Review of *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol* by Gregory Paul Harm

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Lee Lawrie’s Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol. By Gregory Paul Harm. Austin, TX: Gregory Paul Harm and Susanne Patricia Harm, 2008. 193 pp. Illustrations, bibliography. $75.00 cloth, $49.99 paper.

This book is a tribute to the power of art, specifically, of the sculpture outside and inside the Nebraska State Capitol. It so impressed Gregory Harm in his youth that he has undertaken in maturity an enthusiastic exploration of the aesthetic and historical background of that sculpture and its creator Lee Lawrie (1877–1963). He found his way to the Lawrie archives at the Library of Congress, the University of Nebraska, and the Capitol itself, and stood in awe before Lawrie’s monumental works for Rockefeller Center and other public buildings around the country. His book makes the case that Lawrie should be more deeply studied to appreciate the masterful integration of his works into their architectural settings and the skill by which he transferred a complex symbolic program into accessible panels and figures.

Harm in this book has uncovered the human and spiritual context of the sculpture, and displayed in photos these works in situ and in their early stages as sketches and maquettes. Those who already share his love of the building and sculpture will rejoice in the many excellent photos, not only of familiar panels, but also the small details to be found on walls, windows, and ceilings in the Capitol. These photos will win new fans and send readers back to the Capitol to note these details. Harm also refers readers to his website Bisonwerks.com, and promises follow-up studies.

A reader, however, might wish that this self-published book had been passed by a copy editor and a fact checker. It is disconcerting to read that habeas corpus means “under most circumstances, one cannot be charged with murder if there is no corpse,” or that the Magna Carta was “a feudal compact imposed on the people by King John,” as against a compact imposed on the King by his Barons, or that the “Spaniards owned sugar plantations in the Caribbean called economendias,” rather than encomiendas, or that the Emperor Justinian (rather than Constantine) had the Hagia Sophia built. However, these and other similar puzzlers do not seriously distract from the spirited accounts of Harm’s pleasures and discoveries.

And while Harm quotes and paraphrases interesting primary materials, has read and cited relevant works of scholarship, and wisely confirmed his judgments with Capitol Administrator Robert Ripley, Tourism Supervisor Roxanne Smith, and retired UNL Architecture Professor Dale Gibbs (from whom he heard the story of the rescue of Lawrie’s maquettes), he is not himself a trained scholar.

What the book with all its charm and revelations calls for is the skill of an art historian to elucidate the stylistic models and originality of Lawrie’s technique and an iconographer to explain how sculpture and story can carry meaning. The factual tidbits Harm attaches to his photographic survey of the sculpture are only randomly explanatory of the stories or figures represented.

Commenting on the panel Deborah Judging Israel, for instance, Harm identifies the Palm
of Deborah under which she judged (Judges 4:5), and says, “This panel reinforces the Mosaic covenant—that God’s will protects his chosen people—but only if they obey His law.” We see in the panel Deborah with her left hand staying four men with spears, one of whom holds a chained, prostrate woman who lays pleading hands in Deborah’s lap. Deborah is a commanding woman acting in defense of a helpless victim of masculine military rigor. Since that scene does not represent Deborah’s part in the Judges narrative nor show any aspect of the Mosaic covenant, a viewer will still be left wondering about its place in a History of Law.

The work of elucidating the meaning of these works of art in a way that accounts for their style would properly supplement Harm’s labor of love; in this book he models the affection for the art and artist which must motivate such a study.

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