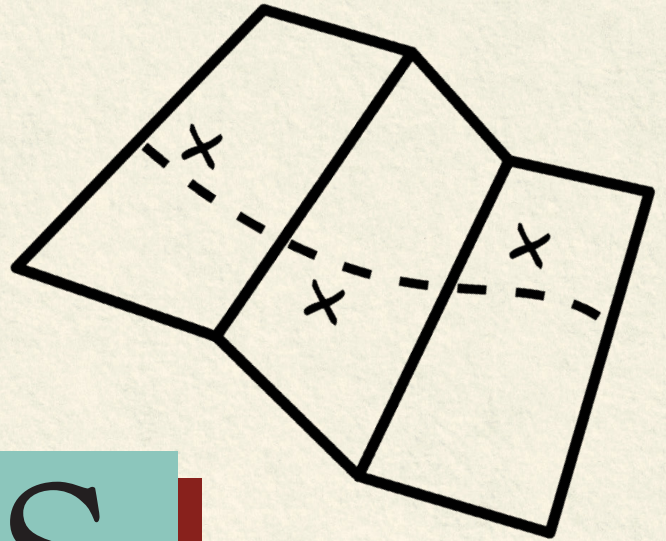


# SIDE

# TOURS



Visit a Foundry: What are they  
bronzing now?



Who (and why) did we start putting  
up statues in so many public squares?





# VISIT

# A FOUNDRY

A lot of time, thought and money goes into crafting a bronzed statue for a public square. Travel with me behind-the-scenes to one of the most established foundries in the United States to see first-hand all that goes into building such permanent memorials and what are they casting now.



## Building a Bronze Statue The New Arts Foundry, Baltimore

It starts soft, with clay, in the hands of a creator with a story to tell.

Let's set aside that there are dozens of types of clay and just focus on the red and grey clays common in potters' shops.

The heavy material feels so resistant to nuance and flair.

But place just one small piece in the hand and a childlike energy fills your fingertips. You want to press, fold, squish. Even after you put it back down on a table, the earthy wetness clings to the skin. You long to pick it up again.

Artists always remark on the first time they worked with the medium, what a rush they felt as they played with three dimensions



instead of a flat screen or canvas. There's a roundness to the form that makes it ideal for rendering the human figure in all of its complexity. They rarely want to return to paints or photography.

Alumina, silica, quartz, metal oxides, water. Always water.

But to move a creation from clay to bronze, the artist must next embrace wax.

Gary, owner of the New Arts Foundry in Baltimore for more than forty years, agrees to give me a tour and starts with a wax mold of a horse about a foot long encased in white plaster. All about the room hot wax has dried and left complex drip patterns on big barrels, tables, shelves, walls.

His thick hands take the plaster top off to reveal a horse rendered in astonishing detail in red wax. When put back into the case, there's a large opening at the top where they can pour the bronze into the mold at temperatures reaching 2000 degrees, obviously melting the wax but replacing it with the metal.

"It's like a photograph; the original makes a negative that you then use to make a positive," he explains. As we walk slowly about the large room, he reminds me of the actor Jimmy Stewart, tall, languid, warm. "The molds are the negative, the castings the positive."



I love that the narrative must flip before it can be fully realized, just as most Americans must tune out what they think they know to truly tune into what they need to learn about each other.

We move to a space behind the big shelves where a young woman with cropped bleached hair works to remove any sign of seams on a wax horse. Body parts are scattered everywhere—lower legs, ears, a hoof. I spy sections for another project all encased in white plaster with identifying marks in black ink: Darista armless torso; Darista head. For larger installations they must build the pieces then assembly on location.

When Gary moves me into the room with the furnace and a keg-sized contraption that a man in a heavy silver protective suit uses to pour the heated metal into a mold, I notice the box of sand for cooling and a lab-like box with special gloves that a worker uses to sand blast some finishing touches. For now, the furnace is quiet; the room feels small and cluttered. But in a video Gary shows me, it's clear that when the barrel gets hot, the entire foundry must be very awake and on its game.



I do not enter the last room where a six-foot statue of a local judge from Baltimore County sits ready for delivery, because as an asthmatic I can sense the particulate matter in the area. The employee in this room has on a heavy mask, just as the man in the plaster room, which was entirely encased in white like a New England tool shed after an ice storm. Remarkably, the entire process has changed very little in hundreds of years.

A quiet middle-aged man with glasses comes by carrying a wax figure. It's Toby Mendez, an accomplished sculptor, who did the bronze statues for Baltimore's baseball stadium at Camden Yards of players like Cal Ripken Jr., as well as other well-known installations, such as the Thurgood Marshall memorial in Annapolis, Maryland, and a six-foot statue of Gandhi in Long Island. He's checking on the judge, his creation, among other things.

I ask Gary if he's seen any big changes in the last 40 years of what artists or organizations want cast into bronze?

"More sports figures now and more commemorative figures for African Americans," he tells me. Later, I see the foot-long wax piece Toby was carrying on a table: an African American man in a Tuskegee Airman's uniform.

“We are not critics” Gary assures me. They take whatever business comes to the door. Casting anything into bronze is prohibitively expensive.

Back in the main office where his wife Judy mans a spare desk in an equally spare office, I see posters of statues on the wall produced by the foundry over the years. One that catches my eye commemorates African American soldiers that fought in the Civil War that now stands at Howard University in Washington, DC. The date: 1999.

The war ended in 1865. An estimated 180,000 African Americans fought in that war. That’s one slow timeline to commemoration.

My friend and personal guide, Susan Mcelhinney, and Judy begin chatting about the Fearless Girl, a bronze sculpture by Kristen Visbal of a young sassy girl with her hands on her hips commissioned by State Street Global Advisors and cast in this foundry. When placed opposite the famous bull of Wall Street, it transformed that looming, powerful image into something else, Judy says.

“Now the bull was a bully, right?”

A bronze facing another bronze creating a new narrative.

Judy reflects a bit then mentions that something similar happened to the iconic black jockey statues holding a lantern by the door once so common on American lawns. Now considered a racist symbol, they were “once used to help run-away slaves find their way along the Underground Railroad.”

Cast in metal, their meaning shifted like clay, melted like wax, with the complex culture of race in America applying the heat.

