

The Story in the Stone

Eyewitness: Julian Isaacson

BY [JESSICA MORELAND](#) [10.17.12] 7 DAYS MAGAZINE

Julian Isaacson's sculptural masterpieces are as deeply connected to Vermont's people and land as is his picturesque art gallery. [Stone Revival](#) resides in a beautifully refurbished red barn at the edge of a field on Route 100 in Stockbridge. The gallery is filled with stunning bas-relief sculptures. Lifelike farmers, Native Americans, buffaloes, trees and birds appear on slabs of local marble and hardwood, revealing the artist's preferred themes of nature and community. Isaacson's particular focus is the connection world.



Bas-relief, or “low relief,” was popular during the Roman era in what is now western Europe. The technique involves cutting away background material from a flat piece of stone or wood so that the final scene looks raised, or set apart from the backdrop. Isaacson does bas relief the traditional way: “I use a hammer and chisel, which allows time for the material to speak to me,” he says. “Power tools take away too much too quickly.”

Even for bas-relief, Isaacson's pieces are unusual, combining rural Vermont and Native American themes with classically European mediums and techniques.

At first glance, Isaacson, 57, appears as hard and unapproachable as the stone he shapes. He's a broad-shouldered, 6-foot-tall, bald-headed man who looks like he could crush you with the flat of his palm. But, in fact, he is friendly, with a warm, wide smile. Isaacson readily sets down his tools to chat about his techniques, his latest piece or art in general.

Isaacson has an open-studio policy and encourages curious passersby and aspiring artists alike to stop by and watch him work. Along the back wall of his gallery is a viewing window that overlooks his cluttered workspace: Hammers, chisels, mallets and hunks of stone and wood are strewn across tables covered with a thin film of marble dust. In the midst of it all, Isaacson works intently.

During a reporter's visit to the studio, he is hunched over a marble bas-relief of chickens in a barnyard, chipping at the stone to reveal the “story” that resides within it. Soon, an empty corner of the marble begins to resemble a chick pecking at the ground. The background is rough and textured, but the feathers of the chick are smooth and soft. If you were to run your fingers across the surface of the stone, you would almost feel the chick's down.

Seeing his work, you might assume that Isaacson was classically trained. But he never went to art school. His mother, Eileen, a Native American from the Osage tribe, was a sculptor. His father, Sidney, the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant, was a painter. Isaacson's childhood home, in the backwoods of Hancock, Vt., was an incubator for artistic creation — it's where he learned to sculpt. “I literally grew up in my parents' studios,” he says. “I never would have developed into the artist I am today without my parents' influence.”

Originally, Isaacson dreamed of becoming a painter like his father. But at the age of 13, when his father was trying to teach him the color wheel, Isaacson realized he was completely color-blind. His father encouraged him to become a sculptor instead. Now Isaacson combines traditional painting compositions with sculpting techniques. Indeed, his artwork reads like a painting trapped in stone.

“I really fell in love with paintings that tell a story — pictorial paintings with hidden meanings,” Isaacson says. “So I morphed that painting principle into my artwork.”

Five years ago, after a 27-year sojourn in Oregon, where he worked as a professional chef, Isaacson returned to Vermont to work on his art full time. He and his wife, Lee Ann, live in a small apartment above the gallery. They often host art parties, open houses and events on their stone patio, which serves as an outdoor showroom for Isaacson's garden sculptures and landscape accents. The couple has four grown children, two of whom have also returned to Vermont — the place Isaacson considers his true home and wellspring of creative inspiration.

In addition to fine art, Isaacson crafts functional items, generally on commission, including nameplates, memorials, mantels, altars, gates, doors, wainscoting and tiles. He also uses his skills as a stonemason to build traditional stacked-stone walls, patios and stairways.

In all of his work, Isaacson makes a point of using materials native to Vermont. “I like to keep things local,” he says. “I want my pieces to reflect the spirituality of the people both in content and form.”

For example, his piece “Deer Dance,” in Vermont marble, shows a man from the Osage Indian tribe running with a herd of deer, illustrating the connection between man and nature. Another Vermont marble piece, “The Guardian,” depicts a proud Green Mountain Boy, a member of the Vermont militia led by Ethan Allen in the 18th century. And “The Lion,” a self-portrait done in local black walnut, reveals the animal nature of the individual.

“My pieces show that man is an integral part of nature,” Isaacson says. “Sometimes, we forget how connected we are to the world around us. We are, like animals, creatures on this Earth — and we need to respect the environment.”

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