

The mystery of the Veiled Virgin

Get thee to a nunnery. More specifically, get thee to the Presentation Motherhouse, in Cathedral Square next to the Catholic Basilica. These words come not from a Danish prince but from any person who has had the honour of experiencing St. John's premier masterpiece.

The Veiled Virgin is to St. John's what Venus de Milo is to the Louvre; what la Pieta is to the Vatican. This bust of Mary was carved in white marble in the mid-1800s by Giovanni Strazza, an Italian sculptor. No one knows exactly when Strazza completed this masterpiece and strangely enough, the statue is not listed among Strazza's works.

Also no paperwork has survived the purchase of the statue by Bishop Mullock of St. John's who presented the bust as a gift in 1862 to the mother superior at Presentation Convent, Mother

Mary Magdellan de Pazzi, one of the four sisters who came to Newfoundland from Ireland in 1833.*

To further the mystery even more, a second veiled bust of Mary produced by Strazza has been lost, at least to those searching on this side of the Atlantic. Separated twins. One not complete without the other. Can you be the one to unveil the mystery?

The statue is signed by Strazza. The fact that it is his work is not in question. The great mystery is when was the statue produced, what became of her twin and where did Bishop Mullock purchase it and from whom? Perhaps Bishop Mullock had the statue commissioned.

Why not go check out the statue for yourself? Weekdays between 10:30 and noon and again between 2 pm and 4 pm.

Or, by special arrangement by calling Presentation Convent at 753 7291. Don't show up with a large group unannounced or you'll give Sister Perpetua a breakdown. Sister Perpetua is the archivist at Presentation Convent and the caretaker of the Veiled Virgin. She is as lovely as the statue itself and, on some visits, almost outshines the most magnificent work of art in the capital city.

*Bishop Mullock's own sister was also a Presentation sister, Sister M. de Pazzi, at the mother house in St. John's. She became mother superior later in 1875. ☐

by Susan Flanagan



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A Gem of Art

A perfect wonder of the sculptor's art has just been imported here from Rome by the Right Rev. Dr. Mullock. It is a white marble bust of the Blessed Virgin veiled – the work of a Roman artist of celebrity and the second of the kind he has produced.

To say that this representation surpasses in perfection of art, any piece of sculpture we have ever seen, conveys but weakly our impression of its exquisite beauty. The possibility of such a triumph of the chisel had not before entered into our conception.

The face is, of course, one of ineffable loveliness; but it is not its mere beauty, physical and spiritual, that strikes the gazer with astonishment – it is the indefinable art with which all this beauty is both veiled the transparent marble, and yet expressed through it in every feature with most vivid distinctiveness. The bare formation of a veil from such a material excites wonder – but how far more admirable is that disposition of it in folds down the face and neck, which so entirely resembles what we daily see as to give one the impulse to touch and feel the delicate texture.

It differs from almost every other statue we have seen in another respect. It has all the repose peculiar to them, but not the death-like character. Art has contrived to diffuse a something of the warmth of life over that more angular countenance.

Ordinary language must ever fail to do justice to a subject like this – to the rare artistic skill, and to the emotions it produces in the beholder. These themes are rather presented to us to feel, to admire, and to contemplate.

An unattributed article which appeared in The Newfoundlander, a St. John's newspaper in the mid 1800s

SPCA: More than a Century of Service

In late May, a full-grown ginger tomcat was found by Parks and Recreational Services in a dumpster on Killaview Avenue, Conception Bay South, barely breathing. It had a plastic garbage tie wrapped round its neck.

"We went public with the story in the hopes that we might locate the cat's owner," says Debbie Powers, Volunteer Coordinator of the SPCA. Powers was at the Shelter when the call came in and with the vet when the cat was euthanased for humane reasons.

Powers, who has been the Volunteer Coordinator of the SPCA for the past 18 years, says animal abuse is more common than the public realizes. And she says the abuse is a direct reflection of our social and economic problems.

"Take the cod closure, for example," says Powers. "People will lose their jobs. Some families will have to move, and a lot of them will leave behind the family pet. Any stress that's felt in the home will also be felt by the pet."

Meanwhile, Powers says she's seen many positive changes in society's attitudes towards animals over the years. She credits the City of St. John's, in particular. Powers says Mayor Andy Wells has been instrumental in providing major improvements to the Humane Services Division of the city, as well as allocating municipal funds to the organization itself. Powers says she's also noticed a positive change in the attitudes of the police, and in particular, school-aged children.

"A lot of schools are showing interest in the SPCA nowadays," says Powers. "They'll call up if they're looking for a fun day or whatever, and we get a very good response." Nevertheless, with no provincial funding, the organization is forced to rely heavily on volunteers, fundraising initiatives and private donations. And Powers says less people are able to volunteer these days.

"People's lifestyles have changed so much in recent years that they just don't have time for volunteering," says Powers. "So we're really grateful for the volunteers we do have. Some of them end up coming in to the shelter as much as seven days a week."

Meanwhile, Powers says the SPCA needs government to make a financial commitment to the services the SPCA provides. As well, she says the SPCA needs access to a low cost spaying and neutering facility, and an informed public. "We have to educate people that animals aren't property, but living, breathing members of our community," says Powers. "Adopting a pet is a long-term commitment to a long term relationship – a fifteen year relationship."

All the same, Powers says, the love for animals endures and prevails. Powers says she is most inspired by the level of compassion and understanding in young people today. The next issue of News Paws, the SPCA newsletter, will feature an article written by an eleven-year-old.

Meanwhile, the next fundraiser for the SPCA takes place June 18th at 7 pm. The annual "Walk for the Animals" will begin at Confederation Building, and sponsor sheets can be picked up before hand at the SPCA. Those walkers who raise more than two hundred dollars will receive the latest in SPCA t-shirt design. ☐

by Robin Grant

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