

PIERRE BOURDELLE - An All-American Artist

In the selection of Pierre Van Parys Bourdelle (1901-1966), a naturalized citizen of the United States; interior decorators of the *SS AMERICA* found an artist who could see the vessel's namesake nation from the unique perspective of a new American. What he found in his adopted land was a newness, a vitality, and much natural beauty. He believed that Americans should not search for their artistic roots in Europe, rather they should look at the natural beauty at home, and in the art and culture of Native Americans.

By virtue of his talent, hard work and inventiveness, Pierre established himself as one of the top muralists in the United States. He built a reputation as one of the outstanding pioneers in creating contemporary art, utilizing unique materials and invoking imaginative response to spatial challenges. His murals could be seen at the Texas Centennial, The New York World's Fair, the presidential palace in Haiti, onboard over a dozen steamships and in the domed cars of the Great Northern Railway. Creating art from diverse material became a family trademark for over seven generations. "It was a tradition in our family that each succeeding generation should do something different, even though we were all artists. If one generation worked in stone, the next turned to wood."

His father, Emile Antoine Bourdelle, was a noted French sculptor, and shared a studio with another, even more famous sculptor, Rodin (creator of *The Thinker*). It was in their studio that a very young Pierre started work as an apprentice, learning from the great masters how to handle plaster, wood and marble. His creative prospective would be enriched by his travels with his father to study classic Greek sculpture, and by journeying through Europe with Rodin, delving into the lore of Gothic Cathedrals. In 1916, at the age of only 15, he joined the Aviation Branch of the French Army, where he served two and a half years in World War I; suffering severe hearing loss when his fighter plane crashed. After the Great War, Pierre continued his studies at the world-famous Sorbonne in Paris in 1921.

Pierre Bourdelle immigrated to the United States from France in 1927; first working as an artist in a New York City-based architectural firm. There he learned how to create art for buildings within the constraints of material specifications, fire

insurance regulations, and building codes. He worked with such diverse mediums as concrete, Linoleum-and-lacquer (his own discovery), plaster, granite, limestone, Lucite, clay, canvas, Plexiglas, glass, and various metals. His early works in America included a painting for the famed Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station.

Pierre Bourdelle's crowning achievement came late in the 1930's, in the form of twenty-six lacquered Linoleum panels that enveloped the majestic main dining room of the *SS AMERICA*



This art medium, which he perfected, came about as a response to the challenges he faced in previous commissions to produce art work that would cover large areas at a reasonable cost and have the ability to withstand the elements. He was never satisfied with what he had accomplished and was constantly experimenting, looking for a medium that was reasonable in cost and could survive pencil marks, vandalism and the assaulting elements. He tried mosaic, but found it too expensive; likewise, painting on glass proved too fragile. His final experiment was with Linoleum, and there he found a medium that had no grain, was strong, and could be obtained and carved at reasonable cost. His first test was for the New York World's Fair.

"There I produced an outdoor mural on which people had to walk with gravel on their shoes. After two years the mural was still not obliterated. Next I tried the medium in Haiti where there are quick twenty percent temperature changes, say from seventy to ninety degrees. The mural remained undamaged. Then I kept a similar piece of work on the roof for two years. The lacquer checked slightly, but nothing was obliterated, nor did storage in a wet basement cause disintegration."

The expressed theme for the *AMERICA*'s interiors was 'fresh and stimulating, and essentially American in body and spirit'. The challenge that was presented by the main (appropriately named *The American*) dining saloon was formidable; a space that spanned the entire ninety-plus foot width of the vessel, and was equally as large fore-and-aft, and extended two decks high, seating 348 passengers in opulent luxury. A fresh and stimulating, essentially American medium – hand-carved lacquered Linoleum – was selected. Scenes essentially American in body and spirit – depicting the flora and fauna of the United States – were executed in huge murals. And the embodiment of that truly-American, truly unique experience – the creativity of talented immigrants celebrating America the Beautiful – happily resulted in the selection of Pierre Bourdelle to apply his own unique brand of artistry to the *AMERICA*'s interior.

His personal challenge in this assignment was to combine beauty, size and durability. Described as 'one of the most extensive artistic projects ever created for an American ship', the Bourdelle murals covered some 1,632 square feet of space. Pierre developed a pattern of work that required him to sit directly upon his creations in his Long Island City studio. After sketching in pencil directly on a large sheet of commercial grade Linoleum, and following its softening via the use of heat lamps; he would carve each mural panel's base material with a sharp, stubby chisel. Finished carvings were smoothed, chemically cleaned and lacquered. Color highlights were added, using a wide variety of techniques and each resultant creation had simonized automobile wax applied by hand; then very practically polished by utilizing a commercial floor buffer. Pierre journeyed to the shipyard in Newport News, Virginia in 1940 to personally deliver, then supervise the installation of his creations in the nation's newest, largest, finest passenger liner of the pre-war era.

The ultimate test of the durability of his work would come over fifty years later, when the former luxury liner that held his most extensive works of carved Linoleum art lay broken open just off the rocky shores of Fuerteventura Island. Several of his panels (including one entitled 'Alaska') would survive that ordeal and end up in the hands of an islander who salvaged them from the wreck site.

Shortly after the installation of his murals in The American Dining Room, Hitler invaded France. Pierre Bourdelle gave up the safe and secure life of a recognized and respected artist in America to return to his native land once more. Described as both personally and intellectually brave, he slipped un-noticed into France to work with the French Resistance. He parachuted behind enemy lines and was eventually captured by the Gestapo. After a daring escape, he returned to volunteer for regular army duty, but he was rejected as too old and deaf. Not one to ever take no for an answer, he sold all his art work and equipment, and purchased an ambulance which he drove for the American Field Service. He served out the war with the Foreign Legion and the British 8th Army in North Africa.

At the end of the World War II, Pierre returned to his adopted country, and – one last time - to the *AMERICA* as she lay alongside a pier at the Newport News shipyard. Here, he helped restore his massive, multiple murals while the liner-turned-troopship was being refurbished in 1946 for peacetime service. Pierre then established both residence and studio on Long Island, and went on to create new works of art, which would continue to earn him critical acclaim for their striking design and execution.

Pierre spent the last eight years of his life on Long Island as artist-in-residence at C.W. Post College, where he was one of the prime movers in the shaping of the college's art department. One of his last creations was a futuristic mural for the Nuclear Ship *Savannah*, placed in service in 1962. He died suddenly in Geneva, Switzerland on July 5, 1966 near the beginning of a trip intended to introduce his then-teenage daughter and son to the continent of his birth and artistic inspiration. His ashes are interred in the soil of his adopted nation, within sight of Long Island Sound.

Unwittingly, the interior decorators of *AMERICA* had selected an artist whose story is as interesting - as diverse and as inspiring - as that of the ocean liner they collectively turned into an enduring example of all- American artistic accomplishment.

Written by Larry Driscoll and Bill Lee, with thanks for significant contributions by Pierre's only offspring; Stephanie Ruth and Peter Anthony Bourdelle.