

The Encounter: From Rheims to Romeoville

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Origins

The project was a creative, meaningful, and once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. A generous benefactor offered to fund the development and construction of an “iconic sculpture” on the Lewis University campus that would be attractive, unique, and reflect our Mission and identity, a sculpture that would evoke a sense of emotion and would appeal to current students, staff, and alumni alike.

Such iconic sculptures exist on campuses throughout the country and around the world, for example, the University of Notre Dame’s *Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes*; Michigan State University’s storied *Sparty* statue; and Lorado Taft’s *The Alma Mater* sculpture, a beloved symbol at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign that for over ninety years served as the backdrop for countless graduation photos. And now Lewis would be able to enjoy its own “iconic sculpture.”

In August 2015, Brother James Gaffney, FSC, the University’s president at the time, suggested the project to longtime friends and benefactors of Lewis University, Jay and Lori Bergman, who generously agreed to underwrite it. Brother James asked me to serve as project director and convene an especially creative group of faculty and staff to help imagine and articulate what the sculpture could be. The initial group included a Christian Brother, a theologian, an English professor, an artist, a historian, a fundraiser, and our superintendent of grounds. It gradually increased to include numerous other campus colleagues.

Brainstorming

Our “Iconic Sculpture Project” team, as we came to be known, approached the work in a holistic, comprehensive, and educational manner. We sought inspiration on other college campuses and in public squares and parks. We studied websites and photos of art pieces, sculptures, exhibits, memorials, and other places of symbolic meaning and historical significance. By October, we articulated the guiding principles for the project: the sculpture should reflect the mission of the university, inspire a new campus tradition, center on an experience that one “enters into,” and tell a meaningful story that unfolds as part of that experience.

Our conversation then turned towards themes for the sculpture itself – something that would make it truly ‘iconic’ for our community – such as aviation and flight; the identity of “The Flyer,” the Lewis mascot; the Lasallian star; and other ideas inspired by our Lasallian and Catholic Mission. There was also talk of plazas, amphitheaters, walls, benches, pavers, mosaics, pedestals, lighting, interpretive text panels, walkways, and more that would help us situate the sculpture in the appropriate setting. By mid-November, we were under timeline pressure to

present several viable options to the donors for their feedback and approval. And although we generated numerous ideas, we weren't yet unified around any one compelling option.

Conceptual Designs

In February 2016, after several additional months of brainstorming and discussion, we presented our "Iconic Sculpture Concepts" memorandum to the president and the donors for their consideration. Our proposal included three main concepts accompanied by images that inspired our thinking: the statue of a pilot that evoked our aviation heritage and the embodiment of "The Flyer"; a large, stainless steel, five-pointed star evoking the symbol of the Institute and the University's Mission values; and a concept we called "Flight," a sculpture depicting an airplane with a long, flowing contrail meant to represent soaring, upward momentum.

By the early spring, we received helpful and constructive feedback from the donor expressing a preference for the project's focal point to represent an actual, iconic figure connected to the University rather than an abstract image or concept. Strong consideration was given to the possibility of memorializing Frank J. Lewis, one of the institution's founders and the University's namesake. To further assist us, we invited Leslie Ansteth Colonna, Assistant Professor of Art and Design, to develop sketches and watercolor concept images of Frank J. Lewis standing alone in one depiction, and in another, accompanied by a high school-aged young man and a college-aged woman, both meant to represent Lewis's role in founding Holy Name Technical School and his legacy as the institution evolved from a technical high school into a university. We also sought out the expertise of Alec M. Smith, a sculptor based in St. Paul, Minnesota, who had worked on previous sculptures for the University. In addition, we carefully identified possible campus locations for the sculpture. Our overall concept was well received, but many involved felt it didn't represent the energy and uniqueness we sought to evoke in the completed project. The timing was right for a pause, as Brother James Gaffney's presidency concluded that summer, and Dr. David Livingston was welcomed to campus as our tenth president.

New Energy and Inspiration

By October 2016, with a revitalized and reconstituted committee, I proposed that Saint John Baptist de La Salle serve as the central focal point of the project. I further suggested we envision a depiction of De La Salle that was unlike the traditional versions seen elsewhere. And so, we aimed to offer a decidedly "twenty-first century" rendition of the Founder, one that would create a sense of pride, elicit emotion, and inspire. Most importantly, we wanted it to be an original, unique to Lewis and unlike anything else in the Lasallian world that any of us were aware of.

We quickly developed ideas around De La Salle as the central figure, discussing ways to represent the spirit, identity, meaning, and relatability of De La Salle to the viewer. We also considered how the sculpture might reflect the concepts of vocation and calling. Finally, we expressed a desire for the viewer or observer to interact with the statue.

And then we had a breakthrough moment! Our inspiration was *John Baptist de La Salle Meets Adrien Nyel*, a painting from Gerlier's engraving in Gaveau's 1886 *Life of the Founder*. The

painting depicts the events that occurred in March 1679, when twenty-seven-year-old John Baptist de La Salle visited the convent of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in Reims, France, to assist the Sisters with important business matters and to celebrate Mass. As he approached the doorway to the convent, De La Salle encountered Adrien Nyel and his fourteen-year-old teacher-assistant, Christophe. Nyel, a social services administrator, was from Rouen, where he had established schools for the poor. He had been asked by Madame Jeanne Dubois Maillefer, a wealthy widow, to consider founding a charity school for boys in Reims. Nyel's first visit in town was to seek guidance and support from the Sisters. Once inside the entryway to the convent, Sister Françoise Duval introduced the two men.

This chance encounter changed the trajectory of De La Salle's life. With each passing day, De La Salle found himself becoming drawn into an unfamiliar world: the world of the poor, of disadvantaged students, uncultured teachers, and families chronically oppressed by poverty. Although De La Salle didn't expect his involvement with Nyel and the schools to be a lasting project, he sensed that God was calling him to continue this important work. The rest, as they say, is history. In 1680, De La Salle went on to begin the process of establishing the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Seeking the "Iconic"

What if we could capture this "encounter moment" in our depiction of De La Salle, yet also make it relevant for a twenty-first century, college-going audience? How could we effectively interpret and communicate that moment of discovery, promise, and impact in De La Salle's life, more than three hundred years ago, for a new generation learning about the Founder and his educational mission? Before long, we were discussing not just a simple re-creation but a modern-day reinterpretation to inspire and teach others about this pivotal moment in the founding story of Lasallian education.

Soon, it all came together. Our sculpture of De La Salle would be positioned at the entry of an open doorway, hand outstretched, welcoming, inviting. We would communicate to the student that just as De La Salle's life changed from his encounter with Nyel, and opportunities presented themselves to him that he had not previously imagined before that day in March 1679, the same could happen for all Lewis students. A Lasallian education could similarly open possibilities. A sense of purpose and calling could be discovered. Transformations could take place that one didn't expect. We agreed that we could design a ritual for new students around their passage through the doorway and that our initial hope of an "experience" could be realized by telling De La Salle's story, relating it to students today, and creating an engaging, interactive experience for students, alumni, employees, and visitors. We had finally discovered the "iconic" concept we were seeking!

The Encounter

Throughout 2017, we focused and executed. We presented our newest idea to Jay Bergman, and he enthusiastically approved. We studied De La Salle's "encounter moment" in more depth to better understand the circumstances around this crucial moment in the Lasallian story. Leslie Ansteth Colonna started sketching, painting, and sculpting a variety of conceptual images to help

us develop and refine our ideas. We discussed important features like the size and scale of the sculpture and the “approachability factor.” We didn’t want just observers; we wanted students and others to interact with the sculpture, to be able to walk up and directly approach De La Salle. We discussed at great length his stance, his facial expression, and the positioning of his arms and hands. Leslie invested countless hours bringing our ideas to life in drawn and painted form. Alec Smith was soon developing computer-generated, three-dimensional digital concept sculptures for us to marvel at and scrutinize in an effort to perfect our image of De La Salle. I consulted Brother William Mann, FSC, and Brother Gerard Rummery, FSC, on De La Salle’s appearance, his clothing, his posture, his hand gestures, and even his height! We spent time envisioning the doorway itself: its size, scale, shape, construction, and the positioning and location of De La Salle at the entrance to the doorway.

During the summer of 2018, we began working closely with architects and our facilities staff on the necessary infrastructure for what we were now calling our “monument.” We identified the ideal site at the center of campus, adjacent to a main pedestrian thoroughfare, ensuring that the monument would be visible and familiar to all members of the Lewis community. Our vice president for university advancement helped manage the financial elements of the project and stayed connected with the Bergmans while I worked closely with Facilities, Leslie Ansteth Colonna, Alec Smith, and others to ensure that we were staying true to our overall concept plan.

By late 2018, the design work, architectural specifications, and drawings were complete, materials were selected, and the concrete footings at the site had been poured by our contractor. From that point on, all the structural work for the project, save for a few finishing elements and the doors themselves, were completed in-house by Lewis facilities staff members, making the project even more meaningful. The brickwork construction of the doorway moved along swiftly despite cold and damp weather. The concrete deck surrounding the doorway was poured. Landscaping and plantings were installed. All that remained was the arrival of the Founder.



The Encounter-Concept Image 2018
K. Schackmuth

On April 26, 2019, a beautiful, sunny day, Alec Smith arrived from Minnesota with the sculpture of De La Salle. The sculpture was carefully wrapped and strapped to a pallet on a trailer attached to Alec’s truck. Alec then led a crew of four facilities staff to first move and then carefully raise the three-hundred-pound bronze sculpture of De La Salle onto the specially reinforced concrete, where anchors had been meticulously placed according to Alec’s exacting specifications. Together, the team moved the sculpture into position. Once De La Salle was secured in place, Alec and members of the facilities team proudly posed for a photo, the first of many people to do so.

We scheduled the dedication ceremony for April 30, 2019, perfectly timed to coincide with the 368th anniversary of De La Salle's birth. Mother Nature, however, had other plans, and the ceremony was postponed due to heavy rain. Because we had arrived at the end of the academic year, we rescheduled the dedication for early in the fall semester.

Dedication and Blessing

After four years of ideation, discussions, strategizing, designing, refining, sculpting, and building, *The Encounter* was formally dedicated on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 24, 2019. Nearly a hundred faculty, staff, students, trustees, Christian Brothers, alumni, and guests, including Jay and Lori Bergman, were in attendance for the formal dedication and blessing of the new monument. The ceremony became an occasion to share with the University community the meaning of *The Encounter* and what we hoped it could mean for students and others. In Brother Philip Johnson's blessing of the monument, he prayed, "It is our hope and prayer that as students arrive on campus they will encounter this sculpture, discover its symbolism, and commit themselves to being challenged: by new ideas, by people with different perspectives, by experiences that draw forth talents they may not have known they possessed, and by an openness to change and being changed."

Now, each August, as part the New Flyer Convocation, during which we tell De La Salle's encounter story and convey the significance of the monument, hundreds of first-year and transfer students pass through the doorway of *The Encounter*. This rite of passage begins with a procession from the Student Recreation and Fitness Center Fieldhouse to *The Encounter*, with faculty and staff lining the sidewalk, cheering and applauding the students as they approach De La Salle symbolically welcoming them into their Lasallian experience. The president, provost, and members of our Christian Brothers community greet them on the other side of the doors, marking the official start of their Lewis experience.

To learn more about *The Encounter*, our traditions associated with the monument, along with a virtual tour of photographs, please visit www.lewisu.edu/encounter.



The Encounter-2019
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