

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 18, 1997

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ONE OF AMERICA'S GREATEST SCULPTURES,
"AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS' MEMORIAL TO ROBERT GOULD SHAW
AND THE MASSACHUSETTS FIFTY-FOURTH REGIMENT,"
ON VIEW IN WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 21, 1997

WASHINGTON, DC -- One of the greatest works of nineteenth-century American sculpture will go on view at the National Gallery of Art this fall. The memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment is on a ten-year renewable loan to the Gallery from the National Park Service, Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire. Created by the preeminent sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907), the relief masterfully depicts Colonel Shaw and the first African-American infantry unit from the North to fight for the Union during the Civil War. The memorial, which has been on display since 1959 in an outdoor pavilion at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, has recently undergone restoration in Boston.

The monumental plaster, measuring nearly fifteen-feet high, eighteen-feet wide, and three-feet deep, will go on view

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September 21, 1997, with related studies. The installation will close on December 14 for approximately eight months while skylights are replaced in the West Building's American galleries. The memorial will go on view again in the fall of 1998.

The Shaw Memorial Project is made possible by the generous support of The Circle of the National Gallery of Art. Additional support is provided by the Shell Oil Company Foundation.

"We are deeply honored to be involved in the preservation and exhibition of this important work by America's greatest nineteenth-century sculptor and to put it on view where it can be seen by millions of visitors every year in the rich historical context of our nation's capital," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

The dramatic high relief reveals Colonel Shaw astride his horse, upright and serious, a figure for the ages. The troops, in contrast, push forward with intense determination, as an angel floats protectively overhead, bearing poppies symbolizing death, sleep, and remembrance, and olive branches symbolizing peace. The sculpture combines the real and allegorical, and presents a balance of restraint and vitality.

Rare and early plaster sketches of the memorial, the angel, and six portrait heads of African-American soldiers will also be exhibited. Except for a show in Cornish this summer, most of these objects have not been on public view since a retrospective in 1908.

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Augustus Saint-Gaudens

Born in Dublin on March 1, 1848, to an Irish mother and a French father, Augustus Saint-Gaudens immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of six months. While working as an apprentice cameo-cutter in New York, he studied at Cooper Union and later at the American Academy of Design. At nineteen he went to Paris, where he studied sculpture at the École des Beaux-Arts. Over the course of his distinguished career in the United States and Europe, Saint-Gaudens received numerous honors and commissions.

Among Saint-Gaudens' major works of sculpture are the "Sherman Monument" in New York; the "Standing Lincoln" in Chicago; the "Adams Memorial" in Washington, D.C.; and "Diana," which once topped the Madison Square Garden tower in New York and is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The success of his first major commission, the "Monument to Admiral David Glasgow Farragut," in New York, led to the Shaw commission. No other American sculptor of the post-Civil War era approached Saint-Gaudens' success in creating the grand and moving public monuments to the nation's heroes, as well as penetrating portraits of some of the most prominent figures of America's Gilded Age.

The Massachusetts 54th Regiment

The intensive campaigning of the abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by

President Abraham Lincoln paved the way for the enlistment of one thousand black men into the 54th Regiment of the Massachusetts Infantry in 1863. Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, the twenty-five-year-old son of prominent Boston abolitionists, accepted the commission from Massachusetts Governor John A. Andrew to lead the 54th Regiment.

In 1863 the 54th Regiment distinguished itself in its first battle, rescuing three companies of the 10th Connecticut Regiment from defeat during an assault on James Island. Anxious to prove his men in battle, Shaw volunteered the 54th for the assault on Fort Wagner, which guarded access to the port of Charleston, South Carolina. Shaw led the men in their charge and died from a bullet in his heart as he reached the top of the fort's walls. In all, the regiment suffered 281 casualties among the 600 men who fought that day. The survivors of the 54th Regiment rose from defeat, replenished their ranks, and went on to join in the eventual triumph of the Union Army.

A Monument to Shaw and the 54th Regiment

Soldiers of the 54th Regiment provided contributions for a memorial to honor their fallen colonel, but, concerned about local hostility and unstable ground conditions, they instead donated the funds to build the first free school for black children in Charleston, which was named after Shaw. In 1865 twenty-one prominent Bostonians formed a committee to commission a monument to Shaw. The contract with Saint-Gaudens was signed

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in 1884, even though he had begun sketching designs two years earlier.

Saint-Gaudens was interested in portraying the soldiers as young men going off to the war and found African Americans in New York, Boston, and elsewhere who were willing to be models. The studies he made of their heads are among his finest portraits, and some of them will be included in the Gallery's exhibition of related objects and historical material, on loan from the collections of the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site.

After many starts, the magnificent relief was completed in 1896, cast in bronze, and unveiled on Boston Common on Memorial Day 1897. Sixty-five survivors of the 54th Regiment marched in the vanguard of the parade.

Still seeking to improve the sculpture, Saint-Gaudens created a new plaster version of the memorial and exhibited it at the Paris Salon in 1898, and with additional variations at the Exposition Universelle, Paris, in 1900. There the artist was awarded a grand prize for all of his works on display and a Legion of Honor (officier), a coveted award infrequently given to foreigners. The final version was exhibited in 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and was purchased by the Buffalo Academy of Fine Arts, later the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. It remained on exhibit until 1919 when, a victim of changing tastes, it was covered by a wall. In 1949 it was given to the Saint-Gaudens Memorial in Cornish.

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Conservation

"In order to prevent further disintegration of the plaster, we selected the National Gallery to be responsible for its complete conservation and installation," said John Dryfhout, National Park Service curator and superintendent. "Without the initiative of the Trustees of the Saint-Gaudens Memorial, the project would not have been realized." A new bronze cast was made from the plaster sculpture and was unveiled outdoors at the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site on July 13, 1997.

Installation at the National Gallery will mark the ninth episode of complete dismantling and reassembly of the plaster memorial and the tenth episode of complete surface treatment. The latest dismantling of the memorial into more than twenty sections offered the first opportunity in some fifty years to see the faces of the marching soldiers hidden behind Shaw's horse. Although they were never visible to the public, these soldiers had all been modeled individually in perfect detail.

A thorough examination showed that the plaster memorial was in generally good condition despite nearly forty years of exposure to extremes in temperature and humidity, and pollutants. However, it also showed deterioration and rusting in the original iron armature, misalignment of some sections, cracks and chips in the plaster, and discoloration and flaking in the previously restored decorative surface, which was no longer representative of the artist's delicate handling. Examination of cross sections

of the surface revealed as many as twenty-five layers of paint, gold and brass leaf, clear coatings, and waxes, many of which had been added during earlier campaigns of restoration.

Following X-radiography and dismantling in Cornish, conservation of the sculpture in Boston consisted in removing old restoration materials, consolidating and stabilizing the plaster, filling losses, treating the surface to match its original texture, and sealing it with synthetic resin. At the National Gallery all of the sections will be reinstalled on a newly designed stainless steel armature, the new joins plastered, and the entire surface patinated and glazed to replicate as closely as possible the final treatment of the memorial done during Saint-Gaudens' lifetime.

Installation and Design

The neoclassical detailing of the West Building gallery where the memorial will be installed is harmonious with Saint-Gaudens' design. The room also affords a rare five-gallery axial view, framing the monumental sculpture.

A twenty-foot-long, fifteen-foot-wide portion of original terra-cotta wall was removed and a massive steel beam was installed to create a grand niche for the sculpture. Original chestnut oak flooring is being remilled, refinished, and carefully fit around the footprint of the memorial. Rare slabs of rose marble, matching that of the original West Building, will be split, polished, and installed around the memorial's new

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pedestal as base molding. A state-of-the-art exhibition case with fiber-optic lighting and special nonreflective glass will display Saint-Gaudens' plaster studies.

Organization and Booklet

Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., the Gallery's curator of American and British paintings, is overseeing the Shaw Memorial project and organizing the exhibition in Washington. The conservation of the memorial is being performed by Clifford Craine, Daedalus, Inc., with guidance from a team of conservators including Shelley Sturman, Michael Palmer, and Mervin Richard of the National Gallery of Art; Brigid Sullivan and Carol Warner of the National Park Service; and Richard Newman of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The design and installation team at the National Gallery is headed by Mark Leithauser.

A booklet with color illustrations and text about the memorial and its history, written by Deborah Chotner, assistant curator, National Gallery, will be distributed in the exhibition free of charge. A comprehensive, illustrated book on the history of the memorial was published by the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site and the Trustees of the Saint-Gaudens Memorial. It includes essays by Gregory C. Schwarz, chief of interpretation at the site; Ludwig Lauerhass, Jr., University of California, Los Angeles; and Brigid Sullivan, National Park Service. It will be available for \$16.95 in the Shops of the National Gallery.

Special Programs

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Gallery will offer family programs geared to children aged eight to twelve that will include discussions of the memorial's history and sculptural techniques, followed by a sculpture activity, from 1 to 3 p.m., on September 28; October 5, 19, and 26; and November 2 and 16. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Preregistration is required and may be arranged by calling (202) 789-3030.

A film series scheduled during the fall will include "Glory" as well as "The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry" from the PBS series "The American Experience."

A lecture program followed by an open discussion will be presented on Sunday, September 21, from 3 to 5 p.m. Gallery curator Cikovsky will speak on "The Shaw Memorial: Art and Artist" and June Hargrove, professor of art history at the University of Maryland, will present the lecture "Heroes and Monuments: The Shaw Memorial and Its Place in History." A second lecture program on October 26, from 2 to 4 p.m., will focus on the 54th Regiment, emancipation, and the reappraisal of the Civil War at the time of the Shaw Memorial commemoration at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Gallery also will include the Shaw Memorial on its Web site at <http://www.nga.gov>. Information regarding teaching packets and teacher workshops may be obtained by calling (202) 842-6796.

Admission to the Gallery and its programs is free of charge. The Gallery, located on the National Mall at Fourth Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open Monday - Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. For more information, call (202) 737-4215.

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