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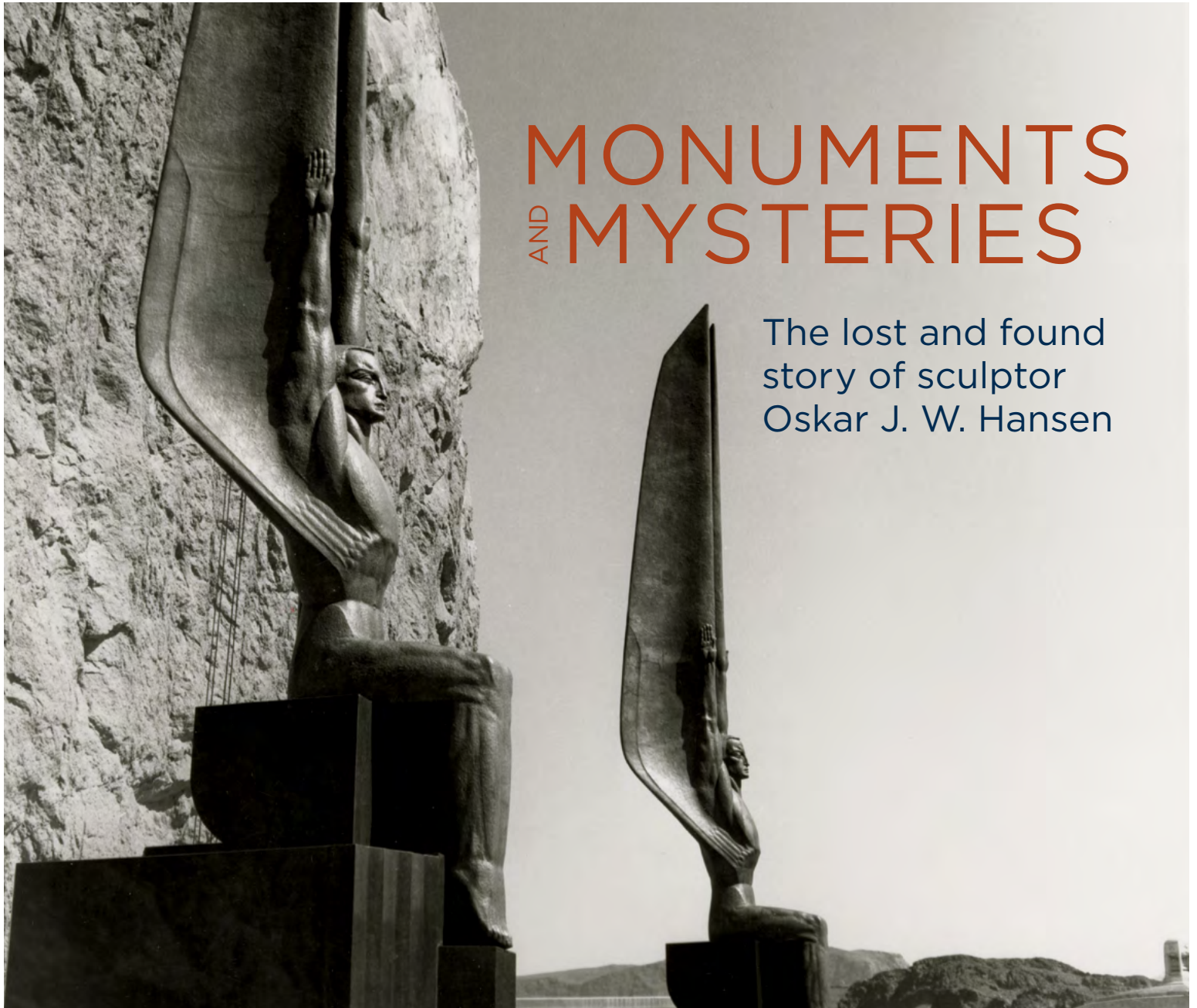
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# Currents

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION | SUMMER 2024 VOLUME 192



## MONUMENTS AND MYSTERIES

The lost and found  
story of sculptor  
Oskar J. W. Hansen



# THE STORIES WE TELL

As my great-great-grandparents, Grace (Gro) and Ole Rollag, traveled by caravan west from Winneshiek County, Iowa, to Rock County, Minnesota, in 1874, they bore witness to the devastation of locusts. To quote from their/my printed family history (which is based on a memoir held in the NAHA archives): “Many shacks were abandoned, and people we met on the road told us, ‘Next year, you will be on your way back.’” Yet Grace and Ole moved ahead, bound and determined to make a life on the unrelenting prairie. Despite significant obstacles, they survived and ultimately thrived, never turning back.

This is a story that has been told and retold in my family through the generations. Jennifer Eastman Attebery might call it a legend. I had the pleasure of attending a talk that Attebery gave at a meeting of the Swedish American Historical Society in Seattle this May, about her recent book *As Legend Has It: History, Heritage, and the Construction of Swedish American Identity*.

Attebery discussed her research into the ways Swedish Americans constructed an ethnic identity out of local legends like the one in use in my family. She found that many of these legends centered on encounters either with Native Americans or with extreme natural events, such as Grace’s recounting of the damage from locusts. Attebery’s talk got me thinking about the role this repeated story has had in shaping a family identity as well as an ethnic one for my Norwegian-American settler ancestors and their many descendants.

This year, my family gathers to mark the 150th anniversary of Grace and Ole’s journey from Norway to the plains of the Upper Midwest. As I contemplate the ways in which my family is choosing to commemorate this past, my thoughts also turn toward next year’s bicentennial of Norwegian immigration to North America. How can Attebery’s work inform our discussions and planning of those events? How will legends, and their connections to identity formation and maintenance, factor in? Which legends are we choosing to re-tell and which are we in the very act of creating?

In sharing these questions, I hope that you, too, might ponder them—turn them over in your mind—and consider how the stories we tell matter, not just in the forging of our own families but in the forging of communities and nations. For stories are the stuff of legends.

In contemplation,

Anna M. Peterson, Editor



## on the cover

Wings are a recurring feature of sculptor Oskar J. W. Hansen’s works. His powerful *Winged Figures of the Republic* at Hoover Dam captured the imagination of Aaron Street, who writes about Hansen in this issue.

## NAHA RECEIVES NEH GRANT

**N**AHA is pleased to announce that we have received a generous grant of \$297,303 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). We will use the funds to preserve, digitize, and make accessible five World War II collections. They document the relief efforts of Norwegian Americans for occupied Norway during and after the war.

The three-year project will run from September 1, 2024, to September 30, 2027. The collections that will be digitized are:

### **American Relief for Norway, Inc., Papers, 1940–1946**

Founded 10 days after Nazi Germany's invasion of Norway, this group was established to aid the people of Norway.

### **Camp Little Norway Association Papers, 1941–1947**

The association was established in 1941 by a group of American citizens of Norwegian descent from Minneapolis. After visiting Camp Little Norway, a training base for the Royal Norwegian Air Force in Toronto, they were determined to help friends and family fighting for their homeland.

### **Campbell Norsgaard Collection, 1938–1946**

Norsgaard was the official photographer for the Royal Norwegian Air Force and its training facilities in Canada from nearly the beginning of World War II until its end. Thousands of photographs, along with more than a dozen films, feature soldiers as well as the Norwegian Royal Family.

### **Hermana Rye Haugan Papers, 1893–1972**

Haugan was one of the most active women leading the relief effort for Norway during and after World War II. She was the secretary of the Chicago Working Center for Norway, a group that supplied handsewn and -knitted clothes for those in Norway.

### **Jacob Stefferud Papers, 1916–1964**

A Norwegian-born Minneapolis resident, Stefferud supported the efforts of the Camp Little Norway Association



Campbell  
“Norsgaard standing on a wrecked Nazi airplane in Norway, 1945,” from the Campbell Norsgaard Collection (2022/013).

and worked as chief clerk for the Norwegian American Line in its New York and Minneapolis offices. He also served as an acting consul for Norway and a commissioner for Nordmanns-Forbundet, a nonprofit organization that united friends of Norway throughout the world.

“This is such an incredible opportunity for NAHA to share this important story with the public,” says NAHA Executive Director Amy Boxrud. “In the past, accessing these collections would have meant making a trip to our archives. This project will allow these priceless materials to be discovered and accessed online. I can’t wait to see the research that comes from this.”

Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports research and learning in history, literature, philosophy, and other areas of the humanities by funding selected, peer-reviewed proposals from around the nation. Additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities and its grant programs is available at [neh.gov](http://neh.gov).

As we embark on this exciting work in the coming months, we will share updates in *Currents*, in our e-news, and via social media.



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE  
HUMANITIES

## BOARD MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Here are two dedicated members whose service on the board of directors will end this fall due to term limits.



**ANN MARIE LEGREID**  
*Shepherdstown, West Virginia*  
*Board member since 2016*

Legreid recently retired from Shepherd University in West Virginia, where she taught geography and global studies and served in academic dean positions. She has been a member of the NAHA Publications Committee and chaired the Governance and Nominating committees. She continues her service on NAHA's Editorial Council.

**Why I serve:** "Study abroad in Norway as an undergraduate was transformational for me. In the decades since, I have been a scholar of Norwegian emigration/immigration. As hobbies, I have engaged in Norwegian genealogy and historic preservation. My ancestral roots are in Norway, and I am passionate about NAHA's mission to preserve and share our heritage stories."



**JAMES HONSVALL**  
*Stillwater, Minnesota*  
*Board member since 2016*

Honsvall's experience as a certified public accountant has made him an invaluable member of the NAHA Finance Committee over the past eight years. His perspective has been especially helpful in our financial reporting to the board, our members, and the public.

**Why I serve:** "I have enjoyed serving on the board because NAHA has been a model in providing quality publications and vital research material regarding Norwegian immigration to the United States. I'm proud to have played a small part in it over the last eight years."

## Fellowship Applications Due October 1

### ARCHIVES FELLOWSHIP

Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, NAHA offers an annual award of up to \$2,000 for a research project. This fellowship promotes exploration to achieve new understandings of the Norwegian-American experience. Preference will be given to topics that are outlined in our research prospectus (available on our website) and that rely heavily on collections in the NAHA archives.



### PUBLICATIONS FELLOWSHIP

An annual award of up to \$2,500 is available for research in the field of Norwegian-American studies. While a candidate may propose any subject, priority will go to topics that meet the goals of our research prospectus. Applications also will be evaluated for their potential to produce work publishable by NAHA.



**Applications and supporting documents are due by October 1** for awards given the following year. Funding should be used within two years. More details are available at [naha.stolaf.edu](http://naha.stolaf.edu).

SAVE  
THE  
DATE

## 2024 BIENNIAL MEETING

Join us Saturday, October 26, at St. Olaf College for our biennial member meeting. It's a day of learning, socializing, and supporting the work of NAHA. Visit our website for more details about registration and speakers: [naha.stolaf.edu/events](http://naha.stolaf.edu/events). All are welcome!



CROSSINGS  
NORWAY & NORTH AMERICA  
1825 • 2025

Crossings is the theme for the 2025 bicentennial of organized Norwegian migration to North America. You can read more about the plans taking shape across North America and Norway—and find an event near you—at the Crossings website, [crossings.norwegianamerican.com](http://crossings.norwegianamerican.com).

NAHA members in Norway also will want to keep an eye on the Norwegian site, [crossings200.no](http://crossings200.no). Our own NAHA website ([naha.stolaf.edu](http://naha.stolaf.edu)) and e-news will carry information on Crossings events that are sponsored by NAHA. Here are three events to look forward to.

**JUNE 18-22, 2025**

St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota

## CROSSINGS AND CONNECTIONS: NORWEGIAN MIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA

NAHA members are invited to a conference commemorating 200 years of Norwegian migration to and from North America. Crossings and Connections is presented by the Norwegian-American Historical Association (NAHA), the Norwegian-American Historical Association-Norway (NAHA-Norge), the Norwegian Researchers and Teachers Association of North America (NORTANA), and the Norwegian Department at St. Olaf College.

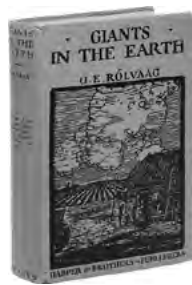
**CALL FOR PAPERS:** The conference will offer a wide variety of experiences that will appeal to scholars and researchers of Norwegian migration while also providing foundational sessions geared to the public. The organizing committee is now accepting proposals for talks, workshops, roundtables, and other opportunities to engage in the topic.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION,** visit the conference website at [pages.stolaf.edu/cc2025/](http://pages.stolaf.edu/cc2025/). Submissions are due October 9, 2024.

**APRIL 27, 2025**

### GIANTS IN THE EARTH OPERA



A tour from the Twin Cities to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, will explore the history of Norwegian settlement in western Minnesota and the Dakotas. The day will be centered on a performance of *Giants in the Earth*, staged by the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra.

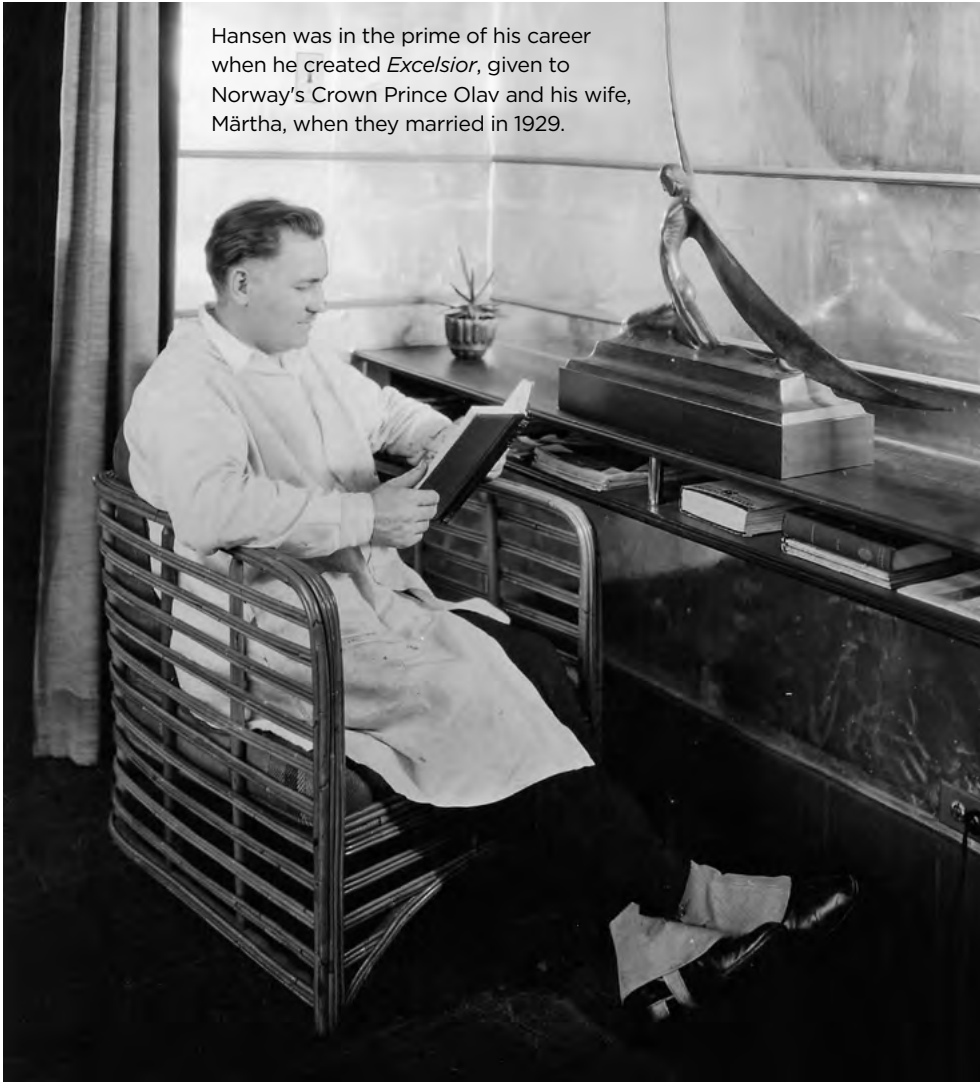
**OCTOBER 5-10, 2025**

### IMMIGRATION TOUR IN NEW YORK CITY

NAHA will partner with Vesterheim Museum to explore the history and impact of Norwegian immigration to New York City. While there, we will welcome the arrival of a replica of the original emigrant ship, the sloop *Restoration*, as it completes its journey from Stavanger, Norway.



Hansen was in the prime of his career when he created *Excelsior*, given to Norway's Crown Prince Olav and his wife, Märtha, when they married in 1929.



BY AARON STREET

My part in the story of Oskar Johan Waldemar Hansen started on a weekend trip to Las Vegas more than a decade ago. Like millions of Vegas visitors every year, I went to see the Hoover Dam and was awed by its scale, feats of engineering, and beauty. While it's an infrastructure project of tremendous magnitude and complexity, it's also a site of influential art and architecture. In particular, I was struck by the enormous bronze *Winged Figures of the Republic* beside the visitor center. The power of their massive, other-worldly wings seemed like a fitting tribute to the sheer human will that created the dam.

Years later, my wife gifted me a poster of the statues for Christmas. It hung largely unnoticed in our hallway until 2020, when we moved back to my hometown of Northfield, Minnesota. Setting up a home office that year, I chose the poster as a backdrop for my Zoom meetings. Hanging it, I wondered: "What else did this sculptor create?"

I googled "Oskar J. W. Hansen" for the first time. Since then, Hansen's fascinating and complex life story has led me on research trips throughout the United States and Norway. Many details of his life seem improbable. Looking for sources to confirm them often leads back to unverified claims that Hansen made about himself. Still, I've made it my goal to find the truth behind his tall tales.

### **Adventures, Misadventures, and Finding Art**

Hansen was born in 1892 in the Arctic village of Langenes, Norway. His mother, Josefine Johannessen, a maid, was unmarried. His birth certificate names Herman Hansen, a local baker, as his father, but Oskar Hansen later claimed on a marriage certificate that he was an illegitimate son of King Oscar II—a claim given weight by the king's reputedly numerous liaisons.

# AMERICA'S "SCULPTOR OF LIBERTY"

Oskar J. W. Hansen left behind monumental artworks and an enigmatic life story.

To uncover the truth about Hansen's paternity, I've delved into census records, coordinated DNA tests with his descendants, and ventured to Herman Hansen's native Lofoten Islands. While I believe I'm close to a definitive answer, this question remains one of Oskar Hansen's many mysteries.

His childhood was marked by upheaval. His mother relinquished him at a young age. His foster parents raised him on a farm, where—according to a Norwegian relative—he was expected to take over one day. Hansen, who had an early fascination with religion and history, harbored different aspirations.

After his church confirmation at age 14, he went to sea as a cabin boy on a cargo ship. In later newspaper interviews, Hansen said he spent four years traveling the globe, starting with a voyage to the Mediterranean, where he visited museums and archaeological sites during stops in Greece and Italy. Hansen recounted that he and the ship's carpenter obtained Greek marble and crafted rudimentary sculpting tools, which Hansen used to make his first artwork, a marble relief titled *Head of Christ*, adorned with a crown of thorns.

When I searched for this early sculpture, the trail led from the Mediterranean in 1906 to a Unitarian minister in a Chicago suburb in the 1920s to a spiritual retreat center in Montana in the 1930s. Recently, after a newspaper in Montana published an article about my search, I was tipped that the sculpture is now displayed, unrecognized, in the sanctuary of a church in Bigfork, Montana.

Hansen's adventures at sea continued. He claimed to have sailed around Africa and joined the French Foreign Legion in Morocco, where he was wounded. He said he moved to Paris to study sculpture formally, even apprenticing under Auguste Rodin. Neither the French Foreign Legion archives nor the Rodin Museum have records to confirm these tales.

## An American

After his purported apprenticeship, Hansen embarked on a ship to South America, eventually making his way to the United States and jumping ship in North Carolina, a claim recorded in his naturalization papers. He arrived in the summer of 1910 at age 18, traveled to New York City, and enlisted in the Army.

Discharged in 1914 after a four-year stint, Hansen settled in Evanston, Illinois, where he pursued studies at Northwestern University to become a minister. He married Eva Brubaker in 1916.

A year later, he became a U.S. citizen and was commissioned as an Army officer in the lead-up to

America's entry into World War I. Hansen ascended the ranks. Records confirm his retirement as a major, but he was referred to as "Colonel" later in life, both by the press and his own children.

After his military service, he worked as a house painter and interior designer. He and Eva welcomed four children between 1917 and 1923, three of whom survived into adulthood. In the early 1920s, Hansen shifted his focus to sculpture and to life as a professional artist.

Amidst a scandal involving a nude art model that made headlines in Illinois newspapers, he and Eva divorced in 1925. Hansen left his family and moved into Chicago. Soon after, he briefly married novelist Vernie Connelly, dedicating his short fiction book, *Chien-Mi-Lo*, to her.

## Prominence

In 1927, the Norwegian National League in Chicago selected Hansen to sculpt a grand Leif Erikson memorial for Grant Park. (Another Leif Erikson sculpture, by Sigvald



(upper left) Hansen made some quarter of a million manual calculations to create his terrazzo *Star Map* at Hoover Dam. (right) Carl Hambro (left in photo), leader of the Norwegian Storting, or parliament, visited Hansen (right in photo) at the Hoover Dam site; the man in the center is Irving Harris, director of power for the dam project. (lower left) Hansen, circa 1911, after he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Discharged after a four-year stint, he later served again as an officer in WWI.

Asbjørnson, another Norwegian immigrant sculptor, already existed at the time, not far away in Humboldt Park.) Esteemed business and political figures in the city began an eight-year fundraising effort for the project. The years 1928 to 1930 were among Hansen's most prolific as a sculptor.

During this time, he won the prestigious Shaeffer Prize from the Art Institute of Chicago and produced several notable works. These included a World War I memorial statue of *Victory* housed in a village hall in Hinsdale, Illinois; a rendition of Medusa that received national acclaim; and busts of Elijah Lovejoy and Joseph Medill, produced for the Editorial Hall of Fame at the University of Illinois.

When Crown Prince Olav V of Norway married his cousin Princess Märtha of Sweden in 1929, the Norwegian-American community made them a gift of Hansen's winged sculpture *Excelsior*. In Minneapolis, aviation magnate Rufus Rand commissioned the celebrated seven-foot bronze *Wings* statue that is still displayed in the Rand Tower office building downtown.

Hansen sculpted a bust of Albert Michelson, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist who measured the speed of light. Their shared interests in spirituality, science, and art cemented a friendship so close that Michelson served as best man when Hansen married a third time, to Mary Beatty in 1929. The following year, the couple welcomed a son, Oskar J. W. Hansen, Jr., affectionately known as "Kar."

Work nearly dried up as the Great Depression set in. Aside from a few commissions, Hansen spent most of his time from 1931 until 1935 trying to raise money for the Leif Erikson project.

He sailed for Oslo in 1933 to meet with Norway's King Haakon and Crown Prince Olav, inviting the prince to Chicago for its "Century of Progress" World's Fair. The prince accepted, but weeks later, decided he should cancel due to the crisis of the Depression. Hansen hoped the World's Fair would reignite financial support for the Leif Erikson memorial, but



(left) *Victory*, Hansen's WWI memorial statue. (below) Aaron Street visits *Wings* in the Minneapolis office tower built by Rufus Rand, who commissioned the sculpture.



Hansen's work was celebrated one last time in 1969, when he gave the U.S. Navy a gift, a bronze *Head of Liberty* to adorn the U.S.S. *Enterprise* aircraft carrier. Several of his family members attended the ceremonies, and it was the last time most of them would see each other.

momentum never built. He traveled to Washington, D.C. in early 1935 to seek federal funding from the Works Progress Administration. It never came through, and the Erikson memorial was finally abandoned. Soon, though, a different federally funded project revived Hansen's career.

### Art and the Heavens at Boulder Dam

In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt charged his powerful secretary of the interior, native Chicagoan Harold Ickes, with overseeing the construction of Boulder Dam (now named Hoover Dam). Ickes chose Hansen as the official sculptor for the dam, the largest construction project in modern human history.

Hansen's work there entailed four projects. One was the cement bas-reliefs on the exterior of the dam's two elevator towers, which tell the story of the area's ancient indigenous past and modern motivations for building the dam. A second was two memorial panels: one honoring Elwood Mead, the government administrator who had directly overseen the dam's construction and died just after its completion, and one honoring the 96 workers who died

in the dam's construction. Third was the 30-foot-tall *Winged Figures of the Republic*, credited as the largest single-cast bronze statues in the world.

Fourth and finally, at the base of the *Winged Figures*, Hansen designed an inlaid terrazzo plaza, an intricate *Star Map* that traces the solar system's movement over a 26,000-year cycle. He made more than 250,000 manual stellar calculations to create it. The *Star Map* remains one of the world's most complex and precise manually calculated representations of the heavens.

The Boulder Dam commission could not have come at a better time. Financially broke in the depths of the Depression, Hansen used his new income to buy 350 acres outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, known



as Pantops Mountain. The parcel had once belonged to Thomas Jefferson and sits just across the Rivanna River from Jefferson's more famous property, Monticello.

Oskar, Mary, and Kar moved to Pantops when the Boulder Dam projects were complete in 1941. Hansen envisioned a secluded retreat for his family and a world-class artist studio and teaching center, much like Rodin's studio retreat outside of Paris, which Hansen claimed to remember. He began building his Pantops Studios and the family lived primarily off his dam commission for several years. In 1942, Oskar and Mary had their second son, Alex.

### **The Elusive Face of God**

The U.S. Congress commissioned Hansen in 1949 to sculpt a new Yorktown Victory Monument, after the original was destroyed by lightning in 1942. The monument celebrates the Revolutionary War victory against the British at Yorktown in 1781.

The project was meant to take two years. It took seven and involved blistering media and legal battles as Hansen's artistic vision and the demands of the National Park Service collided. Things got so bad that the IRS demanded tax on Hansen's entire commission, not letting him deduct the enormous cost of stone and supplies. Congress had to intervene and pass a piece of tax legislation specifically on Hansen's behalf.

When his Yorktown sculpture of the goddess *Liberty* was completed in 1956, Oskar, Mary, and Alex celebrated with a road trip to California. Along the way, Oskar Hansen purchased several large gemstones. Alex remembers driving across the country with the world's largest aquamarine in a paper lunch bag under his father's seat. Hansen had grown interested in carving gemstones. He planned to carve religious figures into the stones to mount on a gold chalice and share it with the world as a peace prize that would travel from country to country. News of the project and photos of his *Face of God* gem were published in newspapers nationwide.

Records at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., verify that from 1949 to 1963, Hansen amassed a collection of some of the largest and highest quality gemstones in the world. In other ways, his life was disintegrating. He and Mary divorced in 1958 after almost 30 years of marriage. Mary and Alex moved to California, leaving Oskar alone at Pantops. In 1961, Hansen married his fourth wife, 32-year-old Hope Clark, a single mother who waited on tables at a nearby hotel.

That same year, members of Congress sought national recognition for Hansen. Congressional leaders sent a letter to newly inaugurated President John Kennedy in January 1961, calling Hansen America's "Sculptor of Liberty" and asking that he receive a presidential medal honoring him for his work on the Yorktown monument. Neither Kennedy nor other presidents who were lobbied in this way ever awarded a medal to Hansen.

Hansen had earned little income since the Yorktown commission, and he had been spending on gold and gems. By 1963, he was forced to declare bankruptcy. He found a savior of sorts in Washington attorney and investor Victor Orsinger. Orsinger agreed to buy Hansen's gem collection and his Pantops property while allowing Hansen to retain a "life estate," the right to live there for the rest of his life. The proceeds were enough to rescue Hansen from financial ruin.

Orsinger loaned Hansen's carved religious gems to the Smithsonian for display in December 1963. The *Washington Post* featured them in a prominent photo-laden story. But not long after, Orsinger was arrested and charged with stealing 1.5 million dollars from a convent of nuns who had entrusted him to invest the money in a Wisconsin property for them. Orsinger spent a decade in prison. Hansen's gems disappeared. The Smithsonian exhibit was the last time they were seen.

### **Restoring a Legacy**

In 1964, Hansen published a dense semi-autobiographical collection of essays, entitled *Beyond the Cherubim*. Written in his impenetrable style, the book did not sell well.

Poor health and little artistic production marked his final years. In 1969, the U.S. Navy hosted a reception for Hansen, who had donated a bronze *Head of Liberty*, molded from his Yorktown statue, for display on the U.S.S. *Enterprise* aircraft carrier. The event served as a Hansen family reunion. Two sons from his first marriage, sons Kar and Alex from his third marriage, his fourth wife, Hope, and her daughter, Candace, were all present. It was Hansen's last public appearance and the last time most of his family members would see each other. He died in August 1971.

Hope and Candace were evicted from Pantops immediately, having no right to live there after Hansen's death. Because the property's owner, Orsinger, was in prison and his unlawful gains were in dispute in court, Pantops was abandoned. By 1978, it was crumbling.

Within a few years of Hansen's death, much of his life—his family, studio, and artwork—had dissolved or disappeared, and his story was lost. That began to change in 2020, when I started the Oskar J. W. Hansen Archives to preserve the story of his life and work.

In January 2021, I helped reunite Hansen's youngest son, Alex, now more than 80, and his daughter Donna, hosting the Zoom call where they saw each other for the first time in 50 years.

In early 2022, the Department of the Interior began a project to rebuild and restore Hansen's terrazzo *Star Map* at Hoover Dam. The federal contractor engaged me as an advisor. Later that year, I traveled to Charlottesville, Virginia, to be with Alex and his daughters, Donna and Lori, for Alex's first visit to Pantops in 60 years.

Just weeks earlier, I had discovered that Oskar Hansen's only daughter, Beatrice—born in 1923, his final child with his first wife, Eva—was still alive at 99 years old and living just outside Charlottesville. Alex, at 80, and his half-sister Beatrice, at 99, were able to meet for the first time. It was an extraordinary moment.

By 2023, the *Star Map* restoration had stalled. After demolishing the existing terrazzo and planning to rebuild it, the government halted work. I launched a "Save the *Star Map*" campaign to encourage officials to finish the project. The campaign garnered several newspaper and television news stories in the Las Vegas area, and work on the project finally restarted last spring.

I continue to follow new leads and explore Hansen's life, which is still full of mysteries. I'm hopeful that in working to solve them and tell his story, I can revive interest in his artistic vision and important work.

*Aaron Street is a lawyer, author, and entrepreneur based in Northfield, Minnesota. He founded the Oskar J. W. Hansen Archives (oskarjwhansen.org), and he plans to publish a biography of Hansen in the coming years.*

# A CULTURED PAIR

BY KRISTINA WARNER, ARCHIVIST

The NAHA archives are home to a wide range of materials. Among them are letters, diaries, journals, ledgers, and many other items related to Norwegians in America. Some items tell us about the lives and work of Norwegian artists.

Lars Olavson Fletre was born in Voss, Norway on June 22, 1904, the third-youngest of nine children of Olaf Oddson Fletre and Kristine Olsdatter Kvårmo. Their home was filled with creativity: Lars's sister Inger played the *langeleik*, brothers Olav and Anders played Hardanger fiddle, another brother Odd was a painter and architect, and Lars was fascinated with drawing. After taking courses at Voss Technical College, Lars migrated to Chicago in 1923 with Odd (who had first emigrated in 1912).

Once established, Lars Fletre attended the Art Institute of Chicago, from 1925 to 1931. His debut was the institute's 43rd Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture in 1930. He showed his work in numerous galleries in Chicago and Brooklyn before later returning to Norway.

In Norway, he married Helen Svensson, whom he had first met when she was in Chicago traveling in 1932. Svensson, a native of Odeshog, Sweden, had earned a teacher's degree in London in 1931 and had worked as a governess in England.

From 1933 to 1954, the couple lived in Norway and endured the occupation years of World War II. Lars worked as a designer, engraver, and decorator for Hadeland Glassverk in Jevnaker from 1941 to 1950. In 1950, back in his native Voss, he established his own venture, Vos-

sevangen Stone Carving, and made several big monuments.

The couple had three children, Anita, Oddgeir, and Valborg. In Jevnaker, Helen Fletre founded a chapter of *Foreldrelaget*, the Parents' Association. She also taught private English, German, and French lessons.

In 1954, the Fletre family returned to Chicago, where Helen and Lars were active in many clubs, including DeLiSa (short for *Det Litterære Samfund*, or the Literary Society), the Chicago Norske Klub, the American Scandinavian Foundation, and others.

Lars Fletre founded the Vossing Art Studio in 1962 on Diversey Parkway, walking distance from the family's home. The sculptures he created there include two versions of *Jesus Healing the Sick*, one for a mountain chapel at Mjølfjell near Voss, Norway, the other for the Norwegian Lutheran Hospital in Chicago. Today, his work for the hospital is in the collection of the Vesterheim Museum in Decorah, Iowa.

Helen served on the Sesquicentennial Commission to celebrate the 150th anniversary, in 1975, of organized Norwegian migration to America. She co-edited a commemorative volume called *From Fjord to Prairie*. When King Olav V visited Chicago for the occasion, she served as a guide and personally took him on a tour that included the Edvard

Munch exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, among other sites. In 1976, King Olav awarded her the St. Olav's Medal for many years of service to Norway.

Valborg Linn, who is Lars and Helen's daughter, recently contributed her parents' handwritten correspondence to the NAHA archives. Their letters, written in English, document the years from 1932 to 1934, when they met and married. The letters cover the couple's mutual interest in art, literature, and politics, how they dealt with the difficulties of the Great Depression, and their hopes for the future.

## More to Explore in the Archives

→ **Norwegian Literary Society of Chicago Records** (P0279). The Norwegian Literary Society was founded in 1925. Authors Waldemar Ager and Ole Rølvaag were both guest speakers there. The group published the yearbook *Forum* and the literary journal *Norden*.

→ **Norwegian Clubs of Chicago Collection** (P0278). One club, the Chicago Norske Klub, began as Den Skandinaviske Kvartettklub, in 1890. The group organized singing societies, art exhibits, and drama societies.

→ **Norwegian Immigration Sesquicentennial Papers** (P0993). In the United States, five regional commissions were organized for the Norwegian Immigration Sesquicentennial of 1975. They were based in Chicago; Ottawa, Illinois; Minneapolis; and Seattle; with a coordinating headquarters in New York.

→ **Lars Fletre Papers** (P1108)

→ **Helen Fletre Papers** (P1409)



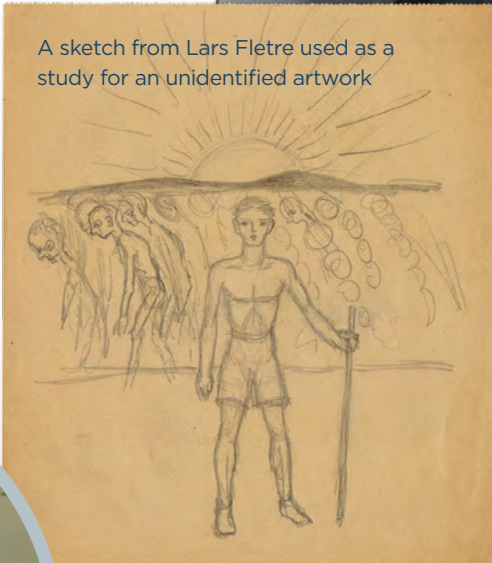
Lars and Helen Fletre passport, 1939



Helen Fletre and King Olav V at the Munch exhibit, Art Institute of Chicago, 1975



Lars Fletre's permit to re-enter the United States in 1934



A sketch from Lars Fletre used as a study for an unidentified artwork



(above) Valborg Linn and NAHA Archivist Kristina Warner on Valborg's recent visit to the NAHA archives

(right) 50th anniversary pamphlet of Det Litterære Samfund, with cover drawn by Lars Fletre



Snapshot of *Jesus Healing the Sick* with a charcoal sketch of the sculpture in the background



NORWEGIAN-AMERICAN  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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