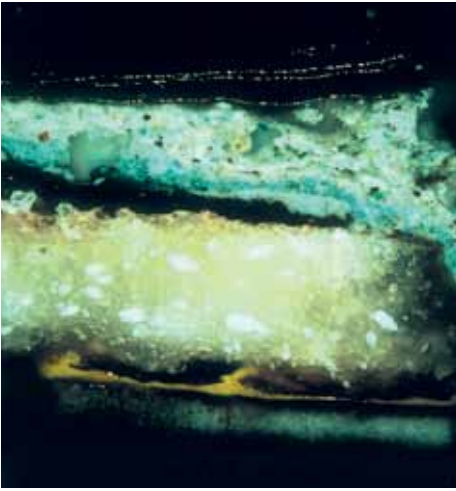


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and stabilized, and a new durable armature was designed that provided structural support for the multiple plaster segments. The dismantling of the memorial offered the first opportunity to view the faces of the marching soldiers hidden behind Shaw's horse. Although never truly visible to the public, these soldiers had all been modeled individually (fig. 19), further attesting to Saint-Gaudens' attention to every detail.

18. Dismantling of the *Shaw Memorial*, August 1996, National Gallery of Art

19. Row of soldiers hidden behind the horse and rider, National Gallery of Art



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Scientific examination of microscopic cross sections of the surface of the monument helped determine its original appearance. It revealed as many as twenty-five layers of plaster, paint, gold and brass leaf, clear coatings, and waxes, many of which

had been added during earlier campaigns of restoration. Upper layers contain combinations of bronze leaf, metallic bronze powder, and dark paint, while a thick layer of plaster and several green paint layers are evident in the midsection. The lowest layers include bole and remnants of gold leaf above a green paint layer, consistent with archival evidence from its exhibition in 1900 (fig. 20). Conservation of the sculpture consisted in removing old restoration materials, filling losses in the plaster, treating the surface to match its original texture, and sealing the surface with synthetic resin. After the memorial was installed at the National Gallery, the new joints were plastered and the entire surface painted and glazed to reflect the color of the monument as it was when Saint-Gaudens first exhibited it at the turn of the century (figs. 21, 22).



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20. Microscopic sample from upper right corner in cross-section, showing the full stratigraphy of

the coatings on the *Shaw Memorial*



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21, 22. Figure of Colonel Shaw during and after conservation, National Gallery of Art

This brochure was written by Deborah Chotner, assistant curator, *American and British paintings*, National Gallery of Art. The conservation section was written by Shelley Sturman, head of object conservation, National Gallery of Art. It was produced by the Gallery's publishing office.

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Notes

1. Duncan, 25.
2. Atkinson, 7.
3. Saint-Gaudens, 332.
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The *Shaw Memorial* is on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art from the National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire.

The home and studios of Augustus Saint-Gaudens are located at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in Cornish, New Hampshire. For more information regarding visits and programs see www.nps.gov/saga.

Visit the National Gallery's *Shaw Memorial* Web feature at www.nga.gov/feature/shaw/home.htm.

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Figures 2 and 6–11 courtesy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire

Cover: *Shaw Memorial* (detail, after treatment), 1900, patinated plaster, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire

