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Object Lessons

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Object Lessons

To better understand Illinois Wesleyan's culture and history, you can learn a lot by just looking around you.

Story by **NANCY STEELE BROKAW '71**

Photos by **MARC FEATHERLY**



First-year student Michele Kim '10 sits beneath the wide-eyed visage of Aphrodite's head. Once a stage prop, the head now rests on the roof of McPherson Theatre, but is taken down every spring so that students can give it a "new look."

The next time you find yourself strolling through Illinois Wesleyan University's campus, try to shrug off any mental distractions and really soak in what you see.

Suddenly, a rock, bench, or building you may have walked past a hundred times can acquire new significance. It might even inspire you to ask, "How did this come to be here? What's the story? Surely, someone must know?"

Those were questions Nancy Steele Brokaw '71 posed as she set about to research the origins of dozens of campus landmarks and oddities this past fall. Her investigations unearthed some extraordinary stories behind several campus objects. Some of her discoveries are described below; the rest will be revealed in a second article to appear in our Spring 2007 issue.

All the roof's her stage

Holding the title "Goddess of Love" would tend to give anyone a big head, especially if it's a title held for millennia. The thing is, McPherson Theatre's Aphrodite is nothing but a big head.

Curtis Trout, IWU professor and director of the School of Theatre Arts, created the original piece in 2002 for an Illinois Wesleyan production of *Big Love*, a modern reimagining of a Greek drama. After the production, Aphrodite rested her head on the roof above the theatre's entrance — and there she remains.

Aphrodite, according to Trout, is made from Styrofoam and 166 cans of expanding urethane foam. She weighs between 200 and 300 pounds. It takes five to six people to lift her.

And lift her they do. During Trout's May Term scene design class, a popular project is to give Ms. Aphrodite a facelift. "The students take her down in the morning and research possibilities for giving her a new look. They divide into teams — one team takes the eyes, others the nose, makeup, and hair. In the afternoon, they paint."

A couple of Aphrodite's more notable makeovers have had her looking like KISS lead singer Gene Simmons and, more darkly, the result of a bloody decapitation. One student videotaped his face for several hours and projected it on to Aphrodite, which made her appear eerily alive, blinking at passersby. Her current look sports fashion-forward, smoky eye shadow.

Be careful of being seduced by her charms, however. Like many a vain beauty before her, Aphrodite's head is hollow inside.

Purely inspired



It seems to float there, that unconventionally-shaped cross in the round hole. Long after the concert or the wedding or the chapel service is over, its presence remains suspended in the mind.

Just what makes the cross above the altar at Evelyn Chapel so memorable? The answer seems to be a potent commingling of wizardly architectural design and a clever riff on Methodism.

Before the 1984 construction of Evelyn Chapel began, President Eckley recalls in his memoirs that research was done in “the visual expressions of both historic and contemporary Methodism.”

In that vein, Evelyn Chapel architect Ben Weese set it as a goal to use “known and familiar shapes and forms but modifying, combining, and permuting them to something fresh.”

Nowhere did he do that with more punch than in the gilded cross in the front of the church, suspended in the large oculus

(the name for the round hole).

Separating two slightly curved walls created the unusual visual effect. The front wall has a circular cutout and the rear serves as a background for the cross. As Weese described it, he was “disciplining decoration to an essential sparseness.”

The cross was made from hardwood. Two School of Art professors, Miles Bair and Kevin Strandberg, were called on to gild it.

“There are actually two tones of gold,” Strandberg explains. “The more reddish is 23-carat and the lighter areas are 18-carat.”

Strandberg and Bair painted a sticky varnish on the cross and then picked the gold off 3-by-3-inch sheets with a camelhair brush and laid it down. “If you blew on it, it would be gone,” recalls Strandberg. Both men had beards at the time and they would be flecked with gold at the end of the day.

From Strandberg's artistic vantage point, the end result was that the cross was “really pretty; it fits the overall design of the building,” and the message behind that design. As the Reverend Professor Peter J. Gomes of Harvard put it while speaking at the chapel's dedication service, the cross is a fitting symbol for “a serious place on a serious earth.”

A heavy metal classic

It was a classic case of finding the answer in your own backyard.

University President Robert Eckley and his wife, Nell, wanted to place on the backside of McPherson Theatre a large replica of the Illinois Wesleyan seal originally designed by famed explorer, scientist, and teacher John Wesley Powell, who taught at IWU in the 1860s. Two attempts were made to find someone to create the replica. Both times, the bids were deemed too expensive.

It was Nell Eckley who suggested that perhaps the seal could be made “in-house.” George Shaver, who was Illinois Wesleyan’s director of planning and engineering, and his colleagues on the maintenance staff went to work. But before fabricating the seal, they had to develop a design “to fit the size of the building,” Shaver recalls. “I found out from an eye doctor what size letters someone with 20/20 vision could see” and from what distance.



Shaver then researched materials. To avoid a rust problem, he decided on aluminum. After creating the outside channels and ordering the letters, he contracted with a fabricator to do the bookish component in the seal’s middle section.

“Each letter was solid aluminum and, in the end, the whole thing was heavy,” Shaver recalls. “To attach it, we went through a joint to the inside of the building.”

The seal was installed in November 1980, at a bargain price of \$3,395.44. Shaver’s notes indicate the Illinois Wesleyan University Women’s League (made up of spouses of faculty and staff) picked up the tab.

Seeds of origin



It’s a big, white hut at the north end of Neis Soccer Field. People call it the Funk building but few seem to know why. The hut is used to solve a variety of storage needs for the University.

Where did the name come from, or the building itself for that matter?

It was once part of a large foundation seed plant for Funk Bros. Seed Company, later Funk Seeds, a legacy company of Syngenta Seeds. According to Denny Steele ’67, who is director of Research Services for Syngenta, Funk Seeds had a dozen or so buildings on the site, which IWU bought after

the company abandoned the plant in the 1960s.

To clear space for much-needed athletic fields, the University bulldozed all but the big, white hut, which was one of the newer buildings in the complex (the rest might have originally been a canning factory).

And that big, white hut got a new nickname — the Funk building.

Mood rock

For those students not content to “chalk the sidewalks” with messages and expressions of self and group, there’s always “the rock.”

Perhaps taking their cue from the students at Northwestern, who paint a large rock on their campus, IWU students now regularly provide colorful ornamentation for a small stone embedded in the ground near Presser Hall’s entrance.

School of Theatre Arts Director Curtis Trout, who walks by the rock on his way to McPherson, thinks it’s only been in the last seven or eight years that students have engaged in the nocturnal painting ritual. “Usually it’s jumbled graffiti but I think it was a strawberry once,” Trout reports.



Beauty from above



Look up!

That Sistine Chapel advice is important if one is to enjoy the coffered ceiling in the foyer of Illinois Wesleyan’s Hansen Student Center, the former Memorial Gymnasium.

Bloomington Architect Arthur Pillsbury originally designed the Memorial Gymnasium as part of a sweeping architectural plan for the entire campus. The gymnasium was completed in 1922 and dedicated to the school’s World War I dead.

Eighty years and \$8.1 million later, the gymnasium was transformed into the Hansen Student Center. A gift from Tom O. Hansen ’82 spearheaded the renovation and the gift of time and skill from David Bentley gave the entrance its “wow” factor.

Bentley (shown above left) spent months flat-backed on a scaffold painting the architecturally ornate ceiling in tones of dark and lime-green, dark red, gold, silver, and shades of beige.

Bentley, a Twin Cities native, operates Bloomington-based Commercial and Industrial Coatings, Inc. He had long felt a fondness toward IWU. He and his wife, Tara, were married at Evelyn Chapel.

The original renovation plan was to simply paint over the gym’s original plastered ceiling, with its many recessed square panels. Bentley’s colorful vision was deemed desirable but too expensive. No problem. Bentley volunteered to do the project, a labor of love that he dedicated to his son, Devyn.

A spot of wisdom

Around 1935, a Bible monument was erected east of Buck Memorial Library. The inscription, from the Biblical book of James, chapter one, verse five, reads, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.”

In the 1970s, a surrounding Bible garden was built, modeled most likely after the Biblical Gardens at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. The garden included a sidewalk lined with shrubs, trees, and a variety of plants. Each type of plant was mentioned in the Bible.

IWU Groundsman Art Killian says the Bible garden, “was a great idea but too labor intensive (to maintain).” Now this shady spot is filled with hearty, albeit non-Biblical, hostas. But, says Killian, a few of the original plants such as flowering quince, grapes, and a boxwood tree continue to thrive.



Because of its relatively secluded location, the Bible Garden (above) has been a popular spot for students to steal a romantic moonlit kiss — or even to propose marriage.