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 anyone 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 1831.

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 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

A Gem of Art

December 4, 1856

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.

by Robin Grant