

**JOHN GUTZON DE LA MOTHE  
BORGLUM**

**(1867 – 1941)**

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# Gutzon Borglum

## (1867 – 1941)

John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum (pronounced gŭt'sun de l'u mät bŏr'glum) was born on March 25, 1867; although, he may have subtracted several years from his age at various times, which often causes confusion about his actual birth year. He was an active Freemason, though I am not always certain we would at all times want to admit that fact. He was raised in Howard Lodge No. 35 in New York City on June 10, 1904 and served as its Worshipful Master in 1910 and 1911. Howard Lodge No. 35 still owns the gavel he used. The form of the gavel was a bronze lion's paw holding a stone from Solomon's Temple. In 1915, he was appointed the Grand Representative of the Grand Lodge of Denmark near the Grand Lodge of New York. He was also a Scottish Rite Mason receiving those degrees in the New York Consistory on October 25, 1907; however, he was suspended from the Scottish Rite in 1921.

Gutzon Borglum was a famous artist, and his most famous work was Mount Rushmore. He did provide some of his talent as service to the craft. One such piece is the Bust of Edward M. L. Ehlers, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of New York, which currently resides in the Grand Lodge Library. Another piece is his memorial "Silence" which is located in the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Hospital at the Masonic Home in Utica, New York. The cornerstone of his studio in Stamford, Connecticut was laid with Masonic ceremonies by the Grand Master of New York under special dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Connecticut.

He was born in St. Charles (near Bear Lake), Idaho (then a territory) to one of the wives of a Danish Mormon bigamist. His father later switched to monogamy and left Gutzon's mother in favor of his other wife, her sister. He was educated in the public schools of Nebraska, but studied art in California and France. In California, he studied at the San Francisco Art Academy. He received a Master of Arts from Princeton University and an L.L.D. from Oglethorpe University. He studied, painted and traveled in Europe, particularly in France, Spain and England, until he finally settled in New York in 1901. While in California, he met Lisa Jaynes Putnam, a painter who became his teacher, mentor and eventually, in 1889, his wife. During this time, he painted a portrait of General John C. Fremont. He developed many influential and important contacts through the General and Mrs. Fremont, who continued her sponsorship even after the General's death. When the Borglums traveled to Paris to study, he came in contact with and in admiration of the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin, which may be one reason that Borglum turned to sculpting rather than painting. It is also speculated that he became competitive with his brother Solon Hannibal Borglum (a successful sculptor noted especially for his portrayal of horses, cattle, Native Americans, and cowboys) which was another reason that he gave up painting in favor of sculpting. While in Paris, he studied at both the prestigious Academie Julien and the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

During this period of his life, he was commissioned to complete a few sculptures and while his talent started to blossom, his marriage began to die. In 1901, he returned to the United States alone and upon the steamship found his future second wife, Mary Montgomery. After his divorce to Lisa Putnam was final, he married Mary Montgomery and they bought a house and farm in Connecticut, which they called *Borgland*. They had two children, Lincoln and Mary

Ellis. It is said that their hospitality was legendary and *Borgland* saw a steady stream of dignitaries, young artists, writers and performers.

In the United States, he completed several major works in America including a bust of Lincoln. Through his association with the Fremonts, he had developed a contact with President Theodore Roosevelt who allowed him to exhibit the work in the White House. The Lincoln bust earned Borglum national recognition. In addition, while many artists searched for the true features of Lincoln, Borglum's colossal bust of Lincoln became the accepted features of the famed President. The statue of Lincoln that stands in the rotunda of the Capitol building in Washington, DC was his first commission upon his return to New York. Borglum had difficulty in finding buyers for his more creative works, and he quickly realized that he could make a better living working on public monuments. This arena of art was beginning to flourish due to a resurgence in civic and nationalist pride.

However, a few of his critics believe Gutzon was not a real artist, but rather a "master money squanderer." It is true that he was constantly in debt and often did not pay off his notes. One critic focused on his fund raising activities and said, "He was a lionizer; he was a womanizer. They say he could raise \$25,000 from a Ladies' Club faster than you could say "gimme kiss." There is often a thin line between having good contacts and exploiting contacts for one's own good. It is not always apparent which way Brother Borglum was working the thin line.

Borglum was then invited by Helen Plane of the United Daughters of the Confederacy to carve a 70-foot bust of Robert E. Lee on the steep side of Stone Mountain in Georgia. This was Borglum's first "mountain carving project" and, although his vision was much larger than planned by the UDC, he did develop some of the techniques that he would use in his later work on Rushmore. He told Mrs. Plane that placing a 70-foot carving of Lee on the side of the largest granite outcropping in the world would be like placing a postage stamp on the side of a barn. Instead he envisioned a large Southern army following Lee, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson cut on the north face of Stone Mountain. While involved in the Stone Mountain project, he became associated with the newly reborn Ku Klux Klan. There is no documented reason for his association with the KKK, but it could have been due to the racist view of the world at that time, or just a way to bond with the sponsors and patrons of the Stone Mountain project. There is little evidence that he treated the blacks any differently than the whites, his priority was basically, the rich first, the influential second and then anyone in his way. Mary Donohue of the Connecticut Historical Commission says, "... He counted American presidents, inordinately wealthy industrialists, and members of society's elite as friends and patrons." He owed both black and white employees back wages, so there is not a differentiation there. At any rate, due to his extravagant vision of the Stone Mountain carving and enormous cost, he was fired before the project was completed. Basically, he had completed only the head of Lee in time to be unveiled for the anniversary of Lee's birth on January 24, 1924. Subsequently in a tantrum, he destroyed the model of his vision and plans.

Contradictory to the racist evidence, Borglum had envisioned his project following Mount Rushmore to be called "Indian Tribe in Granite". It was to be monument to the Native Americans, a whole tribe of 14 to 16 feet tall Indians. Although the Sioux had often asked him to

carve a monument of a lone Indian near Mount Rushmore, Borglum explained, “I played with Indians as a boy. I was brought up on the tales of those old chiefs.” He also held the Lakota in high regard believing them, “intellectual, with high moral standards and honorable in all their agreements.” He also spoke against the American people breaking treaties and agreements with the Indians, even in speeches during the work at Mount Rushmore. In one important speech in 1940, he said, “We are standing on territory once belonging to the Sioux Indians – that great warlike race, like the Romans, who rules everything from Wyoming to Chicago. I wish we had treated them better, in a more noble manner. We are standing on their very land, for which we never paid a cent – just stole it from them and lied about it.”

Other important pieces of the early period are:

- another figure of Lincoln and the massive Wars of America monument (in Newark, NJ)
- a statue of Henry Ward Beecher (in Brooklyn)
- *Mares of Diomedes* (Metropolitan Museum)
- figures of the apostles and other religious figures (over 100) created for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York City.
- the *Wheeler Fountain* in Bridgeport, Connecticut
- *Monument to James McConnell* for the University of Virginia
- *The Trail Drivers Memorial* for San Antonio, Texas
- *General Philip Sheridan* (two versions) in Washington, D.C. and Chicago, Illinois

Tomes could be written on Mount Rushmore. Briefly, it is composed of 60 foot heads of four Presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln (situated left to right). Although originally planned as a monument to the heroes of the West, Borglum changed it to represent the essence of a great nation. He vowed to create a monument “as big as the country itself.” At Mount Rushmore, Borglum used skills and techniques he had used and developed at Stone Mountain and some he had since improved. His son, Lincoln Borglum, was also a Freemason in Battle River Lodge No. 92, Hermosa, South Dakota. He worked with his father on Mount Rushmore since 1932 and was assigned to complete the memorial upon the death of his father.

Mainly, Gutzon created the models, sited the sculptures, and developed the methods for transferring the image to the mountain and carving the rock. Although he spent time climbing all over the mountain and surrounding hills to determine the best angle for each feature, he was not always present at Mount Rushmore and spent time traveling the world and lobbying for additional funding from Washington, D.C. When at the site, he often advised the carvers on how to create nuances in detail that might not even be visible from below. He was stubborn and insisted on having things done his way, even while he was gone traveling. This often led to confrontations with the Commission and his temper caused him to often fire his best carvers and workmen (who were then hired back by his son Lincoln). He was stubborn, temperamental and a perfectionist. He was big and brash, almost larger than life, just the characteristics needed to carve a mountain.

Truly, many people look at something like the carvings on Mount Rushmore and immediately declare the artist to be a genius just from the size of the carving. It is argued, however, that his real talent was in pulling the right strings and raising funds. How else could

one justify “Teddy Roosevelt” with the likes of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. At any rate, he did have the huge vision or big picture of his creation. Borglum’s granddaughter Robin Carter quotes his philosophy on creating as, “The reason for building any work of art can only be for the purpose of fixing in some durable form a great emotion, or a great idea, of the individual, or the people.” This he did achieve.

Brother John Gutzon Borglum died on March 6, 1941 of complications following surgery and is buried in a crypt at the foot of Mount Rushmore.

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