

Strathcona Park fountain turns 100; Solving some of the mysteries surrounding the Sandy Hill landmark

by Barry Padolsky
June 30, 2009

An enigma wrapped in familiarity

July 1, 2009, will mark the 100th anniversary of the unveiling of one of Ottawa's much admired monuments: the Strathcona Park fountain. This elegant, familiar, but somewhat mysterious landmark is located on Laurier Avenue East in Ottawa's historic Sandy Hill neighbourhood.

The fountain, set in a small plaza, is artfully positioned at the top of a flight of 42 steps leading up from the park's Victorian landscape and popular Rideau River promenade. The fountain is a destination for runners, walkers, lovers, and children with boxes of detergent.

It has been commonly -- and correctly -- believed that the fountain was donated to the City of Ottawa by Lord Strathcona, after whom the park was named. A plaque at the base of the fountain confirms this.

But who was Lord Strathcona? Why did he donate the fountain to the City of Ottawa? Where did it come from? What is it made of? When was it cast? What does it represent? Who was the sculptor?

Surprisingly, the fountain's history has remained untold, and is still very much a mystery. We know that Lord Strathcona (Donald Alexander Smith), was a powerful, wealthy Canadian businessman, politician, diplomat, and philanthropist. We know that he drove the "last spike" at Craigellachie, B.C., to signal the completion of Canada's CPR railroad in 1885. And we know that the fountain's material is cast iron. But that's about it.

The purpose of this article is to share a little of my recent research which was driven by my appreciation of the fountain, the occasion of its anniversary, and my admittedly irrepressible curiosity.

The creator of the Strathcona Fountain was the renowned French sculptor, Mathurin Moreau (1822-1912). He was born in Dijon, France, into a family of celebrated sculptors and artists. His career was launched when he won a gold medal at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1855. His works include *L'Océanie* (Musée d'Orsay) and sculptures at the Paris Opera, Tuileries, Trocadero, Hôtel de Ville and Gare du Nord. He was the creator of the City of Bordeaux's monumental Fontaine de Tourny, recently donated and relocated to Quebec City to celebrate the city's 400th anniversary in 2008. Moreau, a gifted sculptor, was also an astute entrepreneur. He became the administrator of the Val d'Osne foundry which cast most of his works. In 1885, he became mayor of the 19th arrondissement in Paris. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) was said to have been inspired by his works.

The Strathcona Fountain was cast at the Fonderies d'Art Val d'Osne in Paris sometime after 1866 (date still unknown). The Val d'Osne foundry was a prolific manufacturer of cast iron fountains, sculpture, electric street lights, gates, benches, and garden rollers.

They produced beautifully engraved catalogues illustrating their ever-expanding artistic product lines. Ottawa's Strathcona Fountain appears miraculously and meticulously rendered.

In 1994, when I was visiting Buenos Aires as the Canadian delegate to the Congreso Internacional de Rehabilitacion del Patrimonio Arquitectonico, I was stunned to encounter "Ottawa's" Strathcona Park fountain on a walk through the city. It is located at the intersection of Avenida 9 de Julio and Avenida de Mayo. The Strathcona fountain has a twin. Upon reflection we should not be surprised. The Val d'Osne foundry in Paris was a commercial enterprise. There appear to be 15 Fontaines de Tourny around the world. Are there more Strathcona fountains?

The Strathcona fountain is a beautifully composed, ornamented and executed landmark, typical of the decorative 19th-century monuments designed in the "beaux arts" tradition. Moreau has given us a quartet of elegantly posed and poised cherubs or "putti" supporting a basin (vasque) decorated with an "egg and dart" motif and eight lion-head spouts.

A central, ornamental spout with four fish rises above the upper basin, sending streams of water that finally spill into a larger cast stone basin below the cherubs. The cherubs stand on a festooned base ornamented with sea shells and the Lord Strathcona coat of arms.

My research, to date, has not uncovered any documentary evidence that identifies the theme that inspired Moreau's fountain. I have circled and studied the fountain for many decades on my walks in Sandy Hill. Like so many visitors, I have been magnetically drawn to this friendly but enigmatic landmark.

It was only recently that it struck me that Moreau may have given us a most remarkable, esoteric, romantic, archaic and almost all-forgotten, but very worldly, allegorical gift.

The fountain may very well represent the Allegory of the Four Continents. This theme was popular among European mannerist and baroque artists in the 16th to 19th centuries. Highly acclaimed Four Continents were painted by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and Peter Paul Rubens. The theme emerged after the European "discovery" of America at the end of the 15th century. It replaced the medieval representation of an idealized world consisting of three continents radiating from Jerusalem like a trefoil (yes, we acknowledge seven continents today).

A close inspection of the four cherubs subtly but clearly reveals their secret identities looking clockwise: Europe, Asia, America and Africa. I will let the reader discover the hidden and not so hidden clues that suggest the allegory. They are all there.

On the 100th anniversary of the Strathcona Park fountain, I recommend that you revisit this landmark with a fresh perspective. Moreau's artistry will delight and surprise you.

This fountain was donated by Lord Strathcona to embellish Canada's capital city and inspire national pride. But did he also provide Moreau's Allegory of the Four Continents to inspire us to think more globally?

We might contemplate this as we respectfully usher Ottawa's Strathcona Park fountain into its second century, not in solitude.