



## Smithsonian American Art Museum

April 2012



### ***Concord Minute Man of 1775***

1889, cast 1917

#### **Daniel Chester French**

Born: Exeter, New Hampshire 1850

Died: Stockbridge, Massachusetts 1931

Gorham Manufacturing Company (Founder)

bronze

32 1/4 x 17 1/8 x 18 3/8 in. (81.9 x 43.5 x 46.7 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Museum purchase

1991.193

#### [Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*The Concord Minute Man of 1775 is representative of crucial period in American history; the American Revolution and our fight for independence. Though this bronze cast of the Minute Man was created in 1917, the composition comes directly from a larger-than-life bronze sculpture in Concord, MA created in 1875 by Daniel Chester French. Researcher Laura wanted to investigate if French accurately depicted the Minute Man but she first needed to understand why French originally created the first sculpture in 1875.*

- **Why and how did Daniel Chester French create the original version of this sculpture in 1875? What was happening in United States history at the time that might correspond to the creation of this sculpture?**
- **Did French accurately depict a Minute Man? Is this a realistic depiction or an imaginative interpretation?**

This artwork proved a challenge to work on as the museum already knew a great deal of information about this particular casting. I decided that we needed to know more about the original sculpture French created which inspired our smaller cast he had made years later. I knew that in order to answer the above query concerning the historical accuracy of

French's sculpture, I would have to explore the origins of the first cast of this sculpture. [The original larger-than-life bronze sculpture in Concord, Massachusetts](#) stands on the west bank of the Concord River adjacent to the Old North Bridge, the historical site of the Battle of Concord. Preliminary research through the curatorial files told me that this monumental sculpture was actually a commission.

As always, it was important for me to first gather primary sources as those often provide invaluable, undiluted information. Through WorldCat, I was able to find two sources which aided me significantly through the entire process of researching this work. One of these sources was a book written by Margaret French Creeson, Daniel Chester French's daughter and a prominent sculptor in her own right. Creeson's publication on the life of her father illuminated the process of creating the Minute Man sculpture. The second source came from French himself in the form of a two page document written in the third person in which French recalls the story behind the Minute Man. Many of Creeson's assertions regarding the sculpture are verified by her father in his 1925 recollection.

Both sources state that the origin of the commission for the original Minute Man sculpture resulted primarily from the upcoming centennial anniversary of the Concord fight against the British in 1775. In 1836, a granite obelisk had been erected to mark the fight. Dubbed the [Concord Battle Monument](#), this monument stood on the side of the North Bridge where the British fought. This simple fact had for years irritated Concord resident Ebenezer Hubbard, a descendant from one of the original settlers of Concord. According to French's daughter Margaret "Ebby could never forgive the town for erecting a memorial on the place occupied by the enemy. He felt that the other side, the west bank, where the Concord Colonel, James Barrett, ordered the attack upon the Regulars and where the column was led by Major John Buttrick, marching down the hill from his own farm, should also have its monument." (Creeson, 1947)

When Hubbard died in 1870, his will stipulated that \$1,000 was to go to the town of Concord for the creation of a suitable monument to the battle on the correct side of the Concord River. With the centennial looming and with money on hand a committee was formed to decide on a sculptor for the new monument. French's friend, the prominent American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, was on this committee and most likely spoke in French's favor as French was an unknown artist at the time of the commission, never once having sculpted anything of this scale. The committee had requested that the sculpture depict Captain Isaac Davis, the leader of the Acton militiamen and the first commissioned officer to be killed in the Concord fight. The 25-year-old French was formally offered the commission after producing a model to the committees liking.

But how accurate was the figure that French had composed? How did he know what a Minute Man looked like? I was interested in discovering the answer to this question and again the primary source information I had gathered provided a wealth of little known

facts. Apparently it was historical accuracy that French was striving for in his depiction of Captain Davis. He wanted to do this to not only effectively visually communicate the message that the sculpture was meant to convey but also because he wanted to properly honor those that had fallen in the battle. Prior to the commission French had taken some anatomy classes with William Rimmer in Boston. Rimmer taught him that in order to make a clothed figure convincing, you had to first sculpt a nude figure and then add clothes. The problem French encountered was that the Boston area was lacking in nude models. Knowing the Boston Athenaeum to have in its collection a plaster study of the Apollo Belvedere, the ever-resourceful young sculptor asked to borrow the study to use as a resource while he created his Minute Man sculpture; a sketch of the legs of the Apollo Belvedere by French survives in one of his sketchbooks.

For the pose of the Minute Man figure, French not only borrowed from the Apollo Belvedere, but also used several friends and his own body to model for different parts of the figure. French's daughter Margaret Creeson writes that he had a full length mirror set up in his studio so that he could survey his "own not unattractive form." (Creeson, 1947) This would not be the first time French would make use of his own body to inspire his artwork; for his monumental sculpture of Abraham Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, [French cast his own hands](#) to fill in for the president's hands. Apparently French used the "physical characteristics of several [young men] . . . Young Charles Baird posed four times. Daniel's friend Charles Hoar [son of monument committee member Ebenezer R. Hoar] also had desirable physical qualities. But none of these volunteers had the rugged arms of a man of the soil. This proved to be no handicap; for who had a finer developed arm than the French's own [farmhand] Patrick Harrington? The statue's strong wrists, the firm hold on the musket, the lingering hand on the plow, and the vein bulging forearms, in themselves, thanks to Patrick, express the virility and determination of the Minute Men." (Robbins, 1945). Patrick apparently posed patiently, "delighted to have a share in the proceedings." (Creeson, 1947)

Now that French had the pose figured out, what of the clothing for the Minute Man? How did French know what a Minute Man should wear? French needed to give the figure the appropriate clothing and various accoutrements needed to convey the image of a Minute Man leaving his farm work to take up arms at a moment's notice. Evidently French's family decided to aid him in this task as French's father had spent some time in Acton [hometown of militiamen Captain Isaac Davis,] "talking with local historians and oldtimers and going through the Davis homestead in hope of finding a portrait or sketches of Captain Davis. This was the best he could hope for, as daguerreotype photography was not used until some sixty years after Davis's death. In this he was to be disappointed, for Acton history showed that no known portrait or sketches of Davis existed, or ever had. But he did bring back pictures and information enough to have Daniel make a good likeness of Davis. The pictures were of relatives and of men who resembled the Captain

in some way. Patrick Harrington's [the French family's farm hand] living daughters have often related how their father told of this trip to Acton and of the Judge [French's father] bringing back these pictures. As Davis's widow did not die until 1841 she was able to satisfy historians with information of her husband for sixty-six years after his death. With this data Daniel French modeled the striking form of the Minute Man during the winter of 1873-74." (Robbins, 1945)

French was also able to rely on the residents of Concord for help with the Minute Man's costume. Wanting to help French in any way they could, residents ransacked old attics and "an original Minute Man costume [was] brought to light. It was of green baize, ornamented with "Silver dollar" buttons, actual coins with the inscription worn smooth on the outer side. The breeches, with "shilling" buttons at the knee, were of homespun dyed with butternut." The powder horn was a cherished heirloom that was lent by a neighbor. It apparently was the same horn "through which the ball passed which killed James Heyward, at the Battle of Lexington. It hung in the studio room for weeks and created much interest." Another neighbor gave the musket that an ancestor had used. But it was the plow which proved the most difficult to locate; it was months before a plow of the type used a hundred years previously could be laid hold of."(Creeson, 1947)

To continue researching the historical context of this artwork, I would like to explore the following question:

- **What were the Centennial celebrations like at Concord? What was the public perception of French's sculpture once it was unveiled?**

#### **Selected Bibliography:**

Creeson, Margaret French. *The Life of Daniel Chester French: Journey Into Fame*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947.

French, Daniel Chester. *The Story of the Minute-Man Statue as told by the Sculptor in 1925*. S.I.:s.n., 1925.

Robbins, Roland Wells. *The Story of the Minute Man with Illustrations*. Stoneham, Massachusetts: George R. Barnstead & Son, 1945.