

The Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet by Daniel Chester French

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ON APRIL 14, 1930, a private ceremony was held in The Metropolitan Museum of Art to unveil a bronze tablet made in memory of Dr. Bashford Dean (1867–1928) by Daniel Chester French (1850–1931).¹ The unveiling was followed by the dedication of the Bashford Dean Memorial Gallery, containing a selection from Dean's former personal collection, the best of which had come to the Museum by bequest, gift, and purchase following Dean's death (Figure 1). These posthumous honors were a tribute to Dean's brilliant and multifaceted career as a scientist, curator, and collector, during which he had simultaneously held posts at Columbia University, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Metropolitan Museum.² Under Dean's direction the arms and armor collection of the Metropolitan was transformed from an unimportant aspect of the Decorative Arts department into an active and independent department with world-class holdings and an international reputation for scholarship. In recognition for his services to the Museum, Dean had also been elected to the Board of Trustees in 1927. After his death, in what was a significant sign of respect for Dean's connoisseurship, the trustees raised funds among themselves to augment the Dean bequest by purchasing many additional items from his estate for the Museum's permanent collection.

It was this private call for funds that prompted the sculptor Daniel Chester French, also a trustee, to contribute not money but another form of memorial for which he was uniquely qualified: a bronze bas-relief. As French recounted to the Museum's secretary, H. W. Kent, "when there was an opportunity given to the trustees to subscribe to the purchase of the Dean armor, I wrote to Mr. de Forest [Robert de Forest, president of the Museum] that I could not compete with my multi-millionaire associates, but that I should like to contribute the tablet in bronze in memory of Dr. Dean, to be erected in the Armor galleries."³ In addition

to his role as trustee French also served as chairman of the Committee on Sculpture beginning in 1903, the same year in which Dean began his affiliation with the Museum. Much as Dean built up the Department of Arms and Armor, French was responsible for forming the core of the Museum's sculpture collection. The *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet* was to be among the last works in French's long and prolific career, by the end of which he was recognized as the most celebrated American sculptor of his time.⁴

The creation and donation of the sculpture was anything but a token gesture for French. After securing the Museum's approval for the project he worked diligently, with the close cooperation of Stephen V. Grancsay, Dean's successor, to ensure that the tablet would be an appropriate tribute to Dean's character. French seems to have been motivated simply by his personal regard for Dean, which was developed during a collegial relationship expressed through intermittent correspondence dating from 1909 to 1928.⁵ The majority of the letters in this correspondence concern two projects on which Dean and French had cooperated.

In 1921 Dean had turned to French for guidance after three years of failed attempts to find the best horse manikin on which to display a magnificent armor for man and horse, which he had acquired for the Museum in 1919.⁶ The armor was the one long attributed to Galiot de Genouilhac, Master of Artillery to King Francis I, which Dean had coveted for the collection and persistently pursued for several years.⁷ Dean, disappointed with the appearance of available horse manikins, decided in a moment of inspiration that Verrocchio's horse for the Colleoni monument in Venice would provide the ideal combination of grace and grandeur that the Genouilhac armor required.⁸ Translating this vision into an attractive and effective manikin able to support an armor for man and horse with a combined weight of 120 pounds was another matter. French willingly agreed to supervise the process. As he commented to Dean, "I am having this sort of work done all the time. The method that I

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Figure 1. Entrance to the Bashford Dean Memorial Gallery, showing the tablet by Daniel Chester French, 1930



Figure 2. Armor for man and horse, English (Greenwich), dated 1527. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1917, 19.131.1–2. Photograph taken in June 1923

would advise would be, not to copy the full-size model of the Colleone [*sic*], but to use one of the mechanical reductions of the statue as the model and enlarge it to the size required. This would give a much closer copy of the statue than any ‘free-hand’ copy that a sculptor could make from the full-size statue.”⁹ French provided Dean with a Caproni cast of the Colleoni and eventually recommended the sculptor John E. Burdick (d. 1927), who created the enlargement to suit the proportions of the Genouilhac armor. Dean was very satisfied with the results, as he wrote to French about the horse once it was on display: “He certainly gives the impression of a beastly who wears armor comfortably. The only trouble is that he has already destroyed the morale of all of the other horses in the gallery. . . .” (Figure 2).¹⁰

French, in turn, depended on Dean in 1925 for guidance in developing the armor and equipment for his relief sculpture *Boabdil the Unlucky*, part of the Washington Irving Memorial in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York (Figure 3). French had chosen Muhammad XII, known as Boabdil (d. 1527), the last Nasrid sultan of Granada, to evoke Irving’s long association with Spain and especially with the Alhambra.¹¹ Early versions of the piece showed Boabdil in stereotypically anachronistic oriental-style costume (Figure 4). French was unhappy with the fact that this was historically inaccurate, but as he wrote to Dean, “You see, I



Figure 3. Daniel Chester French (1850–1931). *Washington Irving Memorial*, 1927. Bronze and granite. Irvington-on-Hudson, New York (photo: courtesy of Kent Lydecker)



Figure 4. Daniel Chester French. Plaster study for the *Washington Irving Memorial*, 1925; H. 39.4 cm. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Chesterwood, a museum property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, acc. no. NT69.38.185

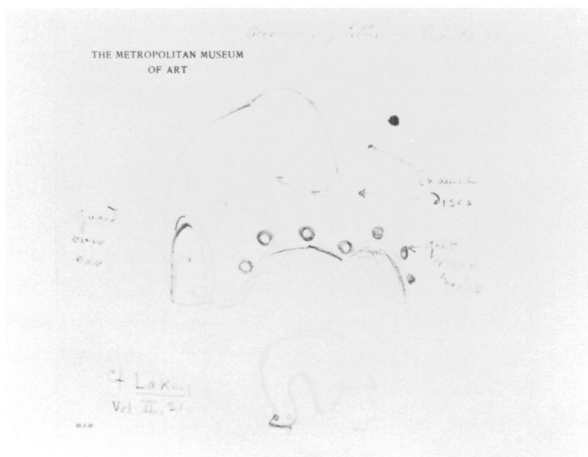


Figure 5. Sketch by Bashford Dean showing the “Boabdil” helmet (later MMA acc. no. 1983.413); sent with his letter to French dated October 14, 1925. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Chesterwood Museum Archives, Chesterwood, a museum property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, acc. no. NT 73.45.5106

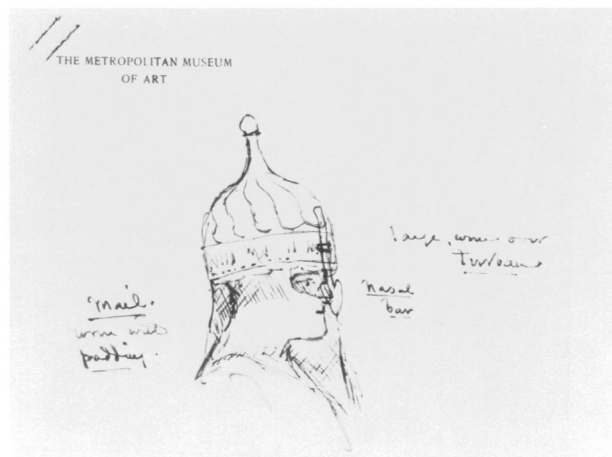


Figure 6. Sketch by Bashford Dean showing a late-15th-century Iranian helmet; sent with his letter to French dated October 19, 1925. Chesterwood Museum Archives, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Chesterwood, a museum property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. acc. no. NT 73.45.5109

am anxious to have my figure explain itself to the casual observer.”¹² There followed a fruitful exchange of letters, sketches, and references in which Dean provided a succession of historically accurate alternatives as French continued to modify *Boabdil* in order to reconcile his instinct for authenticity with his artistic conception of the work.

The helmet and sword were key features in the composition and proved to be the most difficult. French began with a Turkish-style helmet of about 1600. Dean suggested that he consider taking as his model the late-fifteenth-century Nasrid helmet, attributed to Boabdil himself, which was then in the collection of Lord Astor at Haver Castle and which was acquired by the Metropolitan many years later (Figure 5).¹³ But, as French responded, “I cannot help hoping that you will let me keep the helmet I have selected as it not only comes into my composition better than the one that you have drawn, but suggests the Oriental much more. . . .”¹⁴ Later Dean sent two helmets from his own collection to French at his studio in Glendale, Massachusetts. One of these proved to be both authentic and “Oriental” enough, with some modifications, to solve the problem (Figure 6).

The curved sword with which French had equipped Boabdil was also an anachronism, but one on which he could not compromise, as he explained to Dean: “I fear you will look on me as a Philistine . . . when I tell you that I feel as if I *must* retain the curved sword. Not only is it suggestive of the orient, but I find that to introduce a straight one would make it necessary to

change my whole composition, in which this strong curved line is a necessity. Please shut your eyes and let me keep it!”¹⁵ Dean reassured French by replying, “No one knows better than I do that *pictoribus atque poetis* there is always license of beauty rather than accuracy—and sometimes the two aims may never meet.”¹⁶ French’s desire to harmonize beauty with accuracy, so evident in the *Boabdil* correspondence, manifested itself again shortly thereafter in his work on the *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet*.

By August of 1929 French was able to write to Grancsay that the proposal for the tablet was all but approved. It seems, however, that the initial idea for a memorial tablet originated with another of Dean’s friends. In 1912 Dean had been the founder of an enthusiastic group of collectors called the Armor and Arms Club. Following Dean’s death the club appointed a committee to consider plans for an appropriate memorial. The committee’s chairman was George Cameron Stone (1859–1935), a longtime friend of Dean’s, whose extensive collection of oriental and ethnographic arms and armor was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum in 1936. On March 4, 1929, Stone wrote to Howard Mansfield (1849–1938), an active member of the club and a Museum trustee, to ask him to seek the Museum’s permission for the club to erect a bronze memorial tablet in the armor galleries.¹⁷ Through Mansfield’s efforts the proposal was referred to the Museum’s Committee on Arms and Armor, the chairman of which was Clarence H. Mackay (1874–1938). In addition to being an influential

trustee, Mackay was the chairman of International Telegraph and Telephone and the foremost private collector of arms and armor of the period (rivaled only by William Randolph Hearst). Surprisingly, the request was not granted. Mackay wrote to Stone at the end of March to say that the Museum hesitated to set the precedent of allowing a private organization to place a memorial to an individual within the Museum.¹⁸ However, a few months later French received permission to make just such a tablet. The approval may have been given because of the fact that French was not only a trustee (as was Mansfield) but also a world-renowned sculptor who could offer the tablet both as a work of art from his own hand and as a personal gift to the Museum. It is also possible that French had purposely adopted the Armor and Arms Club's idea, perhaps at the behest of Mansfield or Grancsay.

French first proposed a relief portrait of Dean accompanied by an appropriate inscription. He had recently completed a bronze memorial tablet of this type in commemoration of the chemist and philan-

From this point French began a frequent exchange of letters with Stephen Grancsay about the evolving design and the eventual placement of the finished tablet, and asking Grancsay to suggest appropriate pieces in the Museum's collection for possible inclusion in the relief.²⁰ Grancsay responded with the first

Figure 7. Daniel Chester French. Preliminary study for the *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet*. Plaster, 32.1 × 15.9 cm. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Chesterwood, a museum property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, acc. no. NT69.98.137

Figure 8. Daniel Chester French. Preliminary designs for the *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet*, dated October 1929. Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Chesterwood, a museum property of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, acc. no. NT69.38.862



Figure 9. Armet, Italian (Milan), ca. 1475. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Funds from various donors, 1929, 29.158.51

of several photographs and sketches, and with a book which proved instrumental to French in developing his final design. The book, *A Suit of Armour for Youth* (London, 1824) by Stacey Grimaldi, was from Dean's personal library. A moral and inspirational handbook, it consists of eleven short, tripartite chapters devoted to various elements of armor, weapons, and chivalric accoutrements. A historical discussion of each item is followed by one or more allegorical epigrams presenting it as the symbolic manifestation of a given virtue. Each chapter then concludes with a brief essay on that virtue. French used this as a guide to select appropriate pieces from the collection to commemorate certain character traits of Dean. He initially chose a crest for loyalty, a helmet for wisdom, and spurs for diligence.²¹ Later he added a gauntlet, for friendship, in place of one of the spurs. Sketches sent by French to Grancsay in October show the various ideas under consideration (Figure 8), including many of the major elements that would coalesce in the finished design.

As a ground for the allegorical armor parts and the names of the qualities they represented, French settled on a *testa da cavallo* shield, a form frequently found in fifteenth-century Italian heraldry and widely used in Renaissance ornament. At French's request Grancsay recommended Italian pieces in keeping with the shield. The choice of a helmet became a matter of some discussion, as it had been with the *Boabdil* relief. Mr. de Forest and Mrs. Dean suggested a helmet which Dr. Dean had worn (with its matching armor) on the occasion of Mr. de Forest's eightieth-birthday celebration.²² French's reaction to it was that "while it is no doubt an interesting one it is *not* as handsome to a lay-

man as many others."²³ Therefore, after consultation with other members of the Department of Arms and Armor, Grancsay then offered French a selection of three helmets. From these he chose as his model an Italian armet of about 1475, which had only recently come to the Museum from Dean's collection (Figure 9).²⁴

The Gothic lettering on the shield was adapted from a German alphabet of about 1535, for which Grancsay provided an example from the Museum's Department of Prints.²⁵ The execution of the lettering was carried out by French's daughter, Margaret French Cresson (1889–1973), a noted sculptor herself, who assisted her father with some of his later works, such as the *Mallinckrodt Tablet*.²⁶ Mrs. Cresson visited the Museum in October to discuss the place-

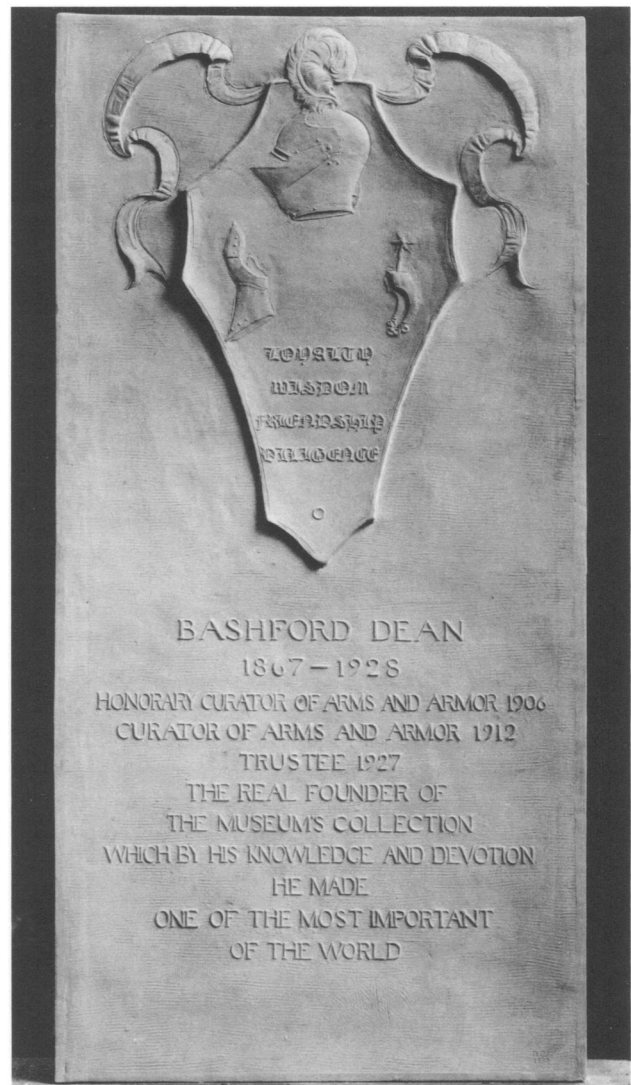


Figure 10. Daniel Chester French. *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet*, March 1930. Finished plaster ready for casting, ca. 147 × 72 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives

ment of the tablet after a wall space, which French felt was too narrow, had been proposed. Since the perception of a relief is very much contingent upon the angle at which it is seen, French was also concerned with the height of the sculpture, which he stipulated should be installed with its bottom edge three and one half feet from the floor.²⁷

The plaster model (Figure 10) was completed in March of 1930 and cast in bronze by the Kunst Foundry in New York. Early in the design process Grancsay had been very interested in the possibility of making the finished tablet of "rustless steel." He suggested that the material was appropriate to the subject and that it would allow the use of decorative techniques employed on armor, such as etching.²⁸ Although French considered the idea it was never acted upon.

At its unveiling the tablet was warmly received by Dean's family, friends, and associates. One of the many tributes and testimonials occasioned by Dean's death, French's tablet stands out as especially distinctive and enduring. However, as the inscription on the tablet implies, Dean's most fitting and lasting memorial remains the quality and diversity of the collection that he founded.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For much useful advice regarding Daniel Chester French, I am indebted to Thayer Tolles, Assistant Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Wanda Styka and the staff of Chesterwood, and my brother, David LaRocca.

NOTES

1. For a description of the proceedings, see *MMAB* 25 (May 1930) no. 5, pp. 120–122.

2. The best overall biography of Dean remains that in Carl Otto von Kienbusch and Stephen V. Grancsay, *The Bashford Dean Collection of Arms and Armor* (Portland, Maine, 1933). The biographical section (pp. 1–47) was written by Kienbusch. Additional biographical information and letters of appreciation from colleagues around the world appeared in a special edition of *The Riverdale News* 16 (May 1929) no. 5, pp. 9–17. Dean's career as a scientist is described more fully in William K. Gregory, "Memorial of Bashford Dean," *The Bashford Dean Memorial Volume: Archaic Fishes*, American Museum of Natural History (New York, 1930) pp. 5–42.

3. MMA archives, dated Jan. 16, 1930. The letter to de Forest referred to by French was written June 26, 1929. For the latter, see the Daniel Chester French (hereafter DCF) Family Papers, Library of Congress, microfilm reel 15, frame 673.

4. The Museum elected French fellow for life, trustee, and chair-

man of the Committee on Sculpture in 1903. He held all three titles until his death in 1931. See "In Memoriam Daniel Chester French," *MMAB* 26 (Nov. 1931) no. 11, p. 258. A chronological listing of French's works is found in *Daniel Chester French*, American Sculptors Series no. 4 (New York, 1947) pp. 61–64. For a concise discussion of French's work and career, see Michael Richman, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor* (New York, 1976).

5. Letters were consulted from the following sources: Arms and Armor Department correspondence files, MMA; MMA Archives; the DCF Family Papers, Library of Congress, reels 15, 18, 19, and 20.

6. BD to DCF, July 15, 1921, Arms and Armor Department (AAD) files.

7. Regarding the acquisition of this armor see Bashford Dean, "Gilded and Engraved Armor for Man and Horse," *MMAB* 14 (Oct. 1919) no. 10, pp. 210–215.

8. BD to Amory Simons, June 6, 1919, AAD files.

9. DCF to BD, July 21, 1921, AAD files.

10. BD to DCF, June 19, 1923, AAD files.

11. For French's full correspondence regarding the Washington Irving Memorial, see the DCF Family Papers, reel 18, frames 1–425. French discusses the meaning of the Boabdil figure in letters to George H. Putnam (July 25, 1925; frame 79) and Rudolph de Cordova (March 30, 1926; frame 119).

12. DCF to BD, Oct. 15, 1925, AAD files.

13. BD to DCF, Oct. 14, 1925, AAD files. For a discussion of the helmet (acc. no. 1983.413), see Stuart W. Pyhrr and David Alexander, *Notable Acquisitions, 1983–1984*, MMA (1984) pp. 21–22.

14. DCF to BD, Oct. 15, 1925, AAD files.

15. Ibid., Oct. 19, 1925, AAD files.

16. BD to DCF, Oct. 19, 1925, AAD files.

17. G. C. Stone to H. Mansfield, March 4, 1929, MMA Archives.

18. C. Mackay to G. C. Stone, March 26, 1929, MMA Archives.

19. Correspondence regarding the *Mallinckrodt Tablet* is found in the DCF Family Papers, reel 19, frames 357–424. French's decision about the photographs of Dean is found in a letter to Grancsay, Aug. 22, 1929, AAD files.

20. Beginning with DCF to SVG, Aug. 22, 1929, and continuing through April 16, 1930, AAD files.

21. DCF to SVG, Oct. 29, 1929, AAD files.

22. DCF to SVG, Oct. 10, 1929, and SVG to DCF, Oct. 11, 1929, AAD files.

23. DCF to SVG, Oct. 23, 1929, AAD files.

24. Acc. no. 29.158.51, described in Kienbusch and Grancsay, *The Bashford Dean Collection*, no. 43, pp. 128–129.

25. SVG to DCF, Oct. 31, 1929, AAD files.

26. French mentions Margaret French Cresson's work on the *Mallinckrodt Tablet* in a letter dated Feb. 3, 1928, and to Charles Coolidge dated Jan. 24, 1928, DCF Family Papers, reel 19, frames 394 and 396. Her work on the lettering of the Dean tablet is cited in the checklist of sculptures by Margaret French Cresson compiled principally by Barbara Stevens Roberts and published in *The Chesterwood Pedestal* 7, no. 1.

27. DCF to SVG, March 15, 1930, AAD files.

28. SVG to DCF, Oct. 31, 1929 (two letters), AAD files.