

# Merrell Gage

## Southern California's Iconic 20th Century Sculptor

BY STEVE FJELDSTED

Gutzon Borglum, the legendary artist who carved the presidential figures on Mount Rushmore, once dubbed his understudy (Robert) Merrell Gage as "that steady-eyed young sculptor." From Merrell Gage's unshakeable artistic focus arose a vision that still speaks volumes about strong, traditional American values. An alumnus of many prestigious art schools, Gage used American historical figures and classics of literature as inspiration for the majority of his most famous artworks, many of which can still be found around Southern California and adorning the entire perimeter of the South

Pasadena Public Library.

By the time he passed away in 1989 at age 81, Gage had lived in Los Angeles County for more than 55 years. After his long, extraordinary series of monumental achievements, he was hailed by many as one of the greatest American sculptors of the 20th Century. Born in Kansas in 1892, young Merrell attended Topeka public schools before working as a ranch hand in the Midwest. Gage decided on an art career and left Kansas to study at Art Students' League, the Beaux Arts Institute of Design, and the Henri School of Art, before working in the Gutzon Borglum

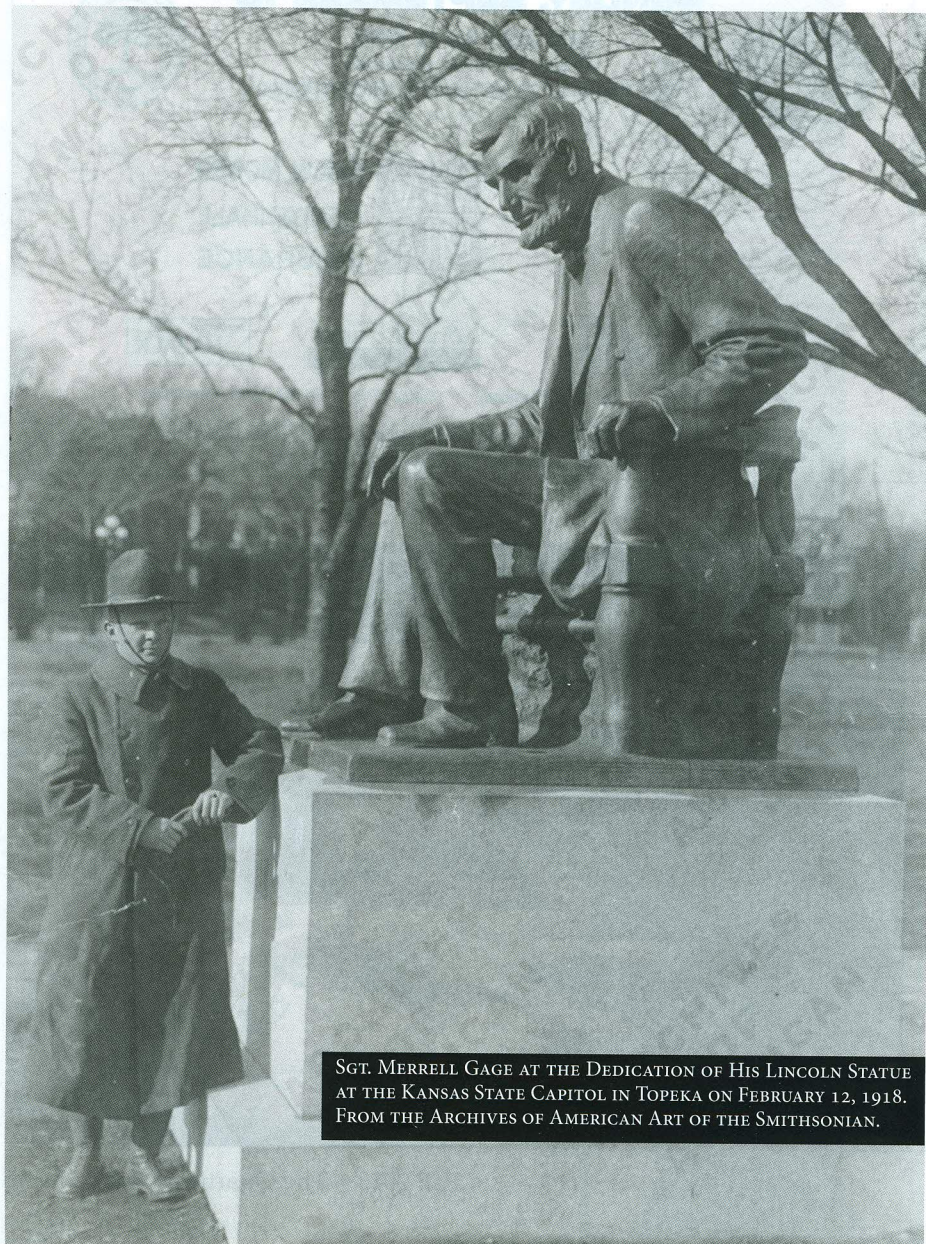
studios in New York from 1914 to 1916.

After returning to Topeka in 1916, Gage set up a sculpture studio in a barn behind his house. Soon he earned his first public commission for creating a life-sized statue of Abraham Lincoln that now sits on the grounds of the Kansas State Capitol. After graduation and a stint in the Army during World War I, Gage began teaching sculpture at Washburn University in Topeka, and then for the Kansas City Art Institute. From 1921 to 1923 Gage served yet again under Gutzon Borglum, this time in his studio in France. Borglum later resided along the Arroyo Seco, Southern California's most culturally historic canyon.

In 1924, Merrell Gage and his artist wife Marian moved to Southern California so he could teach at USC. In 1931 Gage also began teaching at the fledgling Chouinard Art Institute on Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. By 1925 the Gages were settling into Southern California life after building their home and studio in the Santa Monica Canyon, while Merrell continued teaching at Chouinard. Around 1928 Gage was commissioned to create an assortment of artwork for the South Pasadena Public Library which was being expanded and renovated from its original Classical Carnegie appearance.

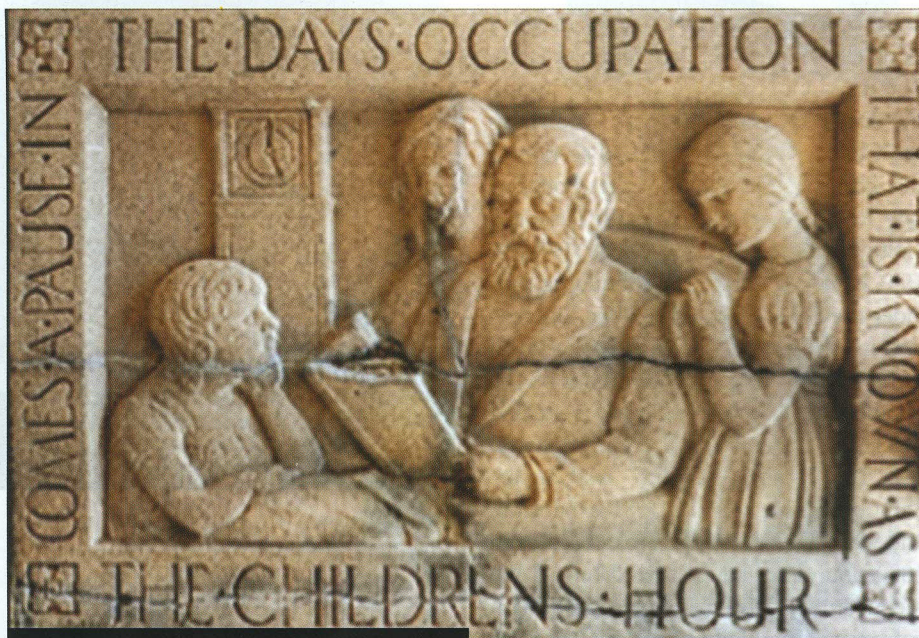
Its new Mediterranean Revival facade was styled after the architecture of northern Italy. The renovation was orchestrated by nationally known architect, Norman Foote Marsh, who not only designed the original South Pasadena Carnegie Library some 23 years earlier, but also the original buildings of the University of Redlands, Hollywood High School, Pasadena High School, and Columbia Hospital in Los Angeles. Marsh is also famous for his contributions for the layout of Venice, California which was, of course, modeled after Venice, Italy. Marsh also served as the architect for South Pasadena Middle School, South Pasadena High School, both of which were also decorated with sculptures by Gage, as was Hollywood High.

After its remodeling and enlargement in 1930 the South Pasadena Public Library reopened its doors and featured a striking series of six decorative stone panels by Gage, illustrating classic scenes from literature. The panels depict David and his sling, Perseus with the head of Medusa, Don Quixote and a windmill, an Indian (Hiawatha?), Rip Van Winkle, and Hamlet. For the area above the main entrance, Gage crafted two shields: one of the coat



SGT. MERRELL GAGE AT THE DEDICATION OF HIS LINCOLN STATUE AT THE KANSAS STATE CAPITOL IN TOPEKA ON FEBRUARY 12, 1918. FROM THE ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART OF THE SMITHSONIAN.





'THE CHILDREN'S HOUR' WAS COMMISSIONED FOR THE SOUTH PASADENA PUBLIC LIBRARY'S RENOVATION AND EXPANSION OF 1930. IT WAS BROKEN AND FELL INTO FURTHER DISREPAIR UNTIL ITS RESTORATION IN 2012. THE MASTERWORK WILL BE INSTALLED AND UNVEILED IN THE FALL OF 2013.

of arms of the City of South Pasadena, and a California bear on the other. Gage also developed ten friezes for the roofline proclaiming the last names of ten famed American writers of the West. Nine of the plaques bear the last names of California authors, namely Mark Twain, Bret Harte, John Muir, Josiah Royce, Edwin Markham, Robert Louis Stevenson, Luther Burbank, Richard Henry Dana, Joaquin Miller, and Mary Austin. Austin is the only one with a

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON SCULPTURE NEAR THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE SOUTH PASADENA LIBRARY



local connection, as she began her writing career when she too lived along the Arroyo Seco. The only non-Californian author depicted on one of the ten plaques is Enos Mills from Colorado. It is interesting to note that Mills, like Gage, was born in Kansas and moved westward as an adult, in his case, to Colorado

Gage also sculpted two statues for the Library's entrance to the Children's Room. One shows St. George and the Dragon popping up from the pages of a book, as does his sculpture of a ship at sea. It's been interpreted as a Spanish Galleon and also as the Mayflower. Above the entrance to the Children's Room loomed Gage's most magnificent creation, "The Children's Hour." The stunning stone casting depicted an image of a father reading to his three daughters bordered by

## A TOP SALES TEAM FOR 28 CONSECUTIVE YEARS



Guess what people are saying about

**MEG MIDDLEMAN**

and The Middleman Team...

**"Meg sold my mother's home and deserves the highest praise. Simply said: Don't change anything. Keep up your perfection."**

**Call Meg:**

**(626) 441-3449**

1055 E. Colorado Blvd., Ste. 500, Pasadena, CA 91106

email: [megmiddleman@gmail.com](mailto:megmiddleman@gmail.com)

website: [MegMiddleman.com](http://MegMiddleman.com) • DRE# 00914188

Each Office is independently Owned and Operated



LAW OFFICE OF  
**JONATHAN D. PRIMUTH**  
A PROFESSIONAL LAW CORPORATION



- WILLS, TRUSTS & ESTATE PLANNING
- ADMINISTRATION OF TRUSTS & PROBATE
- BUSINESS SUCCESSION PLANNING

**626.683.7234**

790 East Colorado Blvd. Suite 790 Pasadena, CA 91101  
[jon@primuthlaw.com](mailto:jon@primuthlaw.com) | [www.primuthlaw.com](http://www.primuthlaw.com)



# J&J PLUMBING

## A RELIABLE & CARING PLUMBER!

We Do Honest, Thorough,  
High Quality Plumbing Work!

Plumbing Repairs,  
Gas Repairs, Drain  
Cleaning, Remodeling  
Needs & Much More.

Your Comfort & Safety is  
Our Highest Priority.

CALL TODAY  
phone (626) 799-7121  
cell (626) 422-3297

www.  
jnplumbingunplugged  
.com

*A South Pasadena  
Company*

Contractor Lic. # 773658



**wide selection of quality,  
imported yarn**

**knitting & crochet instruction**

**custom design**

**finishing services**

**large inventory of knitting  
accessories**

**please call us for more  
information or visit our website:  
www.skeinyarns.com**

**Tues, Thurs, Fri, Sat 10am - 6pm**

**Wed 10am - 8pm**

**Winter Extended Hours (Nov. thru March)**

**Sunday 1pm - 4pm**

**Closed on Monday**

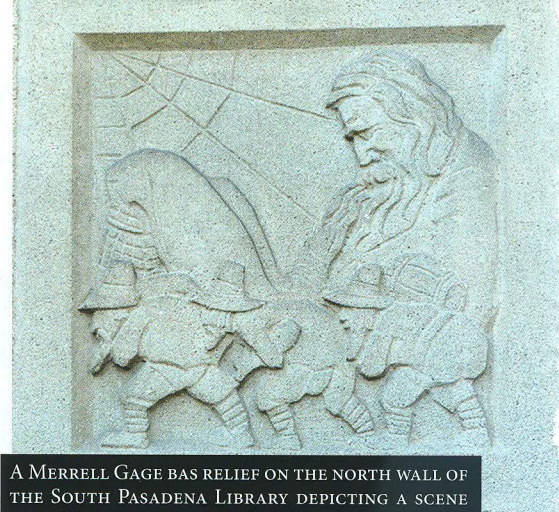
**1101 E. Walnut St.  
(3 blks east of Lake Ave.)  
Pasadena, CA 91106  
626.577.2035**

a brief excerpt from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Children's Hour. The inscription reads: "Comes a Pause in the Day's Occupation That's Known as the Children's Hour." The 1930 section of the library building, now the Community Room, was made a South Pasadena Cultural Heritage Landmark in 1972. A 1981 expansion of the 1930 building provides the South Pasadena Public Library's current footprint. With its 1930 face to El Centro Street and its 1981 entrance on the parallel Oxley Street, the Library is situated in a landscaped block called Library Park.

"The Children's Hour" was apparently broken during the 1981 expansion, and workers encased the broken pieces in 1800 pounds of concrete and buried the reconstituted artwork by the new main entrance. "The Children's Hour" became further deteriorated by a sago palm that was planted next to it. Through the decades, the once majestic artwork grew more cracked, chipped, and worn. In 2008 when the Library embarked on Phase I of a project to beautify the area outside the Oxley Street entrance, the importance of "The Children's Hour" was brought to the attention of the by library by patron Andy Castellano, who is now deceased.

After his momentous work for the South Pasadena Library, Gage went on to an even more illustrious career. In 1932 he was selected to serve on the Sculpture Committee for the LA Olympics and he was elected President of the California Art Club for 1932-33. Gage was later appointed professor of the USC Fine Arts Department which he later chaired until his retirement in 1958. A 30 minute documentary film entitled "The Face of Lincoln" starring Gage demonstrating his talents as a sculptor while unhesitatingly telling the 16th president's life story won him an Academy Award for a Documentary Short in 1956. Before he passed away in 1981 Gage left behind a marvelous body of work of famous artworks that display his bold vision of American values. Among his most transcendent works outside California are his busts of Walt Whitman and John Brown at the Mulvane Art Institute and his Police Memorial and Veterans Fountain in Kansas City. His personal papers are housed in the Smithsonian Institute.

Southern California is especially fortunate to have so many Gage public artworks. These include his fountain at the La Jolla Library, his "Lincoln the Lawyer"



A MERRELL GAGE BAS RELIEF ON THE NORTH WALL OF THE SOUTH PASADENA LIBRARY DEPICTING A SCENE FROM "GULLIVER'S TRAVELS"

in downtown LA at 1st and Grand, his "Tribute to Motion Picture Celebrities" at Beverly and Olympic, and his sculpture of an Indian kneeling in prayer atop the Electric Fountain at Wilshire and Beverly in Beverly Hills. It displayed 60 different combinations of water jets and color combinations every eight minutes. When it debuted in 1931, the fountain backed up traffic for miles. Also noteworthy are Gage's "Father Time, Spirit of Time" sculptures on the Times Mirror Building, the bas reliefs over the Edison Building, and his intricate and ornate archway above the front doors of the LA Arts Building.

"The Children's Hour" was evaluated by an art appraiser in 2009 that deemed it of national importance. It was carefully unearthed and moved to the South Pasadena Public Works Yard for safekeeping until funds could be raised to restore it. There it miraculously survived a devastating fire. The South Pasadena City Council and the estate of Martin Mullen, a local English teacher, were used to restore the artwork and a structural engineering firm devised a large frame to hang the 600 pound piece above the brick patio by the Library's main entrance. "The Children's Hour" will be installed in September where it will reside along with new reading and study tables donated by the Setzler Family and South Pasadena Beautiful. In October "The Children's Hour" and the furniture will be unveiled in a public-invited ribbon cutting to be announced on the Library website at [www.southpasadena.ca.gov](http://www.southpasadena.ca.gov). The South Pasadena Cultural Heritage Commission and the Preservation Foundation have announced that the Library will be honored this fall for restoring "The Children's Hour" and thereby filling a missing piece of Merrell Gage's incredible artistic legacy. *Steve Fjeldsted is the South Pasadena City Librarian.* ¶

