51: Gaston Lachaise *Fountain Figure* (1927)

Cynthia L. Culbert

For many years, the idealized, serene, partially draped *Fountain Figure* by Gaston Lachaise occupied a central space in a jewel of a garden in Rochester, New York. The commission was the result of the landscape designer Fletcher Steele's search for good garden sculpture and a series of relationships and events that led the artist to a group of patrons, including Charlotte Whitney Allen and her husband Atkinson Allen, in Rochester. A beautiful sculpture and quite fitting in the garden, it bears little relation to the work that Lachaise is best known for—ample, fecund, earth goddesses—that earned him the place in the history of art as the sculptor of the monumental woman. That well-deserved title recognizes the power, heart, and soul that he poured into every work that fits that description. But *Fountain Figure* does not fit that description, and as illustrated by the letters between artist and patron, the circumstances surrounding its creation were strained, at best.[1]

Lachaise fell madly in love with an older, married American woman whom he met while she was visiting France around 1901. He followed her to America in 1906 and, following her divorce, married her in 1917. Of that first meeting he wrote: "I met a young American person who immediately became the primary inspiration which awakened my vision and the leading influence that has directed my forces.... I refer to this person by the word 'Woman.'"[2] Her name was Isabel Nagle. She was ten years Lachaise's senior, with a son from her first marriage. Her voluptuous figure informed his work throughout his career (indeed, he modeled every uncommissioned sculpture since he met her on her form) and her luxurious life-style drained his wallet. In 1923, after they'd purchased a summer home in Georgetown, Maine, Lachaise started to seek commissions in order to supplement his earnings.

Through acquaintance with a group of his stepson's friends at Harvard University, Lachaise became the benefactor of very positive free press from the *Dial* magazine, a publication devoted to promoting the best in the visual and literary arts. Among Edward Nagle's peers and those involved with the *Dial* were e.e. cummings, Scofield Thayer, Gilbert Seldes, Marianne Moore, and Rochesterian James Sibley Watson, Jr.,[3] whose mother had founded the Memorial Art Gallery. The whole group became staunch Lachaise supporters, offering praise, encouragement, positive reviews, purchases, and eventually commissions.

Commissions became a point of tension for Lachaise. He could do them rather easily technically, as he spent his early career apprenticed to jewelry and glass designer René Lalique in France doing modeling and design work, then assisted Henry Hudson Kitson in Boston, where he focused on the details of Civil War monuments, and later, in New York, found work with the Art Deco sculptor Paul Manship. He spent about fifteen years polishing his skills as a sculptor with these artists, all of whose individual styles differed greatly from Lachaise's personal style. Around 1920 he stopped working for Manship and focused more on his personal work and a commission that he received in 1921 for a frieze for the American Telephone and Telegraph Building in New York.

Lachaise had his first one-man show in 1918 at the Bourgeois Gallery, where Charlotte Whitney Allen and her husband purchased a small bronze called *Pudeur*. Mrs. Whitney Allen likely saw the first work that Lachaise exhibited in New York when she attended the Armory Show in 1913. His second one-man show was also at the Bourgeois Gallery in 1920, around the same time the *Dial* started to showcase his work. The public reaction to the personal work Lachaise exhibited in these shows was mixed. Many felt that his ample nudes were shocking, even obscene, but the art critics' sensibilities were not so delicate and Lachaise received some rave reviews. Thereafter his career seemed to be thriving. But after the purchase of the summer property in Maine in 1923, the Lachaises were unable to keep up with their finances.

In search of more commissioned work, Lachaise turned to his friends and supporters at the *Dial*. Scofield Thayer had a portrait bust done in 1923–24, Marianne Moore in 1924, and e.e. cummings in 1927. James Sibley Watson, Jr. commissioned a statuette of his wife, Hildegarde, in 1925 and they had a portrait head of Mr. Watson done in 1927. A portrait head of Urling Sibley Iselin in 1927, commissioned by her and her husband O'Donnell, was followed in 1928 by a life-size bronze female figure. Urling, though she now lived in New York, had been born in Rochester. Both she and her cousin Watson were clients and friends of Fletcher Steele's and so had many connections to the Rochester scene, whose elite, in turn, were well connected with New York. In 1924 the Memorial Art Gallery held a show from *The Dial Portfolio of Living Art* (the *Dial* had amassed a collection of art illustrated in the publication), showcasing the work of Lachaise along with Picasso, Matisse, and Marin. The Allens, though already familiar with Lachaise's work through the exhibitions they attended, were likely caught up in the Lachaise fever of the *Dial* and their friends the Watsons.

Gaston Lachaise,
1882–1935
Bust of James Sibley Watson, Jr.,
1927
Bronze, 14 x 8 x 9¾ in.
Gift of a friend of the Gallery
by exchange, 90.3
Courtesy the Estate

A group of letters housed at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, chronicles the working relationship between Lachaise and the Allens. The first letter dated from September 26, 1925, indicates that the Allens had already decided they would commission a sculpture from Lachaise for the garden that Fletcher Steele had been working on since 1915.[4] In a letter from October 8, 1925, Lachaise describes what he has in mind for the sculpture's size (life-size), attitude (about to step into the pool), and material (light pink Tennessee marble),[5] and he carefully lays out the price (five thousand dollars), payment plan, and a completion date of June 1926. Things appeared to be on track until June of 1926 when Lachaise informed the Allens that the sculpture would not be ready until late July. By July 1, he had only just received the piece of stone from which he would carve the sculpture (he had already worked out the design in clay and cast it in plaster). He also asked for his first advance payment at that time. Two weeks later he asked for $300, and two weeks after that, he was asking for more money. The letters that follow become more desperate and continue to ask for more money while apologizing for the fact that the statue is taking longer than he expected. A letter from August 2, 1926, reads: "I find I must have more time to finish your statue as I wish....There is considerable more work than I expected, to make it the complet beautifull [*sic*] work that I wish....This will make it imperative for me to have more money to be able to continue the work without difficulty[.] I trust you may understand my position and that you will send me a further payment."[6]

By January of 1927, the sculpture was complete enough for the Allens to see it in New York and they agreed to let Lachaise include it in its only exhibition before it entered the collection of the Memorial Art Gallery. This was at Alfred Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery from March 7 to April 3, 1927. By late February, after paying Lachaise a thousand dollars[7] more than originally agreed upon, Atkinson Allen wrote Lachaise: "We have now done a great deal more than we had planned to do or had any right to do from the point of view of our finances....[I]f you still need more money it will not be possible for you to look to us for it."[8] On the bottom of a further letter by the Allens, again refusing to give him any more money, is scribbled the word

(Facing page)
Gaston Lachaise,
1882–1935
Fountain Figure, 1927
Tennessee limestone, 72 in.
Gift of Charlotte Whitney
Allen, 64.28
Courtesy the Estate

Gaston Lachaise,
1882–1935
Portrait Statuette of
Mrs. J. Sibley Watson, Jr., 1925
Nickel-plated bronze,
15¾ x 8⅛ x 6¼ in.
Gift of a friend of the Gallery,
67.11
Courtesy the Estate

"anxiety."[9] Alfred Stieglitz then wrote to the Allens on Lachaise's behalf describing the reactions to the sculpture in the exhibition. He told how almost every artist who saw it felt it was one of the "grand bits of work that has come out of America"[10] and that John Marin broke down in front of it. He claimed that the average price viewers placed on the statue was twenty thousand dollars. By May 1929, Stieglitz was writing Lachaise his own letters refusing to lend him any more money, and his predictions of the statue's place as an icon of American art failed to come true.

In 1928, Lachaise wrote "A Comment on My Sculpture," in which he expressed his feelings about working for patrons: "One of the reliable pitfalls in the way of achievement is the society man or society woman seeking playtoys and prestige, publicity for their vanity in exchange for their frivolous or whimsical patronage."[11] Lachaise's biographer, Gerald Nordland, Lachaise's wife Isabel, and even their friends knew of Lachaise's distaste for working for others. Marguerite and William Zorach wondered about "'compromised' standards for reasons of money."[12] It is clear from comparing Lachaise's work for patrons with his own private work based on his reverence for Isabel that there was something missing from the commissioned work—the execution is flawless, the forms are pleasing to the eye, but they are also cold. They lack the spark and vitality that makes the rest of Lachaise's oeuvre deserving of its place in the annals of American art.

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Ralph Avery,
1906–1976
The Garden of Charlotte Whitney Allen, 1969
Watercolor with graphite on board, 21½ x 15½ in.
Anonymous gift in memory of Charlotte Whitney Allen, 89.30

Fortunately, despite the drama over money and the greatness of a statue that Stieglitz shuddered to think would be hidden away in a garden, the Allens and Fletcher Steele were very happy with how it worked in its intended place. Steele's criteria for garden sculpture were met—the pink Tennessee marble contrasted nicely with the foliage surrounding it and blended with the brick and cast stone of the architecture, and the silhouette was animated without appearing blocked in by the arch that framed it. The Rochester weather surely took its toll on the sculpture, but Charlotte Whitney Allen had a box made to cover it in the winter, and on it she had a friend paint a likeness of the statue. At her death, she bequeathed *Fountain Figure* to the Memorial Art Gallery, where today it graces the Vanden Brul Pavilion.[13]

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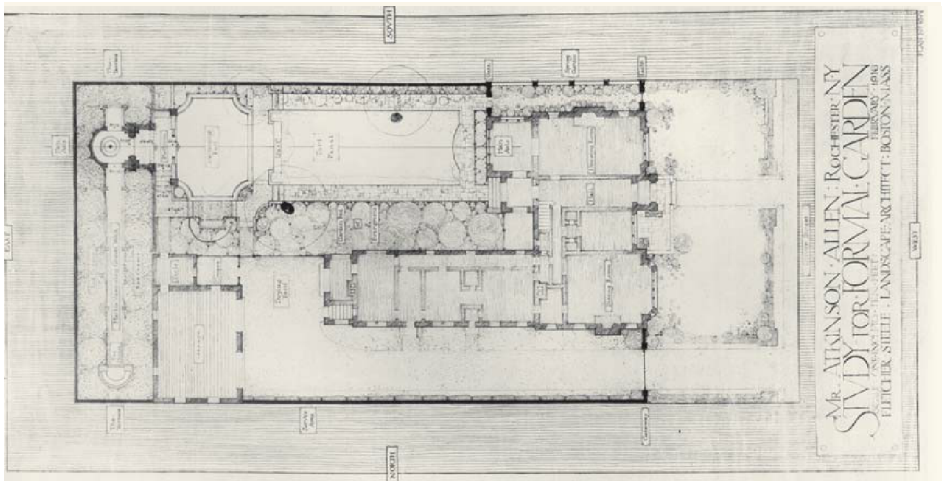

Fletcher Steele,
1885–1971
Study for Formal Garden, 1916
Fletcher Steele Manuscript Collection
Terence J. Hoverter College Archives, F. Franklin Moon Library, State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, Syracuse, New York