



Medford sculptor M. Julian Isaacson has taken a spiritual and philosophical approach to his piece "The Crossroads." Mail Tribune / Roy Musitelli

By **JENNIFER STRANGE**

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Smooth, white, rounded, gently shadowed and speaking of antiquity: M. Julian Isaacson's newly finished marble sculpture, "The Crossroads," shares many of the physical characteristics with one of Mother Nature's perfect pearls. The connection isn't lost on this 51-year-old Medford sculptor, who likens the inspiration for his piece, now mounted and showing through June at Ashland's Illahe Design Studio and Gallery, to a pearl's growth.

"Like a grain of sand lodges in an oyster, irritating its flesh and growing into something meaningful, this sculpture came from a childhood full of difficulty and covert anti-Semitism," says the artist, who grew up in a small, rural Vermont town.

## SCULPTOR'S WORK ON DISPLAY

"The Crossroads" and other sculptures and functional art by M. Julian Isaacson will be on display at Illahe Design Studio and Gallery through June.

An opening Friday from 5 to 8 p.m. will feature an oral presentation and demonstration by the sculptor as well as entertainment and refreshments. Illahe is located at 500 A St., Suite 3, Ashland; call 488-5072

To see more of Isaacson's decorative and architectural work, visit his Web site at [www.stonerevival.com](http://www.stonerevival.com).

"The Crossroads," a 4-by-4-foot carving in Carrera marble, depicts Isaacson's interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ, with the Archangel Michael embracing him, a dove's wing touching his shoulder and a Star of David on the top of the cross. In Isaacson's mind, these two major religions are really quite connected.

"A good Jewish boy artist doesn't really do Christian art; and a Christian artist doesn't really ever use the Star of David," says Isaacson. "But it was necessary and legitimate for me to step forward; I had to make the move to combine these symbols to show that we're at a crossroads of cultures."

This forward-thinking philosophy didn't come just from being bullied on the playground.

A fearless urge to express himself artistically probably came from his parents. Isaacson's father, an artist born to Russian Jews who had successfully escaped violent Russian pogroms to start a new life in America, sustained disabling injuries while fighting the Nazis during World War II. He went on to have seven children, all raised to take pride in their heritage. Isaacson's mother, an Osage Sioux and painter, introduced her son to a nature-based form of spirituality.

Neither background seemed to fit into the setting where Isaacson lived out his adolescence. "It was a very different time when teachers would make jokes about our poverty and how it didn't seem 'Jewish' that we were poor," says Isaacson of the 150-student country school.

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After his family succeeded in bringing the discrimination to the attention of officials, the prejudice just went underground. Nobody spoke to the Isaacson kids, nobody invited them to participate in sports or socializing. "This left a lasting impression on me, like a scar," he says.

Fast forward to what Isaacson calls "a very successful life with a Christian wife" (Lee Ann) in the Rogue Valley, where Isaacson does custom stone sculptures for home decor and commissioned works. It was here, years ago, that the sculptor had a seminal experience during a service at Lee Ann's church.

"I was listening to the pastor speak about how Judaism is the root of Christianity," he remembers. "And the irony of my father fighting next to Christians against the Nazis was not lost on me and I started to see that people can move forward and start to find what they have in common."

What humans have in common, believes Isaacson, is "marching together, away from the hatred that isn't natural."

"People have to pick hatred up and carry it; it's a disease of sorts that's learned or passed down," he says. This realization planted the seed — the grain of sand — that became "The Crossroads."

Body language and spiritual iconography speak volumes in the sculpture, with the Star of David symbolizing the bridge Isaacson feels is gradually being built between Judaism and Christianity.

A dove lights next to the star, its wing touching Christ, forming a spiritual aspect that Isaacson says signifies mankind and speaks to innocence and purity of life and death.

Human emotions are expressed in the faces of the Christ and Archangel Michael. Christ has just died, his hands nailed to the arms of the cross, fingers curled, face downcast and framed by a crown of thorns. A final tear is forever cast on his cheek. The archangel seems to be sending Christ's spirit heavenward via rays of divine light that travel through his own upturned and caring gaze.

Archangel Michael is the representative of God, communicating the sorrow and redemption of Christ's death.

"Even when Christ was being taunted by people saying any true god would remove him from the cross, Michael's presence makes the statement that Christ was never alone," says Isaacson. "It's the Osage Sioux idea that living and dying are one in the same; that we have nothing to do with the birth or death process, that both are simply taken and given and part of the cycle."

Speaking to the American Indian belief that human life is basically organic and fleeting — a membrane that exists among the stable forces of earth, sky, life and death — "The Crossroads" is an attempt to capture a passing moment in an eternal medium.

"A moment is a precious thing that moves through time and can never be repeated," says the sculptor. "Carving that moment of thought in history when we're finding the common bonds in humanity enables me to make the statement on a permanent level."

Calling the piece "truly extraordinary" and "a big deal," Sue Springer, ceramic artist and owner of Illahe gallery, hopes viewers will recognize both the meaning and artistic integrity of "The Crossroads."

"He's reviving the ancient art of carving using a chisel and a hammer — it's a return to the artist as a real craftsman," Springer says. "The piece is very ancient and very traditional but also shows what can be done."

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