

## Scale, Patriotism, and Fun

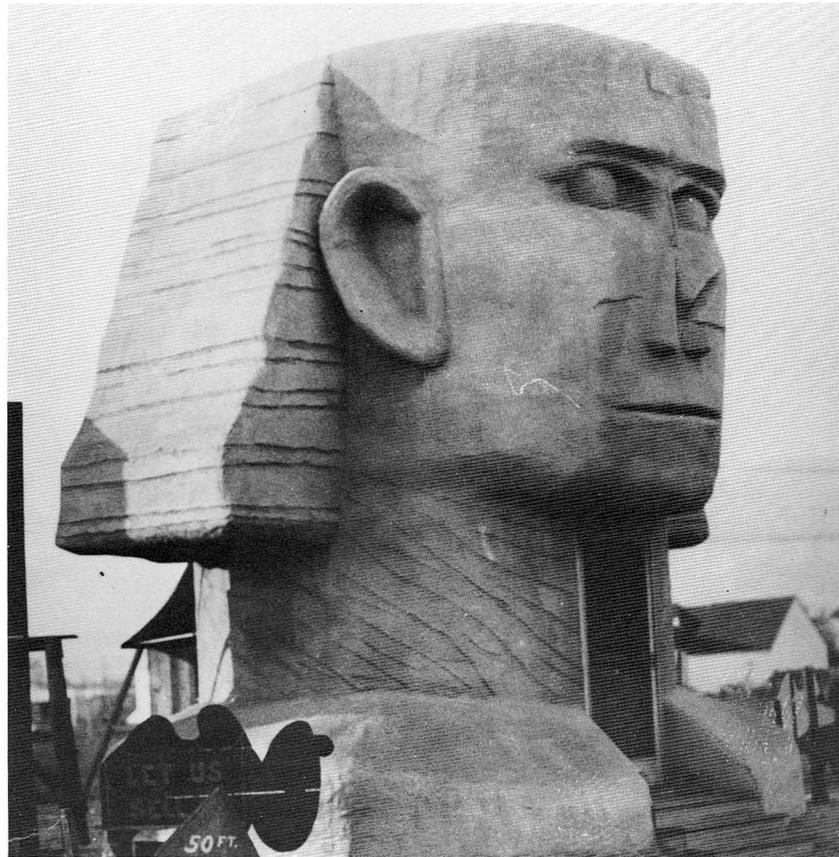
### Crossing the Last Frontier of Fantasy

Karal Ann Marling

According to the rhetoric of a debate that erupted in Germany in 1933 under the leadership of Hermann Broch and was brought to a raging boil in America by Clement Greenberg in 1939, the California Sphinx is a prime example of "kitsch." In its most restrained definition, the verb "kitschen" means to produce trash, or fake art, by manipulating real art, especially the art of past ages, in the manufacture of articles for mass consumption. In the practice of the late 1930s, however, kitsch came to mean the anthesis of elite, high culture, particularly artifacts deviating from the canons of avant-garde art and architecture. Whereas Broch had conceded that "there is a drop of kitsch in all art," the term signified bad taste, blatant excess, and a tinge of pornography, all relative judgments, to be sure, calibrated against the prevailing tenets of a highly serious, chastened modernism. Essentially, then, the most damnable quality of kitsch was its popular origin and its hard-to-define but unquestionable appeal to mass culture.

"Kitsch is art that follows established rules at a time when all rules in art are put into question by each artist," wrote Harold Rosenberg, dean of the formalists:

Kitsch is the daily art of our time, as the vase or the hymn was for earlier generations. For the sensibility it has that arbitrariness and importance which works take on when they are no longer



The Sphinx Restaurant, Los Angeles, California.<sup>1</sup>

noticeable elements of the environment. In America kitsch is nature. The Rocky Mountains have resembled fake art for a century. There is no counterconcept to kitsch. Its antagonist is not an idea but reality. To do away with kitsch it is necessary to change the landscape, as it was necessary to change the landscape of Sardinia to get rid of the malarial mosquito.

The vernacular California Sphinx is an affront to art because it recreates a masterwork; it copies, it "follows the established rules" at a time when the avant-garde pursued a course of idiosyncratic individualism. The rule of modernism is to assault the rule of rule. But for all its obeisance to historical rule, the Sphinx is as startlingly idiosyncratic as any Jackson Pollock (or John Marin, or Gerald Murphy), precisely because it does *not* exist in a "daily" environment.

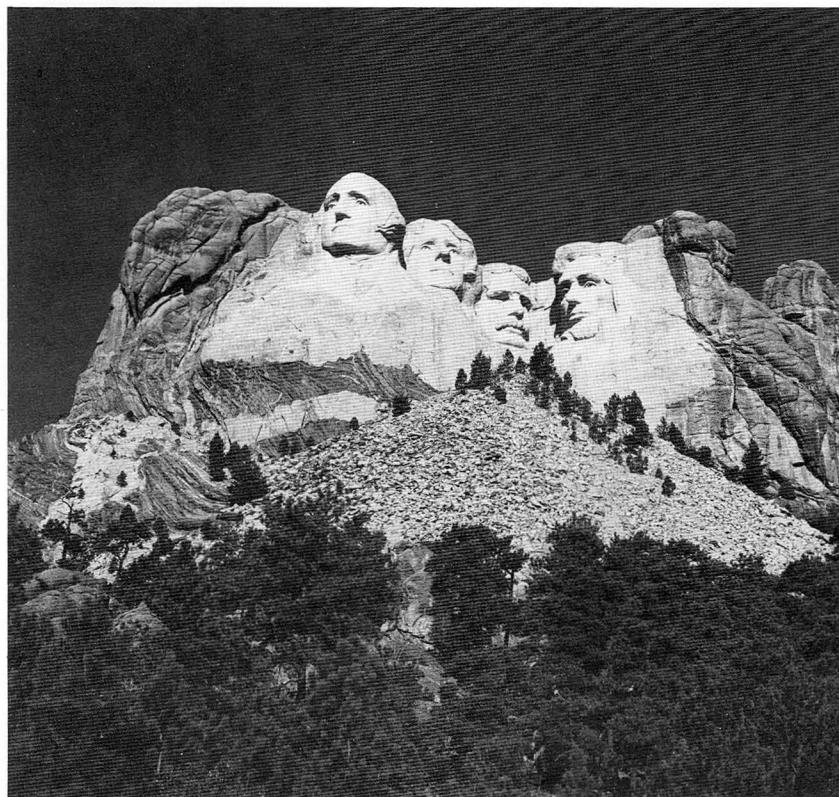
In the world of North Fairfac Boulevard in 1926 (or in 1984), it does not behave like a vase or a hymn, providing visual background music for daily activities. Its arbitrariness and self-importance impinge on and alter the workaday environment. A modest street address becomes the site of endless questioning and an endless variety of illogical, imaginative, fantastic answers to the riddle of this Sphinx.

Although appalled and angered by the very mention of kitsch, Rosenberg has several cogent insights to offer on its American manifestations. The antagonist of kitsch is, as he correctly implies, the reality of Los Angeles, not the ideology of modern art, and the environment — nature in America — is the focus of this persistent drive to step beyond the frontier of reality into the fantasyland of the imagination. In Rosenberg's lexicon the gigantic Rockies are, *per se*, kitsch — obvious, blatant, excessive, semipornographic. That set of adjectives can be conflated into one, gigantic "too muchness." Nature made an aesthetic error of scale in America, troublesome to art critics, mythmakers, landscape painters, tricksters, novelists, and tourists ever since.

Between 1927 and 1939, Gutzon Borglum set out to rectify that mistake in the Black Hills, by turning Mt. Rushmore, South Dakota, into the largest statue in the world, a set of portrait busts of four presidents unfailingly cited in handbooks of kitsch

alongside the Statue of Liberty, a French gift to the United States, unveiled in 1886, but thereafter blamed exclusively on American bad taste. Kitsch or not, Mt. Rushmore is a stunningly successful attempt to turn reality on its ear. A mountain becomes a statue. By carving Mt. Rushmore, man takes over the shaping role of nature and tailors the physical environment to his own measure. The activity humbles nature and renders it responsive to human control.

In literal terms, Borglum reenacted the metaphorical task of W.B. Laughead, Ned Buntline, and Davy Crockett: he made frontier giants of stone, fully as large as the continent. Borglum had been born in the spacious frontier country near the border of Idaho and Nevada, and from the beginning of his noisy career, aimed at a grandiose scale derived, he said, "from American sources, memorializing American achievement." Thus he despised the genteel reticence of official U.S. classicism. The little temple on the Potomac dedicated to Lincoln in 1922 had nothing to do with the robust essence of the man. As for the marble obelisk of the Washington Monument, "if there weren't a policeman to tell you that (it) was placed there to record the work and life of a man who built this great nation after eight years of one of the most trying wars that a little people ever had," could a stranger from "Timbuctoo" deduce the meaning of that pallid shaft? The American story, Borglum argued, was bigger and earthier



Mount Rushmore.<sup>2</sup>

than art had hitherto cared to admit: "There was never a better one lived. We have had all the emotions any people on the earth ever had," and at a pitch of intensity Borglum would translate into stupefying size.

In 1913, the United Daughters of the Confederacy invited Borglum to submit designs for a bas-relief of Robert E. Lee to be carved into the living rock on the face of Stone Mountain, in Georgia. The overall dimensions contemplated for the bust were based on those of Thor-

valdsen's *Lion of Lucerne*. In other words, as Borglum later recalled their invitation, the ladies' timid plan — more European than American — was to "subordinate it wholly to the space upon which it was to be placed, ... a great granite facade eight hundred feet in height and about three thousand feet in length. Instead, Gutzon Borglum conceived of a design covering the whole mountainside with a procession of Confederate chieftains, led by a full-length figure of the general so immense that "a workman engaged in chiselling the hat

will appear from below no larger than a fly." An advocate presenting the project to a businessmen's meeting stunned his audience when he announced that a work of such magnitude would cost the city of Atlanta 50 million dollars:

There was a chorus of exclamations and questions, but the speaker went on, "It will cost the city as much as that to build new roads and erect hotels, to care for the tourists who will come to see Stone Mountain."

The artist was not insensitive to the publicity value of his epochal stunt, nor did he sneeze at tourism. Having grasped that the sheer hubris of his determination to carve Stone Mountain was raising eyebrows well beyond Atlanta, however, Borglum was hard pressed to give his essentially southern memorial a broader and a bigger meaning. In interviews, he began speaking of his mountain as "a symbol, in really American dimensions, of a vital chapter in our history — a symbol of the union of all the forces which make for the greatness of our nation." Granting that the Civil War had been a watershed in national history, cooler heads wondered whether the lost Confederate cause merited the immortality of the Rock Ages:

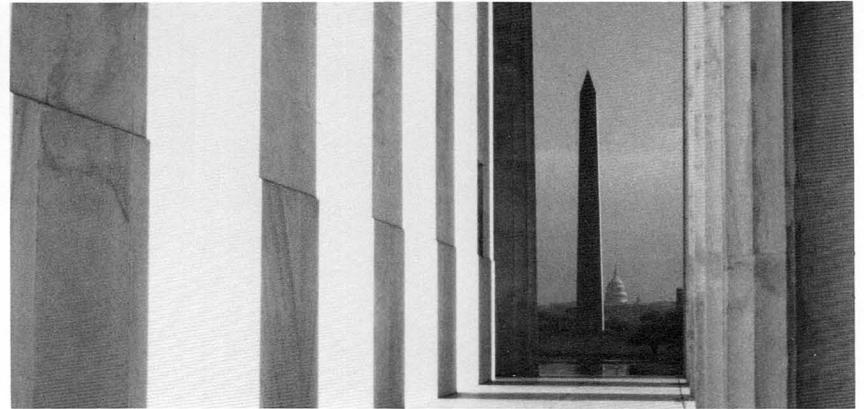
No one will quarrel with Mr. Borglum's audacity in seizing the opportunity to sign his name, in letters fifty feet high, to the largest



Lincoln Memorial.<sup>3</sup>

monument in the world, bar none. Nothing has ever been attempted on this scale before, either in ancient Egypt or Assyria. The Colossus of Rhodes wasn't anywhere near eight hundred feet high, that is certain ... (Borglum) admits that already there is a fifty-thousand-dollar oiled road to the base of his potential monument. One wonders did the Pharaoh erect road houses furnishing excellent chicken dinners at the feet of their pyramids to attract camel-touring parties?

At first, Borglum's enthusiasm silenced the doubters. His plans were adopted and the site was solemnly dedicated in May of 1916. Although work was suspended during the war, blasting resumed in the fall of 1922. On January 19, 1924, Lee's head was unveiled: the occasion was marked by a formal luncheon served on a table mounted on the general's shoulder. Borglum had finished the trifle his patrons had wanted in the first place, but that very measure of accomplishment revealed the lifetime of work ahead. Promoters cooled toward Stone Mountain, there was little for tourists to see, funds ran short, and the sculptor squabbled with all concerned. In 1925, Borglum was summarily dismissed and then arrested for destroying the models others might have used to complete his mountainside monument. While some southern newspapers hoped that the artist's temperamental outbursts would be overlooked, others



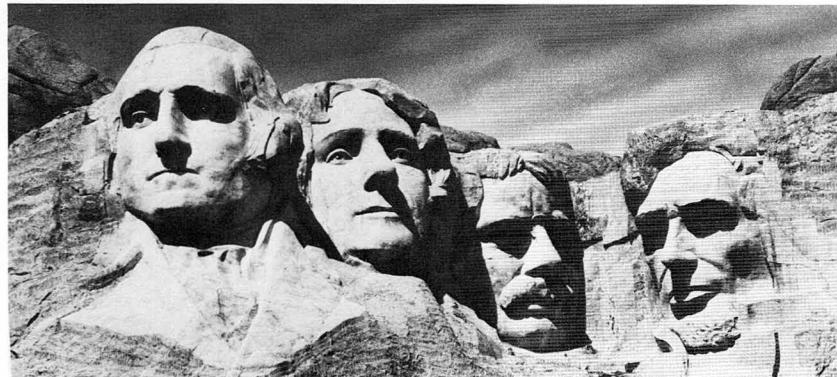
Washington Monument.<sup>4</sup>

tent with the great modern awakening that I should have turned to the huge cliffs of our land, the lofty granite ledges, and in them carve monuments and there leave records of the founding of our great nation and the development of our civilization.

Borglum's own contemporaneity was never in doubt. He took the first chunk out of Mount Rushmore in 1927. As work speeded up with the introduction of jackhammers and new methods of dynamite sculpting, however, a columnist for *The Nation* admitted to a certain apprehension about what fully mechanized mankind might do to the landscape:

To come face to face with Washington or Lincoln along some remote mountain range would be at least bearable. But (I) cannot face the prospect of having to pitch ... camp under the nose of Henry Ford.

Insofar as Borglum's monument reflected a restless, tourist culture, roaming the continent by automobile in search of sensations to match the force of its dreams, Henry Ford might well have joined his company of heroes as a presiding deity. Atop the rugged peaks where the West begins, Borglum dominated the wilderness with his blasting caps and his modern optimism; he asserted his absolute mastery over the frontier, subjugating it in the act of



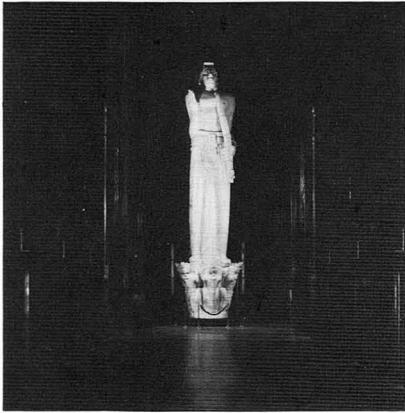
Mount Rushmore.<sup>5</sup>

teetered between apathy and outright antipathy because, as the Norfolk *Virginia-Pilot* put it, "there still clings to the enterprise, despite its sincerely patriotic conception, an odor of Babbitic Atlanta advertising and the handicap of a fortuitous but highly unfortunate association with the Ku Klux Klan, which claims Stone Mountain as its holy birthplace and Atlanta as its holy city." As a landmark calculated to make "Atlanta a Mecca for tourists of all nations," Stone Mountain was foredoomed. Although Borglum called his Confederate Valhalla "an idea as deep, as basic as the rocks upon which our wonderful Continent rests," the theme was meaningless to many Americans, and odious to others. The idea of a sculpted mountain was indeed compelling and "basic," but the Confederate Monument carved on Stone Mountain was a barrier between the South and the nation at large.

Amid the accusations and recriminations came a letter from South Dakota,

inviting Borglum to tour the Black Hills "to see if a mountain monument to America's greatness could be carved there." The sculptor arrived in September of 1925 with his 12-year-old son, Lincoln, in tow: they never left the granite heights of Cathedral Cliff again. It is clear that Borglum was deeply affected by the overwhelming size of his new site. "The vastness that lay here," he confessed to his journal, "demanded complete remodelling of the grouping I had been dreaming. I must see, think, feel and draw in Thor's dimension." It is also clear that the size of the mountain turned his thoughts toward grander themes, of national resonance and popular accessibility. So, too, did his appraisal of the changing scale of modern life:

Everything in modern civilization has so expanded that the very scale, the breadth of one's thought, is no longer limited by town, city, county, or state ... I believe it was natural and consis-



Carl Mille's *God of Peace*.<sup>6</sup>

carving the mountain. Borglum became another Paul Bunyan of the 1920s and 30s, and lived out the frontier tradition of the tall tale.

The iconography of Mt. Rushmore reinforces the meaning of this act of conquest. Mountain is man and the men depicted are the pathfinders, the explorers, the tamers of the frontier. Washington surveyed the Western Reserve. Jefferson dispatched Lewis and Clark to the Louisiana Territory. Lincoln, the railsplitter, was the raw-boned son of the western border. "T.R.," the roughrider, the expansionist, founded the cult of the strenuous life on the high plains of the Dakota Territory. They are frontier presidents, who claimed and reclaimed that frontier dream of perpetual movement, escape, and self-transformation in the name of the American nation. They symbolize the American rite of passage, and defiantly anchored by Borglum in 1927 at the demographic edge of civilization, Mt. Rushmore is itself a perpetual frontier, an emblematic gateway leading to our historical dreams and so to the "dark fields of the republic," rolling ever westward, backward in time and forward in space.

Borglum's landmark gave physical definition to the dream of westering. A pair of very different monuments of the same vintage, erected in downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul, also located the frontier with the vehemence of colossal size. The head of



Foshay Tower.<sup>7</sup>

George Washington on Mount Rushmore was unveiled in 1930. In 1929, a 447-foot free copy of the Washington Monument, enlarged to contain a 32-story office building, opened on Marquette Avenue in Minneapolis. The design was an unusual marriage of historical imagery with modern utility, the latter given symbolic expression in the streamlined, Art Deco details of the decor. For that reason alone, the sculpture *cum* skyscraper functioned as a significant if somewhat grotesque national landmark. Hailed for a generation as the tallest man-made structure between Chicago and the Pacific, the Foshay Tower commemorated the first frontier and articulated the modern edge of urbanism, beyond which a western wilderness still lay in wait for the sturdy adventurer driving to Yellowstone along the route of the pioneers.

St. Paul's colossus was a 36-foot tall *God of Peace* that rose a full three stories

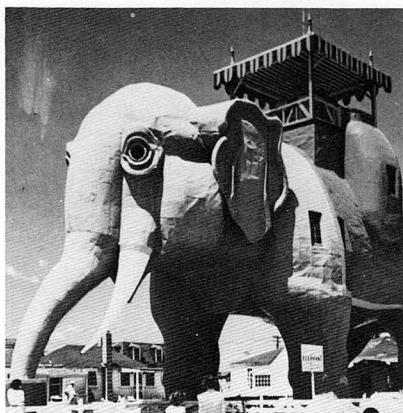
above the foyer of the City Hall and Court House building on Kellogg Boulevard, and spun about, the better to amaze the tourists, on the latest word in motorized bases. The statue was conceived as a veterans' memorial and commissioned in 1932 from Carl Milles, a Swedish artist whose "moderne" design ostensibly depicts the smoke from native peace pipes congealing into the milky likeness of a mythological chieftain, the patron of peaceful pursuits. The specific iconographic connections between local veterans and the 60-ton lump of white onyx in City Hall remained obscure. Connections between Minnesota's territorial past and "The World's Largest Indian" were not. Like the largest pumpkin awarded the blue ribbon at the Minnesota State Fair, "The World's Largest Indian" betokened an expansive local pride and a swelling optimism well suited to the cheerful rhetoric of the New Deal. The fiercely modern style of "Onyx John" measured the distance between the old frontier of



Statue of Liberty.<sup>8</sup>

Indian times and a machine-driven tomorrow, the frontier of the streamlined, aerodynamic future toward which the rocketing profile of the Foshay Tower beckoned, too.

Mt. Rushmore, South Dakota, shares the midwestern environment of "The World's Largest Indian," Bemidji's Paul Bunyan, and other tales writ taller still. The Statue of Liberty inhabits the eastern terrain of Eckleburg's eyes above Queens. Marvin Trachtenberg has noted that the siting of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor is ambiguous. From the deck of an arriving ship, Liberty is a beacon of welcome and enlightenment. In the words of "The New Colossus," the Emma Lazarus poem inscribed on her base, Liberty "lifts her lamp beside the Golden Door." From the shoreline, however, Liberty seems to turn her back on the immigrant and the Old World; indeed, she seems to stride west, casting her beams of enlightenment over the dark frontier unrolling before her, toward Minnesota and the Dakotas. But, to "wretched refuse" and native son alike, Liberty marks a door, a place of potential transfiguration. In common with Eckleburg's eyes, the colossus defines a frontier between factual reality and the imaginatively conceived, dream America beyond the border stele. On the other side of the "Golden Door," the pioneer, the dreamer, the quester, the seeker, and the wandering pilgrim step out of time and circumstance into the dazzling radiance of their own last, best hopes.



"Lucy," The Margate Elephant.<sup>9</sup>

Gatsby and Nick Carraway cross Eckleburg's frontier repeatedly in Fitzgerald's novel, the former as blind to its significance as the sightless signboard and the latter gradually opening his eyes to the delights and terrors of revelation. In moments of anxiety, Gatsby shuns the valley of ashes; instead, he asks Nick to go with him to Coney Island or Atlantic City, spawning grounds of the American popular colossus. On the road to Atlantic City, one James V. Lafferty, between 1881 and 1885, built Lucy, the Margate Elephant. In a bizarre presentiment of the Los Angeles Sphinx, Lucy was built to house a real estate office, although she has also served as a flophouse, a tourist information booth, a children's library, and, for the past several years, as a landmark on the National Register of Historic Places. The records are silent on the fate of the real estate firm; the 65-foot Lucy herself, however, was a huge success. Within the decade Lafferty had built another at Cape May, New Jersey, and a third on Coney Island.

The Coney Island elephant was larger, "as big as a church," and was intended to be a resort hotel. "Its legs were 60 feet in circumference. In one front leg was a cigar store, in the other a diorama, patrons walked up circular steps in one hind leg and down the other." Rooms could be had in thigh, shoulder, hip or trunk. After dark, searchlights flashed erratically from the eyes, illuminating anyone within range who



The Elephant Hotel.<sup>10</sup>

had decided to settle for a parsimonious night on the beach.

Lucy's eyes were a simple commercial come-on. But her circus body signaled fun afoot, a tourist's adventure amongst Barnum's curiosities. That the form of the elephant-hotel symbolized release from the fetters of convention and routine is demonstrated by John Kasson's observation that "the phrase 'seeing the elephant,' often accompanied by a broad wink, became a euphemism for illicit pleasures." At the deepest and crudest level, the bedrooms and stairways inside invoked the psychic transformation of a Jonah in the belly of the beast, Pinocchio in the innards of a whale. Commercial postcards sold in tourist meccas of the day often depict colossal objects and figures containing pleasure pavilions miniaturized within them: a typical postcard, dated to 1908 and bearing the legend "Greetings from Atlantic City," shows

the famous Heinz amusement pier matrixed within a giant pickle, a specific business reference neatly merged with the more generic and fantastic resonance of the image.

With the advent of the automobile, roadside colossi became the pictorial staples of the postcard industry. Symbols of the pleasure trip and the adventure of the open road, the linen-finish postcards of the 1920s and 30s used jangling colors and setting airbrushed clean of everyday clutter to dramatize the already fantastic appearance of Mammy Gas, Toto's Seppelein Diner and Cocktail Lounge outside Northampton, Massachusetts, a Wigwam Cafe in Browning, Montana, or the Teapot, a postcard, souvenir, and hot dog stand in Chester, West Virginia. And if travel on the interstate is no longer the fabulous odyssey implied by such pictorial fish stories, the Rexall souvenirs, the gas station mementos, and the slick Kodachrome postcards of



"Dreamland".<sup>11</sup>

today still fasten on a Jolly Green Giant, a giant loon, or a Paul Bunyan who wears a size 73 shirt to define the process of "having a wonderful time."

Having a wonderful time on the Boardwalk meant rubbernecking at the third version of Lucy, the elephant-hotel, and any number of other Coney Island colossi and near colossi. The Inexhaustible Cow was a particular favorite in the 1890s. It was a machine constructed "to satisfy the insatiable thirst of visitors" and then disguised as a heroically proportioned bossy. Promoters argued that its milk was "superior to the natural product in the regularity and predictability of its flow, its hygienic quality and its controllable temperature." Artifice was superior to nature — safer, more dependable, richer, less apt to disappoint.

The huge figures that marked the entrances to "Dreamland" and the other rides and attractions at turn-of-the-century Coney Island made the same promise. The dreamland just past the colossus at the ticket window was a better place, full of fun, adventure, and happiness, all conducted in a controlled environment of make-believe, wherein the tourist was guaranteed the pleasures life often denied, and a dream life could be lived out in a perfect, predictable safety real life could seldom provide.

The fantasy colossus has been the visual trademark of the fair, the carnival, and the amusement park since 1881.

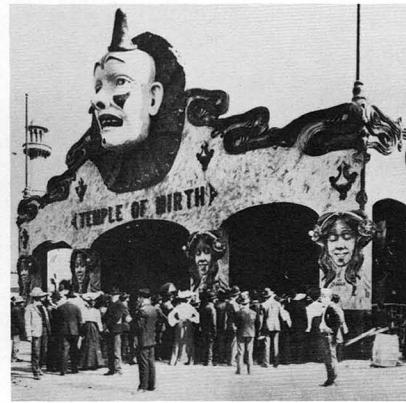


"Creation",<sup>12</sup>

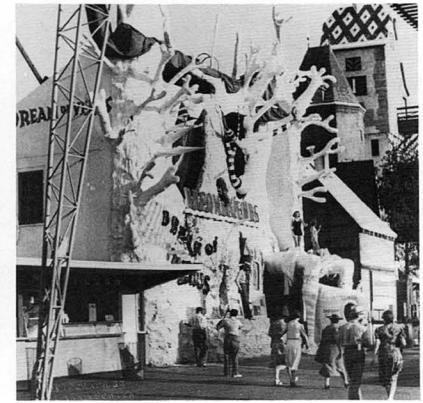
"Dreamland" was reincarnated on the Pike at the St. Louis World's Fair under the title of "Creation." A colossal and scantily draped angel — or was she a winged Eve? — enticed the fairgoer to board "a boat that bears him gently away through a labyrinth of underground passages with clever scenery ... from remote parts of the world. When he disembarks with a sense of having made a voyage," a serious narration from the Book of Genesis was, somehow, anticlimactic. The "Hereafter" attraction, entered under the gaze of an enormous winged sphinx, offered a similar tour of the horrors and thrills of hell, and the "Temple of Mirth," prefaced by a gigantic winking clown and four grinning maidens, sent customers on a voyage through a mirrored maze and shot them back to real life on a circular slide. The Joy Zone at the Panama-Pacific Exposition was a kind of parody of the heroic gigantism of the "serious" buildings, and the inflated industrial propaganda of "serious" exhibits. Underwood displayed a typewriter 15 feet high and 21 feet wide that weighed 14 tons; New York State showed an 11-thousand-pound cheese. The amusement concessionaires responded with a 90-foot caricature of a suffragette, and the Souvenir Watch Palace was all but overshadowed by a giant, jointed statue of Uncle Sam, reaching one great, hammy hand down into the crowd. "The African Dip" was served up in a refreshment stand shaped like a squatting African. "Creation" turned up again, with the



"Hereafter",<sup>13</sup>



"Temple of Mirth",<sup>14</sup>



"Dream of Venus",<sup>15</sup>



Corn Palace, Mitchell, South Dakota.<sup>16</sup>

giant naked lady, and a giant replica of some ancient male deity introduced "the Dayton Flood," a variation on "The Galveston Flood" of the St. Louis Fair and "The Johnstown Flood" of the 1901 Buffalo Exposition.

More recent but equally noteworthy examples include the stupendous National Cash Register that toted up daily attendance figures at the portal of the New York World's Fair of 1939; the humanoid facade of Salvador Dalí's

"Dream of Venus" concession at the same fair, which catapulted the unwary into the Freudian ambiance of a Surrealist nightmare; Cobb's hen-on-eggs-shaped Chicken House eatery at the 1939 San Francisco counterpart to the Flushing Meadow extravaganza (a second overblown cash register loomed nearby); "kiddie-lands" everywhere; the Mitchell, South Dakota, Corn Palace; the Wisconsin Dells, the South Dakota Dinosaur Park in Rapid City — "Childhood Fantasy, Prehistoric

Detail" says the free brochure; and any given turning in the path at Disneyland where, with vast mice and ducks dancing in solemn procession, the past of Main Street U.S.A. yields to Fantasyland, Frontierland, Adventureland, and Tomorrowland, under fiercely hygienic conditions.

#### EDITORS NOTE

We would like to thank the University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and the author, Karal Ann Marling, for granting permission to reprint this excerpt from *Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol Along the American Highway*, Copyright ©1984 by the University of Minnesota.

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