

Emmanuel Fourchet uses unusual toothed-ax method to cut away stone in niche. Hillman Library is at right.

Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette photos

Architect Henry Hornbostel's dream for a series of five monumental niches telling the history of architecture has started again after a lapse of 77 years.

The niches' carved stone was meant to adorn the white brick facade of Carnegie Mellon University's College of Fine Arts, but only a fraction of the project was done when funds ran out in 1913.

Now, working under a \$1 million contract, an international team of artisans will complete the grand design of Hornbostel, who was also the college's first dean.

The one-story-tall niches, their blank stone protrusions oddly disturbing the building's beaux-arts front, have mostly served as casual meeting places where students could sit or draw from a few of the niches' built-in stone benches. The building's Roman-style entrance portal is one of the five niches.

Hornbostel's exterior plans were meant to echo a similar architectural motif seen in his designs for the college's first floor and ceilings. But he never completed his drawings for the niches.

The current project was launched by an \$850,000 bequest from Verner Purnell, CMU Class of 1926. Purnell, interior designer of Heinz Hall who died earlier this year, had a love of architecture.

Purnell's bequest is being augmented by CMU, which has signed a \$1 million contract with Cathedral Stoneworks, based at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, New York, to complete the project. The carving is expected to take approximately two years.

When the college was new after the turn of the century, all the Indiana limestone for the future carvings was cemented into place on the building awaiting a sculptor's touch. A date on one niche reads 1913.

The first niches to be completed will be in Roman and Renaissance styles, both already well under way in 1913.

The entrance portal will bear circular bust-portraits of Hornbostel as Bacchus and Purcell, who lived in Sewickley, in ancient Roman dress. From the building's right, the three remaining niches will be devoted to medieval, Greek and non-Western styles. Each niche is devoted to three different or variant architectural styles. Each style is done as an orange-shaped segment placed against the concave walls and meeting at the arch of each niche.

Carver Nicholas Fairplay, of London, England, is leading an international

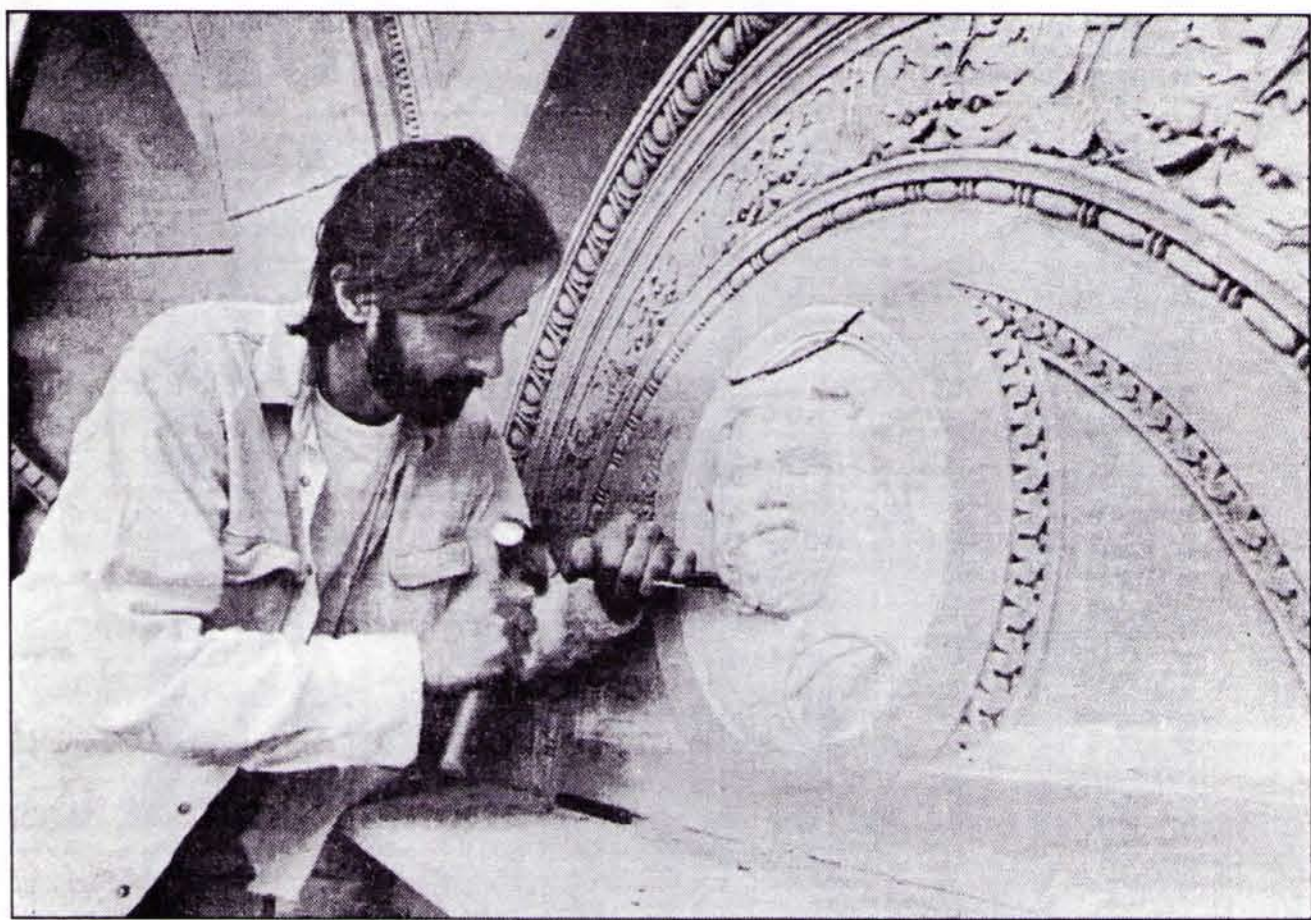
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Carving five niches in history

By Donald Miller
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

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Nick Fairplay, head carver, works on portrait of Lowry Burgess, arts dean, in Renaissance niche.

team of five sculptors-in-residence on campus. Fairplay, 32, explained that carving on the building is infinitely more difficult than in the studio or sculpture yard because the stone cannot be moved at will. To ease the process, computer-generated drawings will provide full-scale working cartoons, the name for such drawings.

During the interview, Fairplay was finishing a bearded portrait in the Renaissance niche of CFA Dean Lowry Burgess, an idea of Richard Cleary, who is CMU architectural historian and project coordinator.

Fairplay, who has worked on the restoration of flying buttresses at Westminster Abbey and other English cathedrals, said he negotiates with the developers of the new plans, Bruce Lindsey and Paul Rosenblatt, on how their ideas can be accomplished in the limestone. Having been in place for more than seven decades, the stone surface is harder than the stone under the surface, requiring a softer touch with mallets and chisels.

At St. John, Fairplay is accustomed to drawings for carvings being guided into computers which then drive lasers that automatically cut the stone.

"You can set the machines and come back in the morning and the work will be done. But this is mostly straight lines, no undercutting. Lasers make the work cheaper. But after the donkey work is done, the finish is left to the hand. At CMU we have to do this all by hand, a tremendous task."

There is also the pressure of the contract which requires the Greek niche (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian orders) to be finished this month and the Gothic niche by the end of next. These partially or nearly completed niches can be done most quickly, allowing more time for the complicated and unstarted medieval and Oriental-Near Eastern niches.

"There are two plans," Fairplay said. "One is to get the first projects done so we can concentrate on the niches which are the most work. The second plan is to do the less intricate areas above and below the main carvings in a simpler style. I would like to see this dropped so all of the carving will be of the same quality. That's what Hornbostel would have wanted, and if we're going to do this much, why not do it all this way?" His goal is to make the new work indistinguishable from the old.

Kevin Burke, CMU architectural

designer, is designing a scaffolding enclosure to permit the artisans to work through winter.

Cathedral Stoneworks held an international competition to select the carvers. Joining Fairplay are sculptor Simon Verity, who has done life-sized statuary for British cathedrals and monuments as well as inscriptions at Canterbury Cathedral and the Victoria and Albert Museum; French carvers Emmanuel Fourchet and Marc Bouakra; and British carvers Christiaan Paul Dawson and John Hutchinson.

Carnegie Mellon president Robert Mehrabian will officially announce the new carving project today at 10 a.m. at the College of Fine Arts. He will be joined by Burgess; Rosenblatt Lindsey Associates, Pittsburgh; David Teitelbaum, Stoneworks president; and executors of the Purnell estate. All will take part in a ceremonial chisel strike, though the work began two weeks ago.

The public is invited to follow the completion of the niches, participate in such events as this morning's chisel strike and view an exhibition of the Hornbostel sketches and new niche designs that are on exhibit in the college's Hewlett Gallery, during the project's course.