

IN RETROSPECT

## THE PICCIRILLI BROTHERS

By Rose Fredrick. Photography courtesy of Eduardo Montes-Bradley

The 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago launched the City Beautiful movement, arguably one of the greatest renaissance periods for sculpture and architecture in America. For the next several decades, cities across the US embraced the notion that beauty could promote harmony and civic pride. As a result, many parks, buildings, and monuments constructed in this period are, to this day, iconic calling cards for cities across our country.

This renaissance was made possible by a trinity of essential collaborators: architects, sculptors, and artisans. The names of the architects and sculptors are enshrined with their work, but not the names of the artisans. Filmmaker Eduardo Montes-Bradley's new documentary, *The Piccirilli Factor*, calls attention to a family of artisans whose impact on American cities was literally monumental. We caught up with Montes-Bradley to learn more about the most famous carvers most Americans have never heard of.



Left to right: Getulio, Furio, Massaniello, Attilio, Horatio, and Ferruccio

### ARTIST OR ARTISAN?

"I stumbled upon the Piccirilli brothers by accident," Montes-Bradley says. "I was making a film about Daniel Chester French and the Piccirilli brothers kept coming up."

It was while interviewing Michael Richman, co-editor for the Daniel Chester French papers, that Montes-Bradley

first heard that there had been, for centuries, a distinction between the sculpture's "designer" and the sculpture's "carver," a distinction that we don't make today because sculptors generally do both design and carving.

Standing in front of French's maquette for the Lincoln Memorial, Richman implored the filmmaker to touch the

Facing page: Attilio with *The Wave*



model. “This is where the spirit of culture lives,” Montes-Bradley realized in that moment. “Michael taught me that the original concept is almost a godlike calling. The artist designs from mud, in a biblical sense, right? And that is very important. But it’s not more important than the action carried out by the sculptor carvers, who turned that concept into a monument.”

That’s when it occurred to him that he was asking the wrong questions. He’d never, for example, wondered how French could have carved all those monuments by himself. He went back and looked more closely at formal photographs of French and noticed the artist always held the tools of his trade—tools for modeling clay—never a chisel.

So, why, Montes-Bradley wondered, weren’t carvers given equal billing? More importantly, if French couldn’t possibly have carved all those monuments, who did?

## MANUFACTURING

Thomas Jefferson loved Italian art and architecture. His home, Monticello, was inspired by Andrea Palladio, an Italian architect whose work and writings Jefferson had been studying for years. Jefferson’s devotion to Italian ideals is evident throughout the Virginia State Capitol, as well as the US Capitol. But stone carving was not an American art—woodworking was the preferred craft. So, Jefferson went to the source and brought over Italian artisans.

Around this time, American artists were traveling to Rome and Florence to study art. “Italy was a magnet for young artists,” Montes-Bradley says. “Not only from the United States, but from England, France, Germany, Austria, and Russia. Young artists would go to laboratories—that’s what they call the carving studios—and stay in residencies to learn. Daniel Chester French was one of them.”

After his studies, French, like many American sculptors, began taking on commissions that he would model in the US, then take to Italy where he would employ carvers to sculpt his modeled work—French was the artist, Italian artisans were the manufacturers. “I have photographs of laboratories in Florence where monuments and busts of Confederate soldiers were being made,” Montes-Bradley says. “They were not necessarily being made here.”

## ITALY

The Piccirilli brothers, Ferruccio (1864-1945), Attilio (1866-1945), Furio (1868-1949), Massaniello (1870-1954), Horatio (1872-1954), and Getulio (1874-1945), were born and raised in Massa, Italy, near Carrara, in Tuscany. Their father, Giuseppe (1844-1910), was a highly trained stone sculptor who brought his six sons into the family business. Attilio and Furio studied at the prestigious Academy of San Luca in Rome. The remaining four brothers studied locally.

Life in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century was a struggle. The country had just come through a civil war. Famine, high inflation, and lack of work drove nearly fourteen million people out of the country; five million came to the United States. Though the Piccirilli had work in Italy, news of the construction boom in London lured Attilio and Furio to try their hand there. They met Thomas Garner, lead architect working on the renovation of Saint Paul’s Cathedral, and soon landed work carving angels and liturgical high reliefs. But New York City, the brothers kept hearing, was the true mecca for art and architecture.

By Christmas of 1887, the family reunited in the United Kingdom, boarded a ship out of Liverpool, and sailed to America, docking in New York the spring of 1888.

“I think this was a big moment in American art history,” Montes-Bradley says. “Because until that point, American sculptors needed to go to Florence and Rome to have their works executed. With the large migration of Italian artisans that came in the mid- to late-1880s—the Piccirilli brothers were certainly not the only ones—now American architects and sculptors were afforded the possibility of building faster and cheaper.”

The Piccirilli wasted no time in setting up their studio in Midtown Manhattan, where they hung out their shingle: “Piccirilli Brothers Carving, a Marble Carving Studio.”

“Now, there is another “aha!” moment here,” Montes-Bradley says. “This is when Daniel Chester French walks for the first time into the studio of the Piccirilli brothers.”

As the story goes, French needed to deliver a bust to a client. He went to see the American carver he’d been using but that sculptor was too busy and told French to go see the Italians. “This is how the conversation must have taken



place,” Montes-Bradley believes. “Daniel Chester French said, “Which Italians?” And the carver said, “The Italians on 39th and 6th.” The minute that Daniel Chester French walked into their studio, his mind must have gone crazy. Suddenly, he saw himself transported back to Florence.”

## BOOM TIMES

By this point, the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893 had ignited the City Beautiful movement, and the Italians had more work than they could handle. The Piccirilli moved to the Bronx where they bought land and built studios and living space.

“Their studio became like a labyrinth of rooms and galleries,” Montes-Bradley explains. “And if you were a sculptor, they would say, ‘Oh, come on over. This room is for you.’ The sculptor would head over and the Piccirilli would provide support and advice. You might see Paul Bartlett, Frederick MacMonnies, Daniel Chester French, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, all the great names parading to the Bronx to collaborate with the Piccirilli.”

In the trilogy of architects, sculptors, and artisans, the Piccirilli had become an indispensable part of the equation. Montes-Bradley says, “They had a very long table in the kitchen, and they cooked spaghetti and had wine and things



Top: Piccirilli studio

Middle: Piccirilli studio, Midtown Manhattan

Bottom: Marble workshop of the Piccirilli Brothers, New York, NY





Top: Enrico Caruso  
Middle: Exterior the Leonardo de Vinci Art School  
Bottom: In the classroom

that at the time were distinctly part of the Italian way of life. They would discuss the physics and the poetry of sculpture in the context of the work being created. And of course, sculptors would continue showing up to supervise the work and to give their final approval.”

And not only sculptors showed up at the Piccirilli studios. Enrico Caruso, the great Italian tenor, often visited and sang for the brothers. Teddy Roosevelt sat at their table and ate spaghetti with the family, as did Thomas Edison. Fiorello La Guardia was a regular. In fact, it was at the Piccirilli’s table that he launched his campaign for mayor of New York, which the family helped fund. La Guardia returned the favor by supporting Attilio’s dream of opening the Leonardo da Vinci Art School with the mission of giving immigrants the opportunity to study art.

### ONE FOR ALL, ALL FOR ONE

What set the Piccirilli apart from other Italian carvers was their distribution of the work. If a sculptor came in with an issue, the brothers solved it together, each brother bringing his own area of expertise to the situation. Attilio was recognized as the leading creative force in the family and was known for his three-dimensional figurative works. Furio specialized in animals and bas reliefs. Horatio excelled in ornamental architectural features. Getulio, a disciplined carver, focused on business; he wrote contracts, negotiated leases, and invested the family’s money wisely in real estate. Massaniello, who went by his American name, Thomas, was best with delicate bas relief work. So talented was he that when Teddy Roosevelt wanted several panels for the remodeled East Wing of the White House, it was Thomas who did the work. Ferruccio, also a brilliant carver, was the brother who learned to speak English without a heavy accent and so was the one who attended public functions at the American Club on behalf of the family.

And though each brother excelled in one area or another, they were always of one mind and spirit. Attilio, toward the end of his life, famously stated, “Make no mistake, we’re six brothers, but we are we, never I. We are we.”

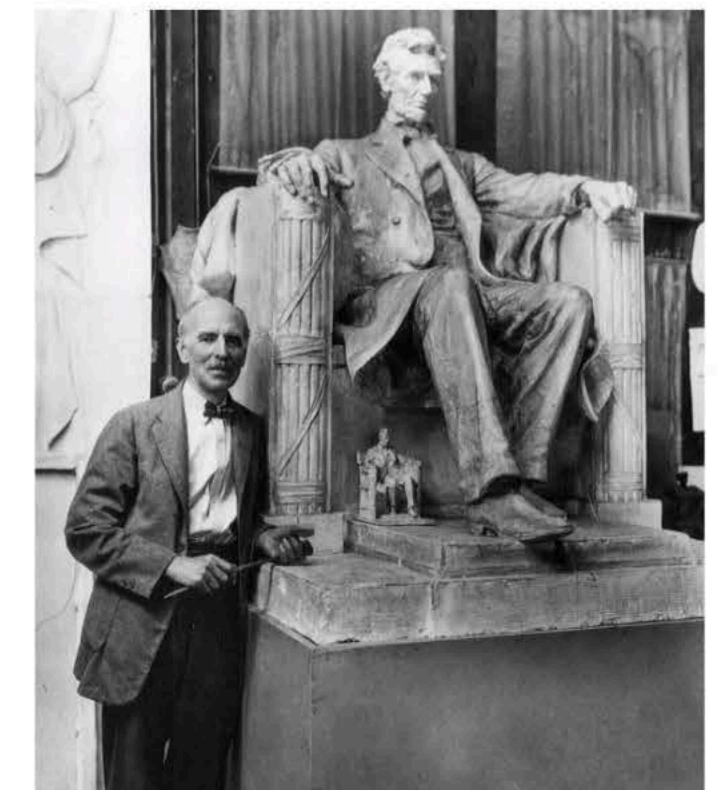
### THE LINCOLN MEMORIAL

It is estimated that the Piccirilli brothers carved some 900 sculptures (see sidebar for abbreviated list). Of all those works, the Lincoln Memorial is perhaps the most famous work that almost no one knows was carved by the Piccirilli.



Designed by architect Henry Bacon and modeled by French, the massive stone sculpture of Lincoln, solitary and contemplative, sits beneath the inscription, “In this temple, as in the hearts of the people for whom he saved the union, the memory of Abraham Lincoln is enshrined forever.”

The Piccirilli’s influence on that memorial, however, didn’t begin and end with the carving of the twenty-eight blocks of white Georgia marble; the brothers decided to use marble for a specific reason. “Attilio knew that Georgia marble was



Top: Lincoln Memorial during construction  
Left: Georgia marble quarry  
Bottom: Daniel Chester French with model of the Lincoln Memorial





quarried by the descendants of slaves freed by Lincoln,” Montes-Bradley says. “He had a political conscience, which is extraordinary.”

Each block of marble was carved with precision in the Piccirilli’s Bronx studio and transported to Washington, D.C., where they were assembled perfectly. And, according to Montes-Bradley, French specified in writing that it was the Piccirilli who carved, sanded, and buffed the monument, and did the lettering. Despite French’s attempts to add their name to the memorial, authorities in Washington at the time refused to add the names of Italians to a memorial for Abraham Lincoln.

#### AMERICAN SOIL

After the Lincoln Memorial was completed, Ferruccio and Furio moved back to Italy and managed the Italian side of the business there. The four brothers who remained were hired in 1916 to create nearly 500 sculptures for the Riverside Church. With the help of several assistants, the brothers completed the sculptures in two years’ time.

Other commissions poured in and took the brothers across the country from Chicago to New Orleans, San Diego to Philadelphia. Amid all that work, Attilio and Furio also managed to create outstanding work for themselves.

Inspired by his work on figures for the Bronx Zoo, Furio carved *The Seal*, which he sculpted in Italy and sent to the National Academy of Design exhibition in 1929. It won the Speyer Memorial Prize for best representation of an animal in painting or sculpture. “That was a big deal,” Thayer Tolles, curator of sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said. “And Daniel Chester French, who by then had brought together this really representative collection of American sculpture, wanted that piece for the Met. It really says everything about Furio as an artist; it’s naturalistic but stylized.”

Gallerist and author Joel Rosenkranz points to seven nudes sculpted by Attilio as works that convey emotion and an awareness of modern movements in art. “He recognized that if you simplify the form, you universalize the subject,” Rosenkranz says, pointing out the graceful gesture of the hands in Attilio’s work on *Fragilina*, which resides in the Met. “That is not a stock standard treatment—it is very poetic and offers a balance to the simplified face.”

Facing page: *The Outcast*, Woodlawn Cemetery, NY



Top: *The Seal*, with Furio and Attilio  
Bottom: *Fragilina*, Metropolitan Museum of Art



IN MEMORY OF  
OUR ONLY BELOVED SON  
ENSIGN NATHAN Q. F. PICCIRILLI  
WHO MADE THE SUPREME SACRIFICE  
FOR HIS COUNTRY AT THE BATTLE  
OF ORMAC BAY, PHILIPPINE ISLANDS  
ON DECEMBER 7, 1944





*Mother and Child*, by Attilio Piccirilli, Woodlawn Cemetery, NY

Art historian Susan Olsen suggests that the Piccirilli's personal work created for friends may be some of their most important. In particular, she mentions the monument for Edward Laning, muralist for the New York Library, as well as the bas relief for longtime friend, Fiorello La Guardia, after he lost his wife and young son. Another poignant sculpture by Attilio, *The Outcast*, sits in a quiet part of the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. Carved in marble, *The Outcast* depicts a young man with his head buried in his arms that are wrapped tightly around himself as if in agony. The emotionally wrought figure, in Montes-Bradley's thinking, seems to communicate Attilio's own sense of not belonging anywhere—no longer in Italy and not fully in America.

When their mother died in 1911 while traveling in Italy, Attilio brought her body back to New York and had her buried at Woodlawn Cemetery. For her grave, he sculpted the figure of a mother comforting her young child. When asked what makes a foreign-born citizen an American, Attilio responded, "I worked here and succeeded here and took the oath of allegiance here. But it is when you bury the one you loved in the country's soil that you realize you belong to that soil forever."

#### THE END OF AN ERA

On June 10, 1940, Italy declared war on England and France. In December of the following year, Germany and Italy declared war on the US. Suddenly the Piccirilli family was a house divided. Nephews living in the US fought for the Americans; those in Italy fought for Mussolini. In December 1944, Horatio's son, Nathan was killed in the Philippines fighting for the US. Devastated, Attilio had *The Outcast* moved to his nephew's gravesite in Woodlawn Cemetery.



*Perhaps that is the only possible rule for success for an artist: Not to think of work in terms of money but opportunity of joy.*

~Attilio Piccirilli

Here in the US, the war cast aspersions on Italians and Japanese. Financial support for the da Vinci school dried up, forcing the school to close. Then, in October 1945, Getulio died. One day later, Attilio died, and within days, Ferruccio was gone, too. Attilio, Getulio, Horatio, and Thomas are buried in the family's plot, unmarked but for a single sculpture representing all, in Woodlawn Cemetery. The remaining brothers retired and their studio quietly shuttered. Though memories of the Piccirilli faded over time, the beauty brought to American soil by six Italian brothers is an undeniable gift that lives on.

To learn more about *The Piccirilli Factor*, please visit: [www.montesbradley.com](http://www.montesbradley.com)

## VISIT WORKS BY THE PICCIRILLI BROTHERS

Unless noted as "carved by," the sculpture was designed, sculpted, and carved by the Piccirilli.

#### WASHINGTON, D.C.

*Lincoln Memorial*, Henry Bacon architect, Daniel Chester French sculptor, carved by Piccirilli Brothers Marble Carving Studio  
The White House East Wing, bas relief panels by Massaniello (Thomas) Piccirilli  
*Present Day Postman*, US Post Office, by Attilio Piccirilli  
*Eagle*, Federal Reserve Board Eccles Building, by Attilio, Furio, and Getulio Piccirilli  
*Guglielmo Marconi Memorial*, by Attilio Piccirilli

#### VIRGINIA

*USS Maine Memorial*, Arlington National Cemetery, by Attilio, Furio, and Massaniello (Thomas) Piccirilli  
*Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe*, Virginia State Capitol, by Attilio Piccirilli

#### NEW YORK

*Four Continents and Twelve Allegorical Figures*, US Customs House, designed by Daniel Chester French, carved by Piccirilli Brothers

*New York Stock Exchange Pediment*, designed by Paul Wayland Bartlett and Quincy Adam Ward, carved by Getulio Piccirilli

*The Coronation of Christ the King*, memorial to Cornelius Vanderbilt II, St. Bartholomew's Church, designed by Daniel Chester French, carved by Attilio Piccirilli

The Morgan Library and Museum, designed by Edward Porter, carved by Piccirilli  
*Lionesses, Medallions, Mural*

Woodlawn Cemetery, NY  
*The Outcast, Eduardo Ferrari Fontana Memorial, Josef Stránský Memorial*, all by Attilio Piccirilli

Metropolitan Museum of Art  
*The Children of Jacob H. Schiff*, Piccirilli Brothers from the Augustus Saint-Gaudens' bronze  
*Fragilina: Variant of a Soul*, carved by Attilio Piccirilli  
*Seal* by Furio Piccirilli

Brooklyn Museum cornice  
*Indian Lawgiver and Indian Literature*, by Attilio Piccirilli

#### NEW YORK, CONTINUED

New York Public Library  
*Patience and Fortitude*, designed by Edward Clark Potter, sculpted by Piccirilli Brothers

Washington Square, designed by Stanford White, sculpted by Piccirilli Brothers  
*Arch* bas-relief panels and *George Washington*

Rockefeller Center  
*Youth Leading Industry*, cast in forty-five Pyrex glass blocks  
*Commerce and Industry with a Caduceus and Joy of Life*, by Attilio Piccirilli

Riverside Park  
*Firemen's Memorial*, designed by H. Van Buren, carved by Attilio Piccirilli

The Riverside Church  
500 sculptures for portal, atrium, and pulpit, by Horario, Attilio, and Ferruccio's son, Bruno

#### SACRAMENTO, CA

*California State Building Façade*, by Furio Piccirilli

#### MADISON, WI

*Wisconsin Capitol Pediment, Sapientia*, by Attilio and Furio Piccirilli

#### WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, CANADA

*Parliament Building*, by Furio Piccirilli

#### PENNSYLVANIA

State Capitol, designed by George Grey Barnard, carved by Piccirilli Brothers  
*The Burden of Life: The Broken Law, Love and Labor: The Unbroken Law*, and *Westinghouse Memorial*, Pittsburg, designed by Daniel Chester French and Paul Fjelde, architects Henry Hornbostel and Eric Fisher Wood, carved by Massaniello (Thomas) Piccirilli

Brookgreen Gardens, South Carolina  
*Candelabrum*, by Furio and Horatio Piccirilli

