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Fountain flows from sculptor

By Michelle Lodge
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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 Road, 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 Gruskin, 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 noted artist. "I'd rather do something I was interested in. How many chances do you get to do this without it costing you anything?"

McCloy has 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 the seafaring tradition intertwined with a book symbolizing education. McCloy feels some observers may mistake the whale with its sharp teeth for a shark but says he got that idea from an early depiction of Jonah and the Whale.

Several people have stopped McCloy to ask whether the piece has been there all along.

"Actually, I take it as a compliment," said McCloy. "That is suggesting that it 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'd say 'what does this mean, man?'" explained McCloy. "And I'd just answer their questions."

More recently, an elderly man stopped by to ask McCloy for an interpretation.

"Well, 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 to be an artist.

Following his natural athletic abilities and his family's teaching background, he started out to be 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 1935.

"It was no joyous adventure," he said. "No Bohemian adventure. I was there for business."

For about the next 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 a cultural standpoint that he was reluctant to leave.

But after four years, he decided to either become a Canadian citizen or



William McCloy and fountain

(Day photo)

move back to the United States. It was then he came to Connecticut College where he served as 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 to make anyone give up art," he concluded jokingly.

But he stuck with it.