

# The Meaning of Walter Allward's Vimy Memorial Figures

## by Dr. Laura Brandon

An analysis of sculptor Walter Allward's (1876-1955) 20 figures from the Canadian National Vimy Memorial (1936) demonstrates how he used his knowledge of contemporary, classical, and religious art and culture to explain the meaning of the First World War to Canadians. In Regeneration Hall at the Canadian War Museum, we are able to see 17 of these figures close up in the form of the plaster models that preceded the stone carvings on the monument itself. With the exception of Hope, the eight allegorical figures designed for the top of the monument are grouped together with the remaining figures lined up against the Hall's south wall. The figure of Canada and the two recumbent mourners are not part of the Museum's collection; they can be seen at the Military Communications and Electronics Museum in Kingston.

### **Allegorical figures**

Two of the eight allegorical figures are winged. The Greek and Roman messenger of the gods, Victory inspired Truth, the first winged figure. Traditionally, Truth is naked and unadorned save for a laurel crown. Here she "Truth" holds a laurel branch in her right hand to symbolize victory. The second winged figure, Knowledge, carries a closed book in his left hand indicating his learning.

The third allegorical figure, Charity, traditionally carries a bowl of fruit. In Allward's version, the bowl is replaced by a fold of her dress in which poppies rest, a clear reference to the poppy campaign that first began in 1921. A fourth figure, Justice, leans on a massive sword, emblematic of the power of justice. Traditionally, Justice presides over the Silver Age, one of the Ages of the World described by Roman first-century poet Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*. In this age, humanity was supposed to have moved forward sufficiently to know "Sacrifice" right from wrong.

The fifth and sixth figures are Honour and Hope. At the Museum, Hope is the isolated sculpture at the far end of Regeneration Hall. As here, she traditionally gazes upward in hope of future glory. The seventh figure,

Peace, lacks some of her traditional attributes – no wings or olive branch. The eighth and last allegorical figure, Faith, appears as she should; her characteristic gesture is to hold her hand to her breast.

The Spirit of Sacrifice holds a burning torch aloft. He was clearly inspired by John McCrae's celebrated poem "In Flanders Fields;" in particular, the lines "To you from failing hands we throw/The Torch; be yours to hold it high." Next to The Spirit of Sacrifice, Sacrifice leans back against an altar-like structure. He is emblematic of Isaac, Abraham's intended sacrifice to God. The Sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the Crucifixion, the two events together being central to post-First World War justificatory sentiments that centred on the redemptive possibilities of the enormous loss of life.

### **South Wall Figures**

In *The Breaking of the Sword*, a man literally does this. The sword is the attribute of the Christian martyr. Just as martyrs were sacrificed for a greater good, so is the sword destroyed to achieve a similar goal. In *The Sympathy of Canadians for the Helpless*, the young woman kneeling on the group's right owes much to the figure of the young girl in British artist George Frederick Watt's well-known painting, *Hope* (1886). Widely distributed reproductions of this painting offered comfort to the bereaved during the First World War.

A question to be asked about all the female figures is why Allward considered so many semi-naked women acceptable for a war memorial? The answer is simple. In western art, artists traditionally use female figures to express abstract concepts like liberty, justice, or victor



**"Sacrifice"**



**"Truth"**

Dr. Brandon was the Historian, Art and War at the Canadian War Museum.

The images, Truth and Sacrifice, reproduced in this article are by Walter Allward.

Their accession numbers are 19770315-011 Truth and 19770315-001a Sacrifice.

They are from the Beaverbrook Collection of War Art