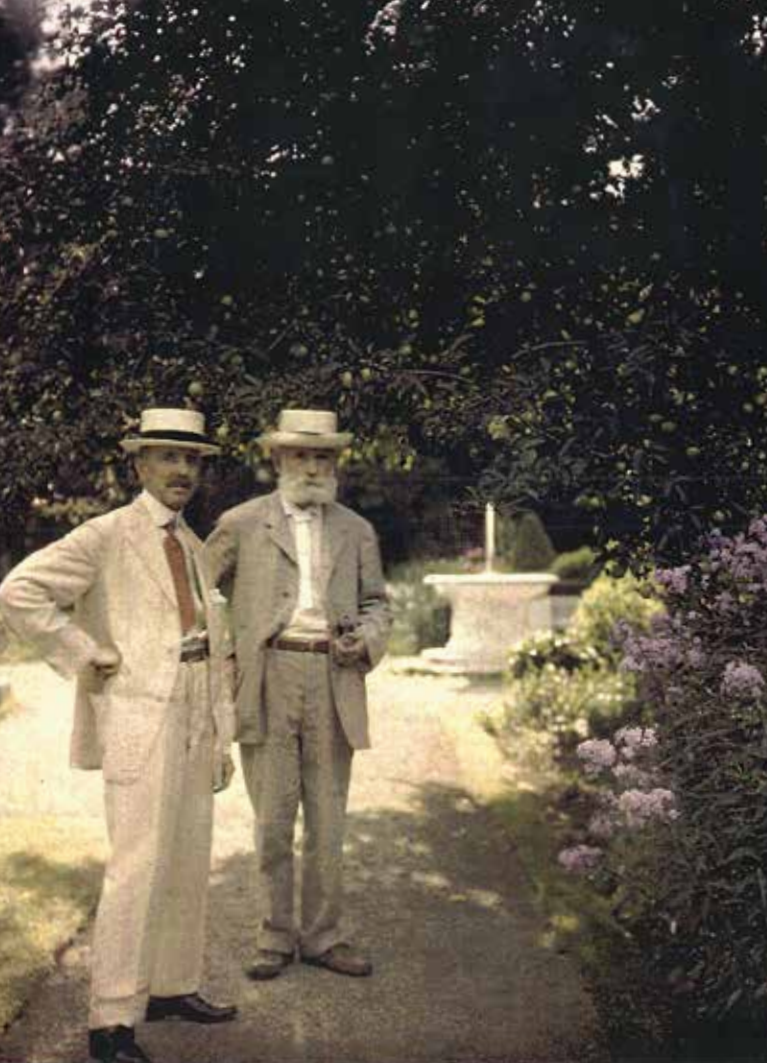


a sculptor's heaven

DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH'S
MOST CREATIVE MOMENTS
WERE AT CHESTERWOOD



BY ANASTASIA STANMEYER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA VOLLMER AND DON FREEMAN



In his studio

off a dirt road in the village of Glendale, Daniel Chester French carved creatures of all types. Swallows and seagulls, peacocks and pigeons, angels and presidents emerged from this rural setting. And within his residence, designed by Henry Bacon, the walls burst in floral patterns and greenery with hidden wooded animals, reflecting the Italianate gardens and open fields of Chesterwood. Glass-paneled doors opened to pathways that carry the eye through landscaped areas and into the wild. Every step on this property was calculated, designed, and formed by French. What he created, and what was left to nature, coexisted in harmony.

Most who come to Chesterwood, now a National Trust Historic Site, are familiar with the man who sculpted the monumental seated Lincoln in Washington, D.C., and the Minute Man of Concord. But perhaps equally as profound and lesser known is this artist's view of the outdoors and how nature was an integral part of his life, his sense of peace and well-being, his art. "You have to look at Chesterwood holistically," says Donna Hassler, Chesterwood's executive director. "It wasn't one section; it was one place. His art and his environment were an aesthetic of beauty."

In 1896, French and his wife, Mary, purchased the old Marshall Warner farm, and just a year later, Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial, designed and built French's studio—a 30-by-29-square-foot room with 26-foot-high walls. It is in this studio where visitors can view many samples of French's sculptures, including his first great work created in the Berkshires, the "George Washington," a bronze reduction of the original equestrian dedicated on July 3, 1900, in Paris; the seven-foot plaster model for the seated Lincoln dedicated on May 30, 1922; and his final unfinished work, the marble "Andromeda."

This studio, the residence, the barn gallery, and the new collections gallery contain 500 statues by French: preliminary plaster models for monumental work and completed sculptures in bronze and marble. Walk outside and find more works by him and others, such as French's bronze working model of "Abraham Lincoln" (or "Gettysburg Lincoln"), his commission for the Nebraska State Capitol, started in 1909 and dedicated in 1912.

French's method and style of sculpting is reflected in his landscape design of Chesterwood. This gardening perspective also was impacted from the few summers he and his wife spent in Cornish, New Hampshire, an important artists colony that started with Augustus Saint-Gaudens's arrival in 1885. The gardens were tied to the architecture of the houses—personal and intimate, drawn from the natural landscape.

Years later, as French turned his attention to his new summer residence at Chesterwood, he used materials for his gardens and structures that were almost all from the Berkshire region: The walls were native stone, the marble was from quarries in Lee, the gravel was from a pit a half-mile away, and the plants were largely native, such as hemlock, pine, and apple trees. But grounding all of this was his landscape design. As his daughter Margaret French Cresson wrote in "The Chesterwood Garden," which appeared in the Bulletin of The Garden Club of America, in March 1956: "If your skeleton and your bones were in the right place, then the chances were that you'd have a statue—or garden—that would stand up and look well through the years."

And so, these gardens and statues have withstood time, appreciated by thousands of visitors to Chesterwood every year. A sort of trademark for French was how the formality and simple beauty of his gardens were framed like a picture. There were few flowers, instead broad sweeps of lawn for tranquility, and the walls and the woods created set boundaries. "So many people, Dan French observed, just put a garden down anywhere, with no relation to the house. A garden should be a continuation of the house, a room of living green, with plenty of shade to sit in and seats in the right places," Margaret wrote.

Functionality and recreation also came into play in French's landscape designs. When Margaret was a girl, he built a tennis court for her near the studio. He later covered it with soil, and you can still see where it was by the oddly level area. Remnants of a cold frame are north

A SUMMER HOME Daniel Chester French in the Chesterwood Studio Garden with ornithologist William Brewster, 1915; fountain in the Studio Garden, designed by Henry Bacon and French; on the table in the studio reception room, *La Jeunesse*, by Herbert Adams, polychromed terracotta, 1899 (a version is in the Met); and view into the Studio Garden.

of the parking lot, where vegetable and cutting gardens once were. In a letter dated September 17, 1911, the sculptor writes to his brother, William Merchant Richardson French, himself a civil engineer and landscape gardener, "We have any amount of fruit, peaches and pears and apples and grapes and a few late plums. We are really embarrassed to know what to do with it. I have always intended to lay in a stock of cheap baskets that people would not feel called upon to return, to send our fruit to our friends."

Margaret also noted in her article that "in the late afternoons of summer the trunks of the trees in the hemlock forest are dappled with sunlight and shadow and in the autumn the ancient sugar maples above the garden become a shield of golden glory. But spring, perhaps, is the loveliest time, when the straight walk, as it goes up into the woods, is bordered with the fiddle-heads of many kinds of ferns and the poet's narcissus and white trillium on either side of the path bring an ephemeral delicacy to the forest floor."

Nearly a half-century ago, on June 9, 1969, Margaret turned to the National Trust for Historic

Preservation to maintain and keep the 132-acre Chesterwood open to the public. It was the tenth such site across the country—now there are 27. The National Trust has invested more than \$1 million to restore the studio, hire staff, and develop various interpretive programs and guided tours. Beyond the studio and home, visitors wander the open fields, walk pathways into the woods, listen, observe, take note, slow down.

“We’re always working in the landscape, thinking about what seeds to buy, what fruit trees to plant, to bring it back to how it once looked and restore the view shed to Monument Mountain, Mount Everett and beyond,” says Hassler. “You cannot get that view anywhere else in the Berkshires.”

It was that expansive view that French and William Brewster looked out to when they sat on the breakfast porch in the morning, mapping out the day. Brewster spent a month in the summers at Chesterwood, even bringing a metal bathtub for his guest room. The renowned ornithologist and first president of Mass Audubon would take long walks and take note of what he saw and heard. Meanwhile, French worked in his studio and joined his friend after lunch. This lifelong companionship was a continuation of their boyhood days in Cambridge, roaming the woods and exploring the rivers. As teens, they spent time boating, hunting, and observing birds, also sharing a devotion to plants and trees.

Brewster was closely involved with French in shaping the Chesterwood landscape from the very start. Woodland work such as clearing trails was Brewster’s chief interest there, but he also shared his garden perennials with French and identified every leaf and flower on the estate. French himself would have been an ornithologist if he wasn’t a sculptor, taking detailed observations in his Garden Notebook:

May 7, 1905: “A wren was singing merrily about the garden, the first one I have seen on the place, and I heard the first bobolink.”

August 1913: “Will Brewster departed Aug. 12. While he was here we built a seat at the view in the pasture and one on the hill, made a new path through the hemlocks in the pasture and cut down a hemlock tree in the glade.”

July 22, 1916: “Set up a dove-cote in the garden near the lilac hedge for some fantail pigeons that W.B. has ordered for us.”

(*Orion Magazine* editor-in-chief Chip Blake, a longtime birdwatcher, will lead walks at Chesterwood on three Saturdays in May, details in “Out & About,” page 63.)

Observes Hassler: “French got his hands dirty, and so did Brewster. It was an opportunity for French to do something unrelated to modeling in clay and working on commission. It gave him a form of meditation away from this laborious work.”

Born in Exeter, New Hampshire, French spent his youth in Cambridge and Amherst before moving with his family to Concord in 1867 at age 17. (Concord also is where he



HOME AND GARDENS Above, main hallway of the Chesterwood Residence, looking into the parlor, which shows *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Chester French* by John C. Johansen, 1927. Johansen and his wife, painter Jean McLane, were summer residents of Stockbridge. Bottom left, Owen Lewis and Susan Ennis in their home, the Dormouse, posing as William Penn Cresson and Margaret French Cresson, depicting the painting by Johansen, *Mr. and Mrs. William Penn Cresson*, 1921. The original is at Chesterwood. Right, the home of Gordon and Carol Hyatt, whose gardens French helped design.





is buried, in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.) His father, Henry Flagg French, by profession a lawyer and a judge, served for two years as the first president of the Massachusetts Agricultural College in 1864, now the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He purchased a farm along the Concord River and commercially raised asparagus and strawberries, kept pigs and a herd of dairy cattle.

Although French briefly attended MIT, he wasn't great at school and wanted to be a sculptor. His first foray into public art came in 1873, when his hometown of Concord, through the auspices of family friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, commissioned "The Minute Man" to commemorate the centennial of the Battle of Concord. French was 24 and was studying in Florence when the work was dedicated in 1875.

As his prominence grew, French became a trustee of The Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1903 until his death in 1931, serving as the chairman of the committee on sculpture. He was responsible for the accession of the museum's core collection of American sculpture.

As French described it, he spent six months in New York City and the other six months in heaven. And in that heaven were the gardens—not only his—that he designed. French created spaces in which one is tempted to linger, rather than merely be dazzled by the layout. Whereas Edith Wharton's gardens at the Mount may be grander and more formal, Chesterwood is a somewhat different experience. Although a classicist in his respect for the traditional art form, there was a sense of abandon and freedom that surrounded the structures.

In her book *Edith Wharton's Lenox*, Cornelia Brooke Gilder writes, "Sculptor Daniel Chester French, who was also an amateur landscape designer, was passionately interested in the progress of Edith's gardens. Mary French remembered that 'when we went to her place, she and Mr. French would wander about the grounds, exchanging ideas.' The conversations would continue at Chesterwood. 'Each new development in our little place, Mrs. Wharton always came to see, and brought her friends to see it—among others, Mr. Henry James, whom Mr. French had known years before in London.'"

French first turned to designing other people's gardens in 1915, and it wasn't unusual for him to take ideas used at Chesterwood. That included the garden layout of his daughter's house and a handful of other homes nearby and even the old Stockbridge Casino, now home to Berkshire Theatre Group. Poet-psychiatrist Owen Lewis is among the group of homeowners whose properties have been touched by French's hands. He lives in what is named the Dormouse, which French purchased in 1919. It became the residence for French's daughter Margaret, who married William Penn Cresson in 1921. While treated as a separate residence, the property was part of Chesterwood.

Lewis has just completed a book of poetry and prose entitled *Field Light* that is centered on the Dormouse, written "with a free hand to

history, although footnoted as though a historical document," as he describes it. "My back field is contiguous to the field that French would have looked out, and almost contiguous to where Norman Rockwell would ride his bike. What we see in the field and the artistic inspiration is one piece of it. I also have some archival photographs of the back porch. I am able to sit in the very place people sat 100 years ago. The gardens and the house haven't changed that much. Conversations lived here, people lived here; it wasn't a blank slate."

French also worked on the landscape design of the Dugway, the estate of his friend and neighbor Charles Robinson Smith. He made a little model of the Robinson Smith garden to help him in the design process. He ordered plants from the nurseries he had used for Chesterwood and even transplanted evergreens and mountain laurel from the woodlands of his home.

His final garden design was for Dr. William B. Terhune, associate medical director of the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge. The Terhunes lived in an early 19th century house fronting East Main Street with land that sloped down to the Housatonic River. Again here, several elements of the Chesterwood garden were applied: a clipped hedge of Japanese barberry, a formal semi-circular privet hedge behind an exedra seat, a circular pool, a grape arbor, and broad shallow steps cut into a retaining wall that bisected the garden and compensated for the slope. French continued to offer advice on planting for Terhune's garden and others he worked on.

In 1983, Gordon and Carole Hyatt bought the property and didn't know that French had a hand in the landscape design until years later, when French's letters to Dr. Terhune were discovered. They have worked extensively on the land, such as clearing another third of the back property to the Housatonic River. They removed the dirt from the fish pond and got it working again. They also added a replica of the fountain at Chesterwood for which French modeled a frieze of dancing boys with garlands, designed by Bacon and made of cement and iron reinforcement. It had fallen into disrepair, and Robert Shure, with Skylight Studios in Woburn, created a new fountain, same design, at Chesterwood out of resin. Gordon Hyatt was on the advisory council of Chesterwood at the time and asked to have a second fountain made from the mold for his home; the only difference is that it has an overflow and moat.

"We feel like we're very close to Daniel Chester French," says Hyatt. "I admire his career and work. The fact that he came over and helped a neighbor design her garden is quite terrific."

Dana Pilson, curatorial researcher at Chesterwood, contributed to this story. ■

STUDIO AND GROUNDS
Daniel Chester French had a hand in every part of Chesterwood. In this spread, a view of the southeast corner of the Studio; the Pergola in the Studio Garden; the Workroom of the Studio; and access to Chesterwood's Woodland Walk, landscaped with the help of French's close friend William Brewster.