Abram Belskie, Sculptor, and the Famous American Sculptors with Whom He Worked

Robert J. Demarest

Abram Belskie, a talented young Scottish immigrant landed in New York just as the Great Depression was getting underway. Fortunately, he found work with John Gregory, sculpting the panels for the new Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. His sculpting talent soon led him to Closter, NJ where he met and worked with many of the fine American sculptors of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. It was through one of these fine artists that he was introduced to Robert L. Dickinson with whom he produced his exceptional opus, the Birth of a Baby, in a series of life size sculptures (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Abram Belskie and Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson with their birth demonstration model. Photo: circa mid 1940's. Belskie Archives.*

I met Abram Belskie only once, in 1967, when I served on a committee to approve his design of the 200th Anniversary medallion for the College of Physicians & Surgeons. The medallion features a flying muse holding the torch of knowledge entwined with Aesculapius' serpent (Figure 2). On the reverse is a bas-relief of the entrance to the medical school, still unchanged from when I first entered that portal over 50 years ago.

Abram was a tall, gangly man. When I met him his soft voice was still tinged with a Scottish accent, despite his having lived in the U.S. for nearly forty years. He was born on March 24, 1907 in London, England, of Jewish parents who had emigrated from Russia. When still an infant, the family moved to Scotland. His father was a tailor and although he didn't speak English he soon found work in the Jewish owned tailor shops of Glasgow. Belskie described his family life as "comfortable, but poor."[1]

Abraham, as he was then known, was always interested in art and, when he went to school, it quickly became his favorite subject. He told of being fascinated by the street artists of Glasgow. Many of the sidewalks there were of slate and provided the perfect surface upon which to draw. Artists made marvelous use of this and as a result, the streets and bridges of the city were decorated with elaborate, if temporal, colored chalk pictures. Despite little encouragement from his parents, young Abraham knew early on that he was destined to become an artist. As paper was then very expensive, he, too, spent a great deal of time drawing on the sidewalks.[2]

Figure 2. *College of Physicians & Surgeons 200th Anniversary medallion, 1967 (2 ¾" in diameter). Photo: Robert Demarest, personal collection.*

[1] Transcript of interview with Abram Belskie in Belskie Museum Archives –1985
[2] ibid

In those days, most poor Glasgow children went only as far as sixth grade before leaving school to become an apprentice in a trade. Abraham's education was unusual in that he attended school until he was 15, receiving what he later referred to as an Intermediate Certificate. He then apprenticed to William McWhannel Petrie (1870-1937), a versatile artist who taught at the Glasgow School of Art for many years. He mostly cleaned the studio, however it was there he started to work in clay. The academic community soon recognized his extraordinary talent and he was awarded a scholarship that enabled him to pursue a degree at the Glasgow School of Art. He graduated in 1926, receiving at the same time *The John Keppie Traveling Scholarship*. It was the prize money from this scholarship that enabled him to undertake further study on the European continent. He spent six months traveling and studying in Paris, Florence, and Rome. In later years, Belskie spoke with reverence of having seen the *Holy of Holies* the Donatello and Michelangelo sculptures that previously he had only known from books. Upon his return to Glasgow, he opened his own studio, worked as an assistant to other sculptors such as Alexander Proudfoot and Archibald Dawson, both of whom were Head of Sculpture at the Glasgow School of Art at different times. Belskie later taught at the Glasgow School of Art as a temporary instructor.

Belskie, being Jewish, ran into prejudice as he tried to become established in Scotland.[3] This may have played a role in his desire to immigrate to America. At the age of 22, he obtained a visa, and leaving his childhood sweetheart behind, he set sail for America. He arrived in New York City on November 11, 1929, a few weeks after the Wall Street Crash, and just as the Great Depression was beginning. Fortunately, he found employment with the London born sculptor, John Gregory (1879-1958), who had a studio in New York City. Gregory had, in turn, worked with Paul Howard Manship (1885-1966). Many critics say that Manship's influence carried through into Belskie's sculpture (Figure 3). They point, in particular, to the stylized figures in his non-medical work (Figure 4).

Figure 3. *Group of Bears by Paul Howard Manship (1885-1966). Original cast in 1932, recast 1989 for Central Park, New York, NY. Photo: William Logan.*

Figure 4. *The First Chironian, in plaster, signed 1959. In Greek mythology, Chiron was the wisest of all the centaurs. This recommended him to the gods, who entrusted him to care for Aesculapius, the son of Apollo and a mortal woman. Chiron raised him and instructed him in the art of healing. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

[3] Transcript of interview with Abram Belskie in Belskie Museum Archives –1985
[4] ibid

When Belskie first knocked on Gregory's door, Gregory said he had no work, but he soon relented and hired Belskie for two or three days a week. Gregory said at the time, "I don't know what you can do…. but we have to change your name – make it more Kosher."[4] Gregory shortened Abraham to Abram, and although Beskie protested at first, he adopted his new name and kept it for the rest of his life. (Curiously, Gregory's insistence on this change was the opposite of God's action, as told in the book of Genesis – Genesis 17-5).

Belskie's employment picture improved when fate intervened in the guise of the Folger Shakespeare Library, then being planned for Washington D.C. Henry Clay Folger (who made his fortune in oil and was president and later chairman of the board of the Standard Oil of New York), along with his wife Emily, had been collecting Shakespeareana for a great many years. After amassing a vast collection of plays, playbills, books, and manuscripts, they decided to build a library to house their collection and make it available for all the American people. The respected architect, Paul Phillip Cret (well known for designing the Rodin Museum in Philadelphia, the Barnes Museum in Merion, Pa., and the Detroit Institute of Arts) was hired to design the new library. Cret commissioned Gregory to sculpt bas-relief panels depicting scenes from nine of Shakespeare's finest plays. It was a huge job, certainly too much for Gregory to handle on his own, so he asked Belskie for help. Together they created the bas-reliefs in Closter, New Jersey and transported the plaster originals by rail to Washington, D.C. There, local stone carvers recreated the work and they proudly grace the north face of the Folger Shakespeare Library (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *A Midsommer Nights Dreame Sculpted by John Gregory in early 1930's, assisted by Abram Belskie. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. Photo: Robert Demarest.*

Meanwhile Belskie hadn't forgotten his childhood sweetheart, Helen Atkinson, and, for months he ate mostly tuna fish and drank buttermilk to save enough money to bring her to America. A clerk at Center Street married them shortly after she arrived in New York in March of 1930. In 1931, with the Gregory/ Folger bas-reliefs now completed, Helen and Abram moved to Brook Street in Closter, New Jersey, where they would spend the next 58 years together.[5] It was here that Helen and Abram raised their two sons, Albert and Victor. Neither of the two boys followed their father into the art world.

Belskie soon found work with the master stone carver, Robert Alexander Baillie (1880-1961), whose old studio building is still extant in Closter (the Belskie museum now sits on what was once part of the Baillie property)[6] (Figure 6).

Figure 6. *This photograph was presented to Abram Belskie during the time he was working at the Robert Baillie studios. He had just finished working on L'Apres-Midi D'Un Faune by Bryant Baker (1881-1970). It was carved from Tennessee marble. It was installed in Brookgreen Gardens in 1934. From the left: Abram Belskie, Charles Semino (Baillie's assistant), and sculptor Robert Baillie. Photo: Belskie Museum Archives.*

[5] Coincidentally, Brook street runs into Demarest Avenue in Closter.
[6] Baillie once worked with Guzton Borglum, creator of Mount Rushmore, and is credited with teaching him the "ways of the chisel."

Figure 7. *Young Belskie with his Christ Child. This sculpture was the first Belskie sculpture to be publicly exhibited. It was placed in Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina in 1935. Photo: Belskie Museum Archives.*

Belskie worked in Closter throughout the 1930's, and it was during that time, while working in Baillie's studio, that he produced some of his greatest masterpieces, including *The Christ Child* (1933), now in the Brookgreen Gardens (Figure 7).

Baillie even allowed Belskie to utilize space in the studio to produce his own work. These were difficult years and jobs were scarce, but Belskie managed to get some carving work helping Malvina Hoffman and later, Sidney Waugh at the Closter studio. Hoffman (1887-1926) was an American sculptor and author, well known for her life size sculptures of people, was born in New York City. In 1910 she moved to Paris where, after persistent attempts, she finally succeeded in meeting Auguste Rodin. Her goal was to study with this master and he finally did agree to take her on as an apprentice. After a year, she returned to the United States to study human anatomy by dissection at Rodin's suggestion. Through a friend and faculty member she managed to secure permission to attend the anatomy dissection class at Columbia University's College of Physicians & Surgeons in New York, where she was the only woman in the class. Eventually, she convinced the medical school to offer a dissection class especially for artists.[7]

Hoffman is perhaps best known for her *Races of Man* sculptures, done for the Hall of Man at the Field Museum in Chicago. Stanley Field, nephew of Marshall Field,[8] one of the founders of the Marshall Field Department Store in Chicago underwrote the entire cost of this project. In 1930 Hoffman started work on the series and subsequently traveled all over the world looking for prototypical figures as models. Although she spent the next five years completing the series, only a portion of it was unveiled in 1933, in concert with the opening of the Chicago World's Fair. Originally, the museum commissioned a new hall to house the entire collection, consisting of 104 pieces that included busts, heads, and life sized figures.

In the political/racial ferment of the 1960's some of Hoffman's hyper-realistic depictions were labeled as racist. As a result, the Field Museum relegated much of the collection to the basement. Today, however, if one searches them out, about half of the pieces can be found scattered throughout the museum. Her book, *Heads and Tales*, details her life and travels. Much of it is devoted to her work with the different races of mankind.

Sidney Waugh, who also hired Belskie during the Great Depression, was working on the art deco pieces that adorned the Buhl Planetarium in Pittsburgh. Sadly, the Buhl closed in 1994. Buhl, primarily a glass designer, went on to become the chief designer for Steuben Glass.

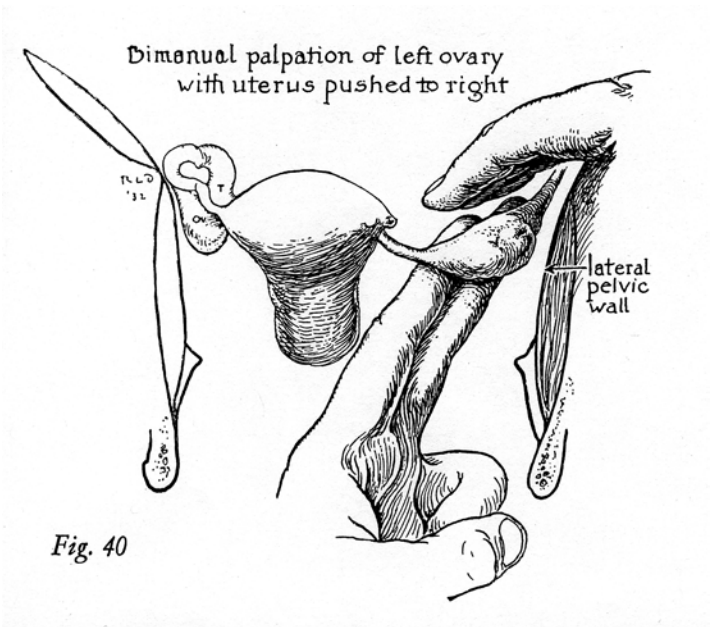

Figure 8. *Bimanual Palpation of left Ovary. Illustration by Edwin L. Dickinson, M.D. Human Sex Anatomy. The Williams & Wilkins Company, Baltimore 1933.*

[7] Sadly, this practice has long been discontinued

[8] The Field Museum was named after him in 1894 after he endowed it with $1,000,000.

In 1939 (the same year Belskie became a US citizen), Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson, a highly regarded obstetrician, gynecologist and surgeon, approached his friend, Malvina Hoffman, to ask if she would agree to help him produce a series of sculptures depicting the birth process. Dickinson was himself a rather good artist and had illustrated his own sex atlas that the Williams and Wilkins Company published as *Human Sex Anatomy* in 1933 (Figure 8). It was a groundbreaking publication with myriad depictions of the genitalia, most done in a tight, detailed pen and ink style. Dickinson's sexual intercourse illustrations were startlingly new for a *scientific* work and earned him the opprobrium of some critics. Of the 174 illustrations in the book, Dickinson produced all but 10[9]. Alfred Feinberg (who was the medical artist for the Columbia University Department of Pathology, when I arrived at Columbia in 1954) did four of the remaining half tone illustrations and Frances Elwyn, a Columbia faculty member's wife, helped with lettering and the remainder of the line work. It is interesting to note that Dickinson's book preceded Alfred Kinsey's breakthrough work, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, by 15 years! Indeed, although Kinsey is often regarded as the father of sexology, as early as 1937, Dickinson was encouraging him in his research.

Despite their friendship Malvina Hoffman refused to work with Dickinson. She told Belskie that; "She was not going to work for five cents a dance, because you know how it is when you do things for friends.[10]" Nevertheless, she encouraged Belskie to meet with Dickinson and apply for the job.

Belskie met with Dickinson in his office at the New York Academy of Medicine on Fifth Avenue. At the time, Dickinson was over 70 and, according to Belskie, too tired to tackle the project himself. To quote from a Belskie interview tape[11]: "When I looked beyond the door, my first impulse was to get the heck out of there. This was something that I never saw before. They were painting something to do with genitalia." Dickinson's charm overcame Belskie's reluctance however, and as Belskie relates it, he thought he'd try it for a few days. He ended up staying for over 10 years.

Up to this period in Belskie's career he was not much interested in medicine, but now new vistas opened up for him. Dickinson grew quite fond of Belskie and, conferring an honorific "Doctor" on him, brought him into examination and delivery rooms. The knowledge gained through these visits brought a verisimilitude to his medical sculptures that could not be achieved in any other way. Much of the impact of the birth series can be characterized by its tenderness. The introduction of no more than the hands of the birthing doctor is not only esthetically pleasing, but also raises the presentation from the realm of physiologic process into fine art (Figures 9,10,11,12,13,14).

It is hard to believe, but the entire original birth series was completed within six months, although these months were spent in intense labor. It was funded under a grant from the

Figure 9. *Normal birth with head molded by birth canal, second stage nearly completed. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

Figure 10. *Normal Birth. Baby is shown with its head being supported and guided by an attendant. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

Figure 11. *A baby, ready to be born, shown in breech position with the membranes intact. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

[9] As early as 1919 Dickinson started corresponding with Max Brödel about medical art. Letters in the Archives, The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Art As Applied to Medicine.

[10,11] Dr. Kamici interview transcript (1985), as transcribed by Helynn Burns in 1994.

Figure 12. *Breech labor with legs and trunk being supported and guided my attendant's hands. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

Figure 13. *Breech labor with the attendant supporting the baby with one hand while the other presses over the uterus to help in the birth. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

Maternity Center Association in New York and was first seen by approximately two million visitors at the New York World's Fair in 1939. The admiration and reviews were such that one of the supporters of the Maternity Association paid for the reproduction of the sculptures so that copies could be sold for a modest sum to various educational institutions. Later, some of the fetus models were produced in malleable latex. This enabled them to be manipulated to simulate the actual birth of a baby. Together, Belskie and Dickinson pioneered model making in plastic and latex. Many of their anatomical models were made with removable sections so they could be "dissected" layer by layer. Hand painting added realism and detail.

Figure 14. *Quintuplets. A depiction of the Dionne quintuplets delivered by Dr. DeFoe in May, 1934. Note: The fifth baby is hidden by the other four. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

And the series lives on! A 1940 book entitled, *A Birth Atlas*, is graced with photographs of Belskie's wonderful series. It too, was published under the auspices of the Maternity Center Association and can still be found in new and used condition under the title, *A Baby is Born* (sadly, both books have become rare and expensive). For the latter book, Frank Robinson, a medical illustrator and graduate of Nat Jacobs Medical Illustration Program at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry (class of 1951) did accompanying pen and ink illustrations as a guide to understanding some of the anatomical features in the sculptures. Frank joined the AMI in 1975 and died in 1988.

In 1945, Belskie's long-time friend, Dr. Robert Dickinson wrote him a letter, expressing his appreciation[12]: "Dear Abram: In the long lifetime of teamwork and with some remarkable chiefs, colleagues, and assistants, I am wondering whether any of these numerous collaborations has been happier, more productive than our years together" His letter then changes tense and continues: "Your incessant consideration for him makes him feel like a father to a beloved son. Which he hopes you do not mind." After fighting cancer for a number of years, Dickinson died on

[12] Belskie Museum Archives

Figure 15. *Harvey Cushing. Maquette for medallion in Belskie's History of Medicine Series. Photo: Belskie Museum Archives.*

November 29, 1950 at the age of 89. In his memory, Belskie was commissioned to do a portrait bust for the New York Academy of Medicine. He had by then become well known and held a faculty position at the New York Medical College. As he humorously stated, "I became a big shot."[13]

Medallic Art

After Dickinson's death, once again, Belskie directed his efforts more towards conventional art. Excelling in medallic art, his first medal was designed in 1952, and it was followed by hundreds more, including The 50 he designed for the "Great Men of Medicine" series honors healers from Hippocrates onward, and includes such luminaries as Galen; Vesalius; Pasteur; Harvey Cushing (Figure 15); Sigmund Freud; Walter Reed; Edward Jenner; Madame Curie; and Benjamin Rush, the first great physician in the United States and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The Belskie Museum has a complete collection of this series.

Another of his early medals was commissioned for the 25th anniversary of the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, which opened its doors in 1928. Columbia was the first facility in the United States to provide patient care, medical education, and research under one roof, hence the designation Medical Center. In 1967, Belskie was again approached by Columbia, this time to produce the medal I mentioned at the beginning of this article, commemorating the 200th Anniversary of the medical school. He also designed and sculpted a series of medallions honoring the early astronauts, another for The Baseball Hall of Fame and still other sports medals in honor of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jim Thorpe, and Red Grange. Also of note are the medals he created for the National Commemorative Society honoring, among others, Thomas Jefferson and Admiral Byrd. In 1974 he was named the Outstanding Sculptor of the Year by the American Numismatic Association, and in a fitting tribute to his versatile artistry, he was asked to produce a medal commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Brookgreen Gardens in 1981.

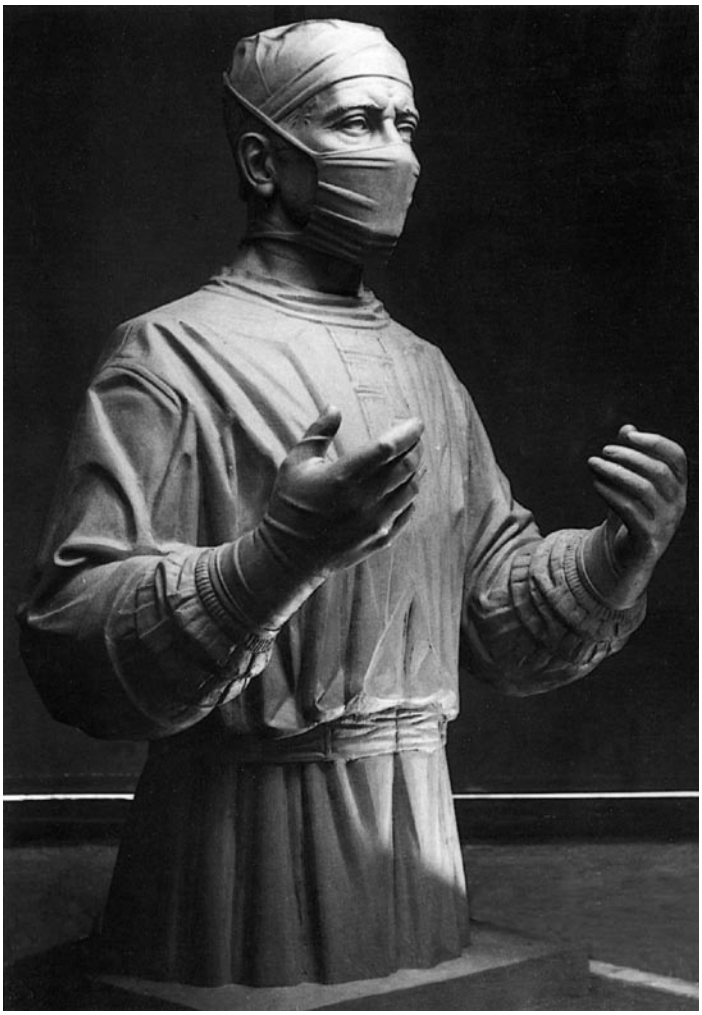

Figure 16. *A clay version of The Surgeon (1961), by Abram Belskie. The original bronze is at the Ethicon Building in Somerville, NJ. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

Fine Art Sculpture

Belskie's fine art sculpture is especially noteworthy. His sculptures can be found in the New York Museum of Natural History, the Field Museum in Chicago, the Cleveland Health Museum, the Mariner's Museum in Virginia, The New York Theological Seminary, and Johnson & Johnson's Ethicon Building in Somerville, NJ (Figure 16). Both his *Christ Child* and The

[13] From Belskie tape transcription

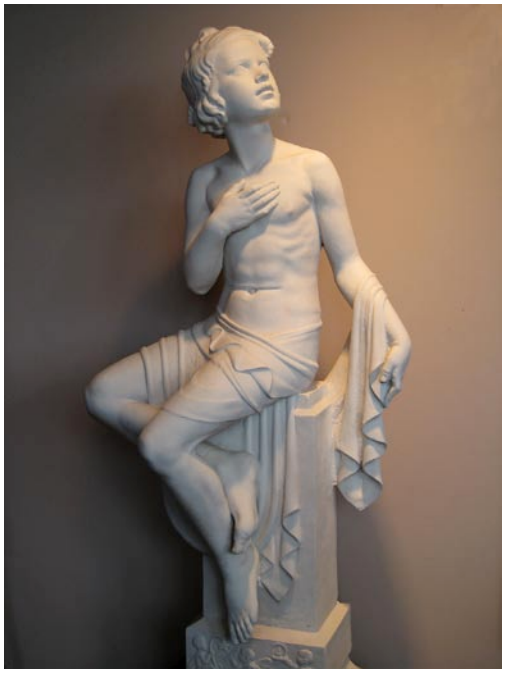

Figure 17. *Moonbeam. Belskie sculpted this in the mid-1930's. A marble version was placed in the Brookgreen Gardens in 1937. A full-size plaster resides at the Belskie Museum. Photo: Belskie Museum Archives.*

Figure 18. *Joan of Arc by Anna Vaughn Hyatt (1915). Executed by Anna Hyatt Huntington before she married Archer Huntington. Erected on Joan of Arc Island on Riverside Drive, New York NY. Pedestal was executed at the J. Massey Rhind Studios in Closter with Robert Baillie assisting. Photo: William Logan.*

Moonbeam can be found at the Brookgreen Gardens, located at Murrells Inlet in South Carolina (Figures 7, 17). The Brookgreen Gardens is not only a wildlife sanctuary but also a National Historic Landmark. In 1931 it became the first sculpture garden in America open to the public. Anna Hyatt Huntington, long considered one of America's finest sculptors, and her husband, Archer, originally purchased the land as a site for their winter home. They soon began collecting the work of other American sculptors to supplement Anna's own work (Figure 18). Today, the Brookgreen Gardens owns 1200 sculptures by more than 350 American artists, making it the largest collection of figurative sculpture in the U.S.

Belskie was worried that his work would not survive him. It was an unfounded fear. Soon after he died (on November 17, 1989), the Closter Lions Club started a campaign to raise money to insure that his work would, indeed, survive. In 1993, the Lions Club built the museum named for Belskie and dedicated to his work. Many of his finest sculptures are on exhibit at the museum, with most shown in a plaster version (Figure19). Created as a non-profit organization and gifted to the borough of Closter, it is funded by grants, memberships, exhibitions, and donations. The Belskie Museum, a testament to his creative genius is located at 280 High Street, Closter, NJ 07 Belskie's work and archives, the museum now has an active calendar of art exhibits. The Belskie Museum of Art & Science is located at 280 High Street, Closter, NJ 07624, and is open on weekends and by appointment. It not only houses the Belskie work and archives, but also has an active calendar of art exhibits. For more information about the Belskie Museum of Art and Science visit: www.belskiemuseum.com.

Figure 19. *Adoration, plaster (Circa 1938). Plaster and Bronze versions at the Belskie Museum. A different version of Adoration was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of Art in the spring of 1940. Photo: Robert Demarest, Belskie Museum.*

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Upon retirement he has devoted himself to fine art watercolor painting and writing. In 2002 he traveled the world researching the paintings of the great American artist, Winslow Homer. His travels and research resulted in his award winning book, *Traveling with Winslow Homer.* When not painting or writing, he can be found on his favorite trout stream. rjdemarest@optonline.net