

# The Story of Audrey Flack and the Beloved Woman of Justice

## Artist was "Tuned In"

By Dolores Klaich

When Audrey Flack, a painter and sculptor who has had a house in East Hampton for many years, was commissioned by the federal Art in Architecture program to create a sculpture for a new United States Courthouse in Knoxville, Tenn., she didn't expect to have an experience she will never forget.

In the tradition of her recent work, Ms. Flack created a colossal head. It was heroic in scale, as are most of Ms. Flack's sculpted women, a cast bronze head three feet high mounted on a five-foot-high verde marble column.

In creating it, Ms. Flack explained that she had combined symbols from different cultures and eras. An American eagle and five-pointed star crown the Greek drapery that covers the head, from which abstracted braids and feathers appear.

## Hokey Title

"I wanted to capture the dignity of the courts, but I also wanted it to speak to the people who stand before the judges," she said. When it was finished she named the piece simply, "Justice." Sometime after finishing the work Ms. Flack got a phone call from a representative of the Art in Architecture program telling her that those who commissioned the work "loved" the sculpture . . . but they would like to rename it. They wanted to call it, "Beloved Woman of Justice."

Ms. Flack said she swallowed hard and told her caller that it sounded a little hokey. The official sympathized but nevertheless supported the wishes of the Tennessee committee.

## Cherokee History

"That's what art is all about," she said. "If art is not for the people, who is it for?" On the day of the unveiling of the statue Ms. Flack and her husband, Robert Marcus, flew to Knoxville for the ceremony. Federal officials, judges, and former Senator Howard H. Baker Jr., for whom the courthouse is named, all spoke.

"But then a most interesting thing happened," Ms. Flack said. "A man wearing a plain brown suit and a beaded necktie made his way to the podium. His name was Chief Bird and he said, 'I named this sculpture.' "

## Woman Elder

He went on to explain that every Cherokee village had an elder woman known as the beloved woman. She took part in local and national councils on all subjects and had the ability to persuade tribal members in making important decisions, particularly in rendering justice.

Ms. Flack said that, cognizant of the statue's headdress, the federal official rushed over to her and asked, "How did you know?" I told her I didn't know," Ms. Flack said. "I just got tuned in; artists do that. Ever since I was a child I felt a strong connection to Native Americans and when I was sculpting I found myself putting feathers in the folds of the headdress in the back. I am amazed and delighted by the historical relevance. And, of course, my feminist soul rejoices."

Ms. Flack found out later that thousands of Native Americans, who had been evicted from their villages, were gathered in Tennessee and taken to their deaths in a march that has come to be called the Trail of Tears.

## Awaits Her Fate

Chief Bird told Ms. Flack that "Beloved Woman of Justice" would be placed on the list of official Cherokee nation sites to be visited. In the meantime, another of Ms. Flack's monumental sculpted public women - a 35-foot statue of Queen Catherine of Braganza, Portugal, which was to overlook Manhattan from the Borough of Queens - awaits its fate in court.

In Ms. Flack's behalf lawyers say it is a landmark case based on the Visual Arts Rights Act, which, Ms. Flack said, "protects and should continue to protect all artists."

Its installation was stopped when Queens Borough President Claire Shulman joined a group that argued against elevating the queen, for whom the borough is named, saying that she and her husband, King Charles II of England, had allowed the slave trade to flourish.

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