

Los Gatos Weekly-Times



Photograph courtesy of the Lawrence Tenney Stevens Trust

Charles Erskine Scott Wood and Sara Bard Field pose next to the monument carved by Lawrence Tenney Stevens.

Famous sculptor left mark in Los Gatos

By John Faubion

Most everyone in Los Gatos is familiar with the two large cats that stand watch over the entrance to the former hillside estate of Charles Erskine Scott Wood and Sara Bard Field, but few are aware of the monument erected there to honor them, or the sculptor who created it.

New information about both was uncovered recently with the mounting of the major retrospective exhibit of the work of American sculptor Lawrence Tenney Stevens at the Tempe Historical Museum in Tempe, Ariz. Rudy Turk, director emeritus of the University Art Museum at Arizona State University, has called the exhibit a major artistic event that "will necessitate the rewriting of the history of sculpture in America."

The exhibit includes pieces on loan from the collections of the Smithsonian, Ball State University Museum, Philbrook Museum and Bank One. Also featured are items from the sculptor's trust, considered to be among the most significant collections of art, personal effects and archives in American sculpture to survive intact.

Stevens was born outside Boston in 1896. He studied at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School at the urging of acclaimed sculptor Cyrus Dallin. A well-known art expert discovered him there, felt he possessed the sculptural genius to rival Saint-Gaudens and Rodin and encouraged him to enter the Prix-de-Rome, the most prestigious competition of the day.

Stevens won the Prix in 1922, which entitled him to three years' study at the renowned American Academy in Rome and stipends to permit travel to the art centers of the world. While studying at the Academy, Stevens met Tom Johnson, the painter who later created the spectacular murals at the Air Force Academy in Colorado. Johnson introduced Stevens to a group of friends who were studying at the Academie Julian in Paris, among them, Grant "American Gothic" Wood. The bunch became good friends and occasionally studied and traveled together.

One of their sojourns, a trip to Sorrento, Italy, in February 1924, may have been quite significant. It was

there that Stevens is believed to have convinced Grant Wood--who, like many American artists of the day, was considering staying overseas--to quit the Academie, return to the United States and use his talent to uplift American art. Sorrento, too, is where Stevens first met Charles Erskine Scott Wood.

Stevens accepted a dinner invitation from Wood, Sara Bard Field and their daughter, the night of the American Academy's major yearly exhibition in late May 1924. In a letter home to his parents several days later, Stevens wrote, "They are both poets, and he is so much like Grandpa, one of the old school you know, rich in knowledge and character, like steel." Wood and Field purchased that evening a small Stevens bronze bear and an etching of a windmill at Wimbledon, the whereabouts of both presently unknown.

Fiercely patriotic, Stevens devoted the remainder of his study at the Academy to developing a sculptural style that was more reflective of the strengths of the American people than what he considered to be the "pretty, sentimental style" popular before World War I. He introduced his new style to enthusiastic crowds at an exhibit at the Boston Museum School following his return to America from Italy in 1925.

One of the first pieces Stevens created after his return to the United States was a 3-foot-tall stone and polychrome impish figure he called "Future." Wood purchased it for his estate. Beth Rondone visited the estate in 1929 and remembers the nude figure as quite controversial at the time.

In 1927, Wood commissioned Stevens to create a medallion to honor Sara. It featured a portrait of her on the front with a raised inscription: Sara Bard Field, Poet and Lover, New York, MCMXXVII. The back shows two dogs at play with the inscription "Tenderness and pity and love alone shall build my city stone on stone."

In 1934, Stevens completed a heroic memorial to the couple, carved out of a 312-ton block of French limestone. Photographs from the Stevens archives show it to be about seven feet tall and four feet square. It is an outstanding example of the strong, simplified style that Stevens hoped would become the hallmark of American sculpture. It is still on the site of the couple's former Los Gatos estate.

Stevens went on to enjoy a successful career, spreading his influence through significant commissions that included the 1936 Dallas Centennial and the 1939 New York World's Fair. He died on board the liner *Michelangelo* in 1972 on a voyage home from Italy to cast some of the pieces now being featured in the Tempe Historical Museum exhibit.

The exhibit runs through July 27.

John Faubion is director of the Lawrence Tenney Stevens Trust.

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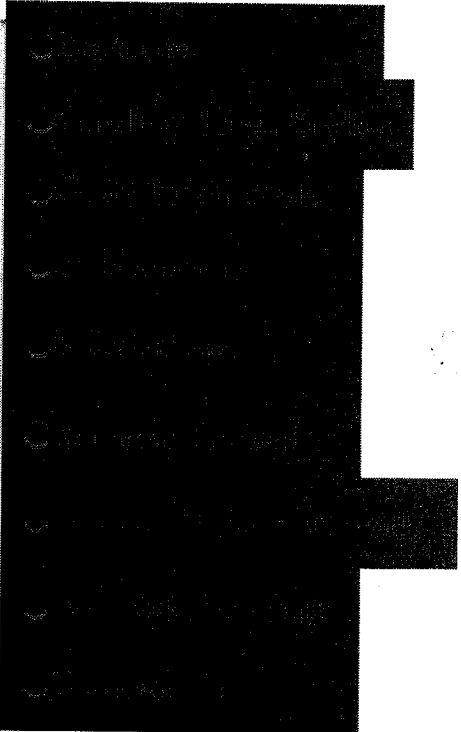
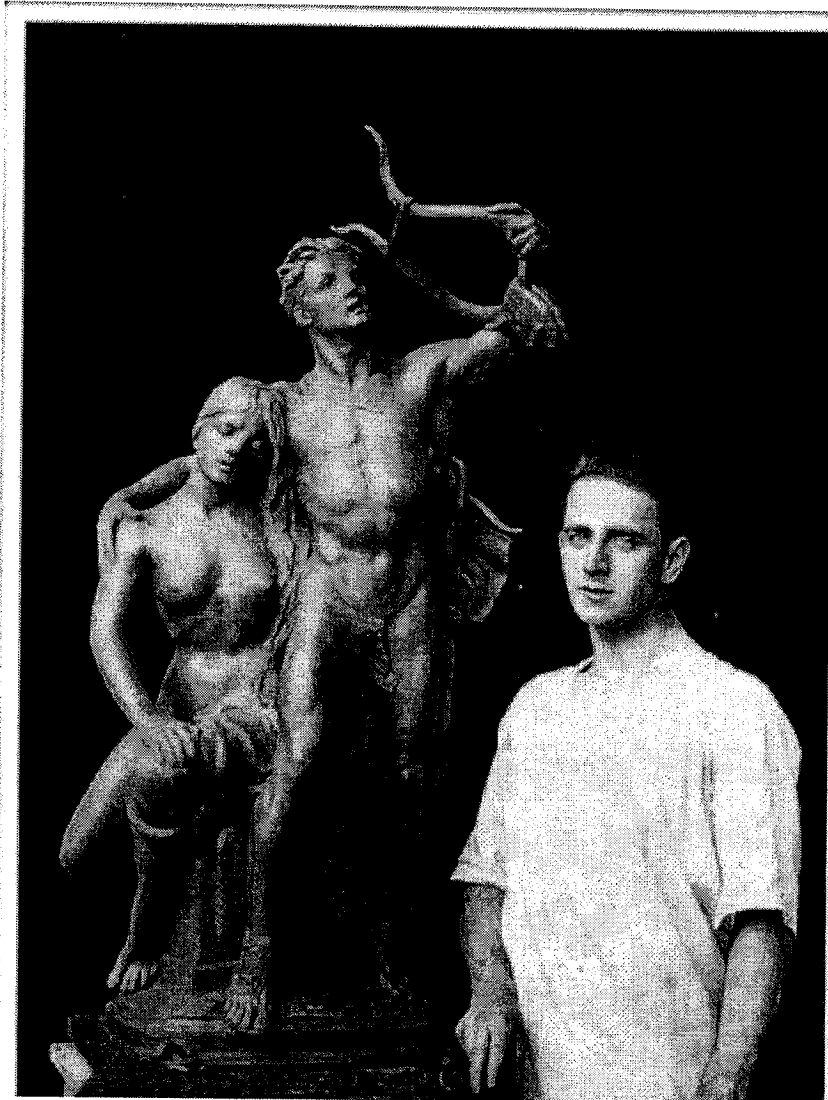
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Lawrence Tenney Stevens

(1896-1972)

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This site will be continuously updated and expanded to reflect these discoveries.

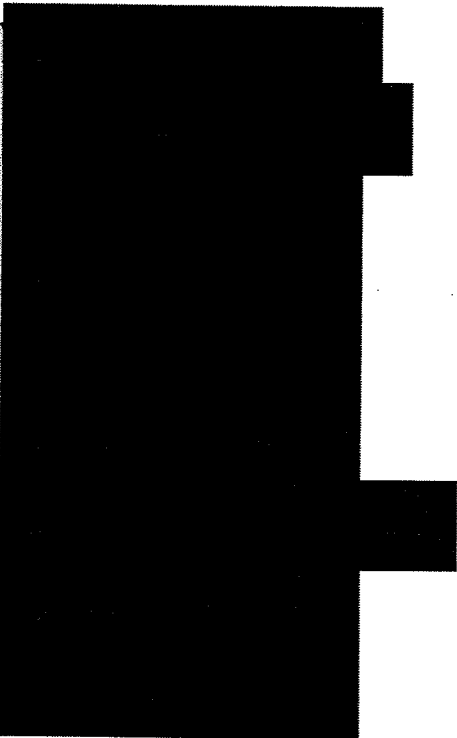
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Coming Soon

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■ Coming Soon

Lawrence Tenney Stevens with his winning entry, *Music*, for the 1922 Prix de Rome.

Lawrence Tenney Stevens Monument at “The Cats”

In 1924 in Sorrento, Italy, Charles Erskine Scott Wood and Sara Bard Field met the American sculptor, Lawrence Tenney Stevens, who in 1934 would carve their likenesses from a three-ton block of French limestone. The memorial is about seven feet high, and four feet square. It was created in order to celebrate the love and fire of the couple’s happy years together at “The Cats.”

Sara’s words, inscribed on the monument are:

**“Had we not clutched love flying by,
Where had you been,
Where had I?”**

This image belongs to the Huntington Library in Pasadena, CA, and can only be reproduced for publication with their permission.

The attached colored snapshots were taken by Peggy Conaway on October 12, 2007 at “The Cats” estate. I was accompanied by Beth Grover Rondone, now age 99, who lived at “The Cats” for a time in 1929.

The sculpture is badly weathered, as can be seen. Few Los Gatans know that this monument by a major artist exists at “The Cats” estate. It is such an iconic piece of Los Gatos history, and perhaps could be restored. It would fit nicely into the garden at the new library if it could be purchased or donated for that purpose.

**Peggy Conaway
June 17, 2009**