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McCLOY, William Ashby

Fountain flows from sculptor

By Michelle Lodge Day Staff Writer

MONTVILLE -- William A. McCloy doesn't think of himself as a typical artist, although he has spent much of his life sculpting, painting and teaching art. So when he shed his artist's smock recently to install his fountain sculpture at the Public Library of New London, he nonchalantly became plumber, handyman and philanthropist.

For McCloy, 66, of 430 Kitemaug Rd., Uncasville, it was a labor of love. He agreed to do the sculpture for free as long as he had a certain amount of freedom. The sculpture is attached to a wall at the library's front entrance on Huntington Street. The Gruskin family is giving the library the sculpture in honor of the late Isser Gaskin, a New London attorney. A dedication ceremony is planned Sept. 29.

"The stipulation was that it wouldn't cost me anything," said McCloy, a retired professor from Connecticut College and a noted artist. "I'd rather do something that I am interested in. How many chances do you get to do this without it costing anything?"

McCloy is yet to figure out the plumbing on the bronze-cast sculpture. He and a city crew recently brought the massive piece from his home to rest on New Hampshire granite taken from the same quarry as the stone on the exterior of the library.

The two major themes of the sculpture are New London's commercial and literary backgrounds – whales and water representing seafaring tradition intertwined with a book symbolizing education. McCloy feels some observers may mistake the whale with its sharp teeth with a shark but says he got that idea from an early depiction of Jonah and the Whale.

Several people stopped McCloy to ask whether the piece has been there all along. "Actually, I take it as a complement," says McCloy. "That is suggesting that belongs to the building."

During the recent hot spell, a group of teen-age boys congregated outside the library in the morning questioning McCloy about his work. "They would say 'what does this mean, man?'" explained McCloy. "And I'd just answer their questions."

Recently an elderly man stopped by to ask McCloy for an interpretation.

"It's kind of a symbol of the character and history of New London," McCloy told him. He seemed to be satisfied. He said "Thank you very much" and walked away.



Despite his acclaim in art, McCloy didn't start out as an artist. Following his natural athletic abilities and his family's teaching background, he started out as a physical education teacher. His father was an internationally-known physical education leader and worked for the YMCA in Nanking, China until the artist was 13.

Realizing his natural talent, his mother scrimped and saved enough money to send her son on a European tour of the world's art centers in 1985.

"It was not a joyous adventure," he said. "No Bohemian adventure. I was there for business."

For about 20 years his life pretty much followed his philosophy of not staying in any place for more than four years. From the University of Iowa, he went to Wisconsin, from Wisconsin into the Army and then back to the Midwest. His four-year professorship at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada proved so satisfying from the cultural standpoint that he was reluctant to leave.

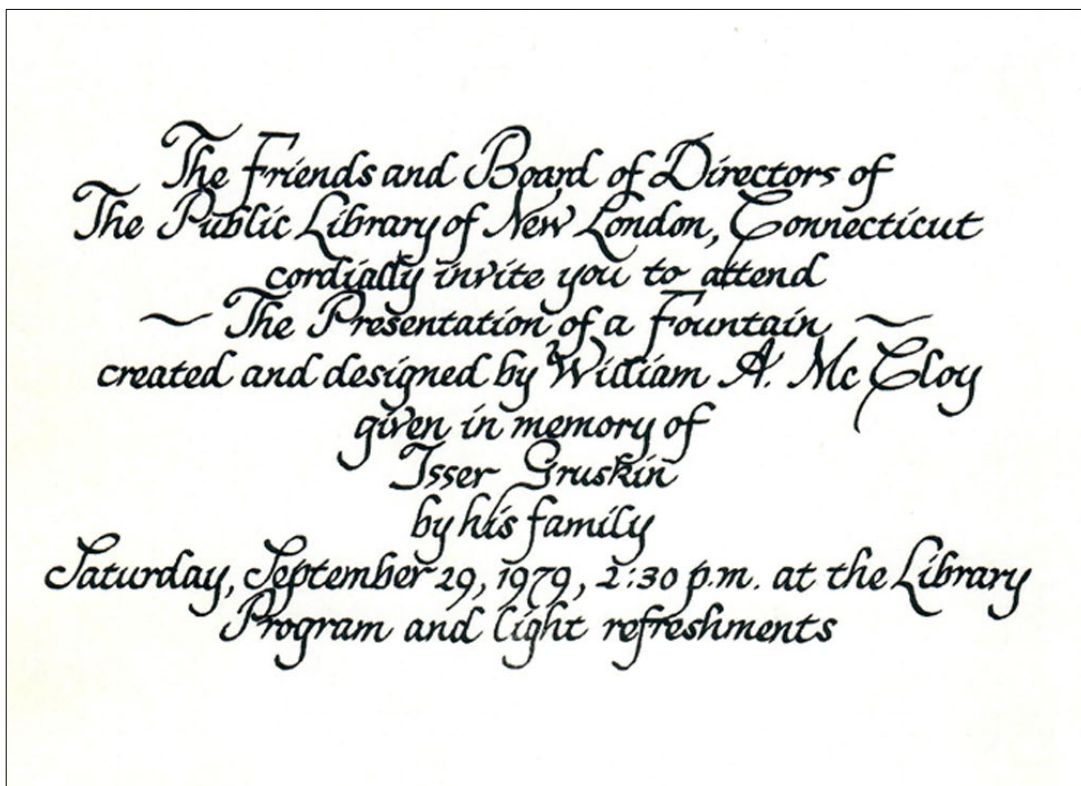
But after four years, he decided either to become a Canadian citizen or move back to the United States. It was then he came to Connecticut College where he served as a chairman of the art department for 18 years. He retired last year.

"It was a hard decision to teach in women's college in a fairly conservative community," said McCloy. One plus to the area, he said, was the proximity to two major art centers – New York and Boston.

Reflecting on his early years McCloy, tongue-in-cheek, wonders why he got interested in art.

As a youngster in China, he won an art award, but it wasn't until later when he took an art course that his interest bloomed. The course entailed drawing only cats. "Nine hours of drawing cats is enough is enough to make anyone give up art," he concluded jokingly.

But he stuck with it.



Gruskin fountain dedicated in New London

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Attorney Samuel Gruskin spoke Saturday at the dedication of a 15-foot bronze sculpture presented to the Public Library of New London in memory of his brother.



Isser Gruskin, an attorney and prominent resident. William McCloy, professor emeritus of Connecticut College, who did the sculpture, and Mildred Gruskin, wife of the late attorney, are at left.

The sculpture is near the library's Huntington Street entrance. Mrs. Gruskin spoke about influence libraries had on her husband as an immigrant boy. McCloy said the sculpture's theme reflects New London's history.

History of the Sculpture

Information Courtesy of Andrew Lopez, Research Support Librarian and Government Documents Coordinator, Charles E. Shain Library, Connecticut College

Leading up to the sculpture's installation and subsequent dedication planned for September 29, 1979, McCloy worked as sculptor, plumber, handyman, and philanthropist. Though it seems the plumbing was never properly installed as the fountain may have always leaked.

The sculpture was planned as a gift of the Gruskin family to the Public Library of New London in memory of the late Isser Gruskin, an attorney and prominent city resident. Isser's widow, Mildred Gruskin, and his brother, attorney Samuel Gruskin, spoke at the dedication ceremony at the public library about the influence of libraries on Isser as an immigrant boy.

McCloy, then 66, said the plan for the sculpture was that it wouldn't cost him anything. He brought the sculpture from his home in Uncasville to the library, where it rests on the same New Hampshire granite as the stone exterior of the library.

McCloy also said the sculpture has two main themes: New London's commercial and literary history — whales and water represent the seafaring tradition intertwined with a book symbolizing education. The whale's sharp teeth should not be mistaken for those of a shark.

During installation, McCloy said passersby stopped to ask him about the meaning of the sculpture.

“It's kind of a symbol of the character and history of New London,” McCloy told him. He seemed to be satisfied. He said “Thank you very much” and walked away.