

THE ASTORIA COLUMN

BY JOHN GOODENBERGER

The Astoria Column is much more than a monument with curious artwork spiraling up its sides. It is a beautifully rendered depiction of early North Coast history.

Two things make it special. First, the artwork is applied in a centuries old technique, called *sgraffito*. The Astoria Column may be the only outdoor monument in our nation to use this art form. Secondly, it is a view of our history seen through the eyes of Attilio Pusterla, a leader of an impressionist movement in Milan, Italy.

The Astoria Column's overall design was inspired by the Trajan Column, a victory monument in Rome. Erected in 113 AD, the Trajan Column depicts two successful military campaigns by emperor Trajan against the Dacians. These stories of war are illustrated in low marble relief — a medium which appealed to an unread citizenry. So it was with the Astoria Column. Its intent in 1926 was to educate the masses and rekindle a connection to their roots. Its sponsor, the Great Northern Railroad, also hoped for increased ridership on its line.

Unlike the Trajan Column, the founders of the Astoria Column were adamant that this was a memorial honoring explorers and times of peace rather than war. It was an attempt to accurately portray Lower Columbia River history.

In a period when history was being romanticized, Attilio Pusterla and his sponsors paid close attention to the regional setting. Horses were eliminated from a scene dated 1792 on the Lower Columbia. Depictions of Chinook canoes were revised. Ribbed canoes replaced dugout canoes.

Pusterla's artistic style and familiarity with *sgraffito* were ideal for this monument. He was known for impressionistic lighting about figures with firm outlines. His subjects broke away from their background and could be admired from a great distance.

Like the sculptors of the Trajan Column, Pusterla manipulated scale to heighten its story. The key was to pull it off without distracting the viewer.

Pusterla had that skill. For example one panel depicts Lt. William Broughton naming Mount Hood. Broughton stands in his canoe, with his men at his feet, pointing to the mountain. To give the subject matter more prominence, Broughton and his party appear three times larger than the surrounding riverscape. Their gigantic size in no way diminishes the story.

Pusterla remained in control of a medium fraught with complexities. *Sgraffito* is a wet-on-wet process. Outlines and shadows were created by incising a trowel through layers of light colored plaster, into a dark base coat.

Complications arose because the plaster was spread over unevenly cured poured-in-place concrete. Moisture was drawn from the plaster more quickly in some places than others. A color shift in the plaster occurred. Bad weather had a similar effect. Pusterla avoided blotchy images by frequently remixing the color and consistency of his plaster. He often chiseled away the previous day's work if he felt it was unsatisfactory.

A stubborn and temperamental man, Pusterla demanded perfection, refusing to compromise his craft for the convenience of his sponsors. Time-lines meant little to him. Pusterla was a constant source of frustration to those who believed that artists and their work could be run like a railroad.

Pusterla's Italian background shines through his human figures. Mediterranean blood seems to flow through their veins. In some cases, the figures stand contorted, framing a scene in the Italian Mannerist fashion. Other times they are frozen in heroic pose, arms outstretched and overcome with emotion. Pusterla's sense of drama pulls the viewer into the scene as he builds to an explosive climax — the destruction of the bark *Tonquin*.

The artist's work also reflects a European view of the "noble savage." Idealized human figures are readily seen in the Chinook men. Rather than short stocky builds, these men appear ready for Olympic decathlon competition.

It is unknown whether any background figures bear the faces of people known to Pusterla. However, halfway up the Column, a seated Chinook woman clubs a salmon into paste. The large-bellied woman has an uncanny resemblance to Pusterla's wife Henrietta.

This fish processing technique, by the way, was a specialty of the Upper Chinookians who lived near The Dalles. Sun-dried salmon was pounded and packed tightly into baskets lined with fish skin. When preserved in this manner, the fish would keep for up to two years. Again, this scene is significant because there was an attempt to accurately portray historic detailing.

In another example, one panel tells of Wilson Price Hunt crossing an endless snow-covered mountain pass. Hunt's party included interpreter Pierre Dorian, his Iowa Indian wife Marie and two children. Marie was the first immigrant to give birth in Oregon. She is seen riding a horse with her children, including the new-born baby. The baby's figure is only three inches long; yet it is found nearly 80 feet up the Column's shaft — indiscernible without binoculars.

Pusterla's ultimately fragile artwork started to wash away almost immediately. The lime-based plaster was unsuitable for our coastal climate. He returned to restore his work in 1936. Several attempts to preserve the frieze followed.

The Astoria Column was more recently restored by a team of 14 conservators and artists in 1995. A water repellent was applied that, if maintained, will preserve the Column for 50 years or more. Astoria's high winds and heavy rain demand periodic inspection of the Column frieze. Maintenance of the frieze is critical.



The beauty of the Astoria Column is both powerful and sublime. The passion it evokes is not accidental. The Column, its siting and landscaping were designed to do just that.

The crest of Coxcomb Hill was a viewpoint long before Robert Gray entered the Columbia River (on May 11, 1792). According to a newspaper article written by Frank Spittle in 1926, early settlers remember a well-defined trail leading to the top. Native Americans, and later pioneers, used the hill as a lookout.

Much later, the 1911 Astoria Centennial Committee donated money to purchase Coxcomb Hill from a variety of land-owners. The view was deemed too valuable to be held by private parties. In 1914, the Astoria Parks Board endorsed a \$25,000 bond to purchase and beautify the hill.



PHOTOGRAPH BY PHOEBE FRIEDMAN

The *Astoria Daily Budget* wrote, "There is nothing more tangible for a city to build up its future upon as well appointed park places and scenic spots. Strangers will go miles to see a historical point and linger longer where the environment is inviting.

The park was used largely for picnicking. Church groups, high school classes and families spread out their blankets in the grass and gazed over treetops to a city below and the ocean beyond.

In 1920, sometime poet Major William F. Mannix exclaimed:

*...On Beauty's mountain sit and rest,
Heart-glad, soul-sated, vision blest!
There nature flings o'er land and sea
Her legend-woven tapestry.
Round Coxcomb!*

Romanticizing reached beyond the view, however. As a part of a national movement, explorers, pioneers and missionaries were raised to the heroic. When the Great Northern Railroad and Vincent Astor proposed the construction of the Astoria Column as an interpretive memorial to pay tribute to those who first settled here, Astorians eagerly supported the project.

Electus D. Litchfield was hired to design the memorial. An architect, he designed the Denver Courthouse, Saint Paul Public Library, the Victory Monument in Newark and proposed plans for the National Armory in Washington, D.C. He was also an accomplished urban designer.

When Litchfield inspected Coxcomb Hill he said it was one of the most magnificent locations he had seen for a monument. Furthermore, the view ranked with the great panoramas of the world.

Litchfield recognized the picturesque qualities of Coxcomb Hill. He juxtaposed the forested hillside with an artifact from the Ancient World — much like the paintings of Claude Lorrain. The result provokes both intellectual and emotional responses from the viewer.

Bernard Maybeck, a San Francisco architect, mastered this technique. In 1915, he designed the astounding Palace of Fine Arts at the Panama-Pacific Exposition. Maybeck designed a Pantheon-like ruin on the edges of an "ancient" lagoon. He seamlessly bound architecture with a romantic landscape, which literally wrapped the structure.



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When Litchfield designed the Astoria Column, its picturesque landscape — the lower Columbia River — was already in place. There was no need to improve upon that. The monument rises from an organic, oval-shaped mound. A small concrete border, marked by a box-hedge, frames an all-grass "courtyard." Three walks radiate from the border, providing a formal axis. But that axis is broken at the edge of the mound. There, nature takes over and dictates form.

When you consider precedents for the Astoria Column are the Trajan Column of Rome and the Vendome Column of Paris — both in city squares surrounded by buildings — the success of Litchfield's design is all the more impressive.

As an interpretive memorial, the Astoria Column is strengthened by — and inseparable from — its view. Its frieze contains scenes of the Columbia River Bar, Tongue Point, Tillamook Head, Astoria and Fort Clatsop — all visible from the Column. Neither the Trajan or Vendome columns allow the observer to compare the historical reference with the modern-day view of the site.

Litchfield created a memorial also meant to be viewed from a distance. Tourists were drawn to the Column while entering Astoria on the Youngs Bay Bridge, crossing the Astoria-North Shore Ferry or arriving on the railroad. Their anticipation grew as they ascended John Chitwood's Coxcomb Drive, catching glimpses of the sculpture through the trees. Then, rounding a corner, the monument was fully revealed.

Litchfield beautifully maintained that tension between architecture and nature. The Column was never meant to compete with anything else.

In 1949, the city constructed a caretaker's house on the site. It was wisely placed to the side and rear of the Column. Philippa Seabrook of the *Evening Astorian Budget* interviewed the caretaker's wife, Lena Anderson.

Anderson noted the beautiful sunsets seen from Coxcomb Hill. She told of tourist cars from inland states lining the parking lot at evening. Expounding, Seabrook wrote, they "watch the brilliant colors sweep the sky, light up the distant mountain peaks and reflect on the still waters below."

Anderson also recognized the value of the Column's natural setting and was adamant that it be maintained. She bristled at the thought of cutting more trees to enhance the view. "Trees are what lots of tourists from the middle-west come to see," she said.

When the Column was first constructed, the forest wrapped the northwest corner of the park, near the current tourist booth. A swath was cut through the trees aligning the Column with the railway station below.

Today Astorians struggle with how best to accommodate large numbers of visitors to the Column. An interpretive center is said to be needed to elevate that experience.

Certainly the maintenance and continued restoration of the Column and its site is a necessity. But the Astoria Column and John Jacob Astor Park have served many generations well. The success is not accidental. Litchfield's plan draws deep emotions from those who use the park — emotions which are felt every time one enters the site.

It is fair to say Astorians and tourists never grow tired of looking at the Column's artwork or surveying what truly ranks with the great panoramas of the world. No one can improve upon that experience. Nor should anyone try.

If we forget or ignore Litchfield's original intent, we will destroy a defining experience in Astoria.



Like a festering sore, controversy continues on the development of Coxcomb Hill. There is enough frustration to make everyone angry.

Many Astorians feel there is no compelling reason to construct an interpretive center.

Most are frustrated by a long, arduous process which has produced uncertain, if not unsatisfactory results. Some view the Friends of the Astoria Column, particularly the Portland members, as presumptuous.

Listening to street talk and reading letters to *The Daily Astorian*, one gets the impression this is a class struggle and that John Jacob Astor Park and perhaps Astoria as a whole is under occupation by Portland forces. It needs to be said outright, Astorians asked Portlanders — not the other way around — to join in the venture of building an interpretive center.

Secondly, the perception that the Friends are untrustworthy — simply because many live outside the area — lacks a historic understanding of the city's development. It was Portland investors who did much to pull Astoria out of the ashes after the Great Fire of 1922. The Liberty Theater, for instance, was not constructed by local investors. Countless other projects would never have happened without outside assistance. Although the contribution of the Great Northern Railway was significant, the construction of the Astoria Column was largely financed by Vincent Astor, a true outsider.

Much anger has been focused on the Friends of the Column board president Jordan Schnitzer who, as one of Oregon's wealthiest citizens, is becoming larger-than-life. Schnitzer may be philanthropic, but he is first and foremost an aggressive businessman, and this assertiveness is the way things are done in the Big City.

Some hope to stop this runaway train by a citywide vote. Sorry, we voted for it when we elected the Astoria City Council. Construction of the interpretive center is an established goal of the city of Astoria.

It has been on the city's radar for more than 17 years and it is highly unlikely the city will reverse its direction now. Those who believe the city lacks vision need to find those who have it and help get them elected.

Both sides of the argument will have to agree, however, the process of creating the John Jacob Astor Park Master Plan

AVAGALLERY

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