

The Spirit of the Ocean receives a breath of new life

A monumental task for SB's monumental fountain

By Kerry Methner / CASA

UNDER A TENT ON THE SANTA BARBARA COUNTY COURTHOUSE LAWN, a friendly bloke from Bristol, Nick Blantern, has been spending these chilly winter days re-creating the *Spirit of the Ocean* fountain.

The new fountain will come alive from a selection of nine boulders weighing in around 175,000 pounds. Five of those boulders, quarried by Santa Barbaran Chris Scott from La Patera Ranch in October 2010 and donated by Slippery Rock Ranch, (Madars Ozlins and Dick Wolf), will ultimately find their way into the finished monument.

"What is most satisfying about this kind of work is looking back at the end of a grueling job at what has been accomplished. You are doing something that's going to last a long time," Blantern shared.

Blantern, Nathan Hunt, Stephen Bouska, and Andrian Melka are the team working to re-produce an exact duplicate of the *Spirit of the Ocean*, an iconic fixture in the community that was first carved by sculptor Ettore Cadorin in 1927.

The project, with an estimated cost of \$600,000 and funded by the Courthouse Legacy Foundation with private and public grants, has been on a *need to be addressed* list for many years. The *Spirit of the Ocean* fountain re-creation is one of a number of restoration projects at the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, a U.S. Historic Landmark since 2005.

The fountain sculpture was originally carved from sandstone quarried near Refugio Canyon but has deteriorated so badly that the only way to restore it is to re-carve it using molds to obtain the most detailed reproduction possible.

Blantern and three fellow stone carvers are on the job six days a week, most days until 6pm. Just as each stone arrived at its own beauty and potential, each of the team has their own story of just how they ended up with a chisel in hand under a great white tent on the Santa Barbara County Courthouse's front yard.

Blantern grew up in Bristol, England, and took up carving at the urging of his father. "The only thing I got 'As' in was pottery," he shared of his high school experience. "So, I was guided by my parents into the field. My dad always had an appreciation for it, and I said, 'it sounds like fun!'"

He completed a challenging

four and a half year Architectural Carving Apprenticeship in England and perfected the craft restoring old English churches, government buildings, and castles, including work on Caldicott Castle that meant re-carving stonework from the 1000s.



The Team: **Stephen Bouska**; **Nathan Hunt**, Founder of Hunt Studios (Huntstonecarving.com); and **Nick Blantern**, Lead Carver, Founder of BritishStone (www.facebook.com/britishstone).

And it was a good career choice for Blantern, who after completing the apprenticeship took a three month vacation with his sister to the States and ended up staying several years in Santa Barbara, working on estates in Montecito, and eventually moving to Cleveland where he established a home, started a family and a business (BritishStone).



Andrian Melka arrived this month.

this friendly way, the team began to assemble. Hunt, who also completed apprenticeships in England knew a figurative carver, Andrian Melka... He also pulled in Californian Stephen Bouska.

"As soon as I was able to make something in stone it was really satisfying," Hunt shared of his introduction to stonecarving. "Seeing a finished piece blew me away and I was hooked on it...I get a kick out of making beautiful objects."

Hunt grew up working with his hands from the time he was five years old on projects like tree houses and chicken coups. "I wasn't enthused with academia. I wanted to work with my hands," Hunt noted. "My step mom was an architect and she got me enthused with old buildings and architecture. She helped me find a trade. From 14 years on I worked with my hands to be creative."

Hunt, like Blantern, was lured by travel. Ten years ago he took a trip to San Francisco with an eventual destination of South America, but he fell in love with San Francisco and stayed.

Bouska who hails from Roosevelt, a quarry town, is a member of the Stone Carvers Guild and worked at Stanford University restoring a Frank Lloyd Wright structure and worked on the Presidio Gate before connecting with Hunt's team. "This is the only place on the West Coast where something like this project is happening right now," Bouska noted. "It's a great opportunity to work on the courthouse... It is a job you have to learn by doing."

Bouska's favorite moment in the process is "when you can see the form, when it starts to pop...It's beautiful to me to see it gradually revealed."

Andrian Melka, who just arrived at the beginning of the month, is from Albania but earned a scholarship to study carving in London. He attended the same program as Hunt, the Dick Reid Workshop which ran for 50 years.

THE COURTHOUSE'S LANDMARK STATUS has meant extra work and planning to retain the nature of the original building, including finding usable chunks of the original type of stone. It also has meant that the carvers must pay particular attention to many details... such as how to



Completed *Spirit of the Ocean* fountain, circa 1928.

preserve a sandstone fountain and how to re-produce the exact surface texture of the original. Each of the team comes with a resume reflecting their experience with these kinds of tasks.

Part of the challenge of this project comes from the disintegration and patching of the original fountain. Up close it is a hodge podge of cracked stone, cement patches, and bulging cracks.

One of the obvious degradations is that the original fountain's surface was much more textured than it is today, after many years of erosion. To meet National Historic Site restoration parameters, the carvers are fabricating tools to create the textures as produced by Cadorin's team - measuring the remaining eroded textures and chisel marks for indications of tooth width and spacing on the original tools and then matching their tools to them.

An issue related to the past degradation, that prompted the re-creation, is preservation. Maintenance will be crucial to the new *Spirit of the Ocean's* longevity. Many mistakes were made with the original, such as thinking that painting the fountain would preserve it. Now there is an understanding that something as basic as ensuring a certain amount of air circulating around the fountain will help keep the sandstone stable.

NO LOCAL TEAM? While a local and national call for proposals was issued in 2007, it is no surprise that a team comprised mostly of Brits was selected. Three of the four selected carvers studied architectural stone carving in Great Britain, land of monuments, castles, and centuries of history. It is also the



land where the value of apprenticeship is understood. In Great Britain there are actual programs designed to mentor and train interested and gifted students in the field of Architectural Stone Carving.

In the United States the field is much less organized, with students usually finding their way into the field through art programs with stone carving elements or via masonry. The U. S. team member, Stephen Bouska, met the second

team leader, Hunt, on a job and joined his team after learning the trade under the tutelage of a granite monument maker in northern California.

THE TIMELINE FOR THIS PROJECT which entered the planning stages in 2007 is coming to a close. Since Melka has arrived, the team has moved into finish work. Melka is known for his abilities with figures and, according to Blantern, is the best in Europe. He'll offer refining touches on the figures, which the others have prepared to within about a quarter of an inch of finish.

If all goes as planned these stone carvers will have finished their job sometime in May. They'll be quite happy to see their work out in public, as often what they make for private individuals on private estates is never seen - making it difficult for them to share their passion and joy at completing a job very well done.

For more info on this and other projects of the Courthouse Legacy Foundation visit www.sbclf.org.

For a detailed history of the *Spirit of the Ocean* Fountain by David Petry visit: www.decomposingsb.com.



The foam model, the eroded 1927 fountain, and the same recently finished foot.



During those early years Blantern was introduced to the *Spirit of the Ocean*, and was struck by its state of disrepair. One afternoon two and a half years ago, when he was back in town on a job, he struck up a conversation with Robert Ooley, Santa Barbara County Architect and the conversation moved to the *Spirit of the Ocean*. In the intervening years, Blantern had also met Nathan Hunt, another Brit who had established himself in the States as an architectural stone-carver with a base in San Francisco (Hunt Studios). Blantern brought on Hunt, and in



The stone carvers use a process called pointing to create an exact replica.