

Museum of John Rogers statuary debuts

By Gaines Steer

Over 50 statuaries depicting the life and times of the mid to late 1800's are on display in a museum/studio located in Northern Chatham County. These original statuaries (many dated and patented), which stand about 20 inches tall, were produced by American artist John Rogers during the period 1859-1893. His biographer refers to him as "the peoples' sculptor"; he has also been called "the Norman Rockwell of the 1800's." Because Rogers was a prolific letter writer, his entire life story and artistic accomplishment is unusually well-documented; the museum display reflects such detail.

I am curator of the display, which is open to the public on Saturdays from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Sundays 2-5 p.m. The museum is not-for-profit; admission is free.

Because Rogers body of work coincided with the Civil War, and many of his subjects strongly reflect Union and abolitionist (anti-slavery) sympathies, he was not popular below the Mason-Dixon line. Unfortunately, that posture diminished awareness of this unique collection in the entire Southern region for generations. Roger's artwork is in 15 museums in the North and West. This museum in Chatham is the only permanent display of Roger's work in the South.

Prior to the American Civil War, sculpture was an art form known only to the rich. John Rogers produced and sold more than 70,000 genre statues. Rogers's artistic mode and choice of subject did not conform to the neo-classic Greek or Roman style popular in America and Europe in this period of history. He was a pioneer in the art category now referred to as realism, that is art which tends to display the feelings and interest of ordinary people.



The Fugitive's Story features some of the leading abolitionists of the era, including the Rev. Ward Beecher Stowe, John Greenleaf Whittier and William Lloyd Garrison listening to an account of a slave mother's escape.

Rogers was a pioneer in the art of producing molds for casting so he was able to make his work available to large numbers of Americans. The statue groups are made from a mixture of hardened plaster, reinforced with pewter over an iron armature. According to David Wallace, author of John Rogers: The People's Sculptor, many period homes displayed a Rogers group as the center of attention in the parlor. The statuary in the John Rogers Museum & Studio is displayed in unpretentious settings, some employing mirrors to enable the entire scene to be viewed.

The statue groups reflect four primary themes: literary subjects like Icabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle; scenes from Shakespeare; Civil War scenes; and depictions of ordinary life and times. Warm, human sympathy is evident. Among the most noted characteristics are: a storyteller's humor; profound detail (particularly of the human face); the accurate physiology of the horse; the angst of slavery exposed. It was Roger's honest depiction of slavery (Slave Auction; Uncle Ned's School) that resulted in his virtual ban in the Civil War South.

According to published sources, only one of Roger's 18 statues relating to the Civil War was tolerated in the South. In Taking the Oath there is a beautiful Southern woman, depicted with a sympathetic attitude.

Rogers was made a member of the National Academy in 1863 and exhibited his groups at the Paris Exposition in 1867. Complimentary letters came from such prominent persons as Abraham Lincoln, Henry Ward Beecher, Edwin Stanton, and William Cullen Bryant. The New York Historical Society opened a John Rogers room in 1938. Numerous well-known public figures posed for the realistic sculptures, including those in The Fugitive's Story.

Gaines Steer, an antiques and art collector, is the owner of the Last Unicorn, located at 536 Edwards Ridge Road in Chatham County, which is also home to the John Rogers Museum & Studio. For information call 919.968.8440 or email info@the-lastunicorn.com.



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