

## Kalamazoo's Memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Michael W. Panhorst

A bronze portrait figure of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. strides forward confidently in a small park in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The statue, created by sculptor Lisa Reinertson, is only slightly larger than real life, but its presence is monumental.

Seen from a distance, the clerical robe worn by Reverend King strengthens the tall, pyramidal composition, while the robe's flowing contours both animate the design and echo the character of this restless minister who was constantly on the march for freedom and justice.

Upon approaching the sculpture, which the viewer is drawn to do by its placement on a simple low pedestal, one sees that the robe is embellished with scenes from the civil rights struggle rendered in low relief. A black slave labors in a field near the hem of the robe, while a dark fold of the garment reveals the lynching of a man by the Ku Klux Klan. A Montgomery city bus and a portrait of Rosa Parks adorn the lower left side. The Selma to Montgomery march and King's *I Have a Dream* speech are depicted elsewhere. One also finds images of voter registration, school desegregation, the Greensboro, North Carolina lunch counter sit in, and the use of firehoses to break up the peaceful 1963 Birmingham demonstrations. Down King's broad back the vertical folds of the cloth evolve into the bars of the Birmingham Jail with a pensive King seated behind them. Above him is the image of Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired King's use of non-violent civil disobedience.



Lisa Reinertson, *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial*, 1989, bronze.

Across the robe's shoulders the sculptor portrayed King's funeral cortege.

Despite the abundance of historical information that the sculpture contains, the work does not degenerate into triviality as do many realistic sculptures of heroes. Perhaps it is the momentous nature of each scene that prevents the piece from becoming a mundane historical narrative of the civil rights movement. Perhaps it is the combination of the sculptor's handling of the imagery, the surface textures, and the three-dimensional forms that make this sculpture sing like a gospel choir of the trials and tribulations that King, and other civil rights activists endured.

The sculptor, Lisa Reinertson (born 1955), did not march with Dr. King, but her father did. Her portrait of the martyred leader is clearly informed by an extraordinary understanding of the man and his mission. Much of her

artistic training came through her study with Robert Arneson, a California sculptor sensitive to the social and political realities of the world around him who often incised and modeled his clay surfaces with imagery related to the central subject of the piece.

Yet Reinertson's sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr. is more than the sum of her artistic training and her inquiries into the subject. Her phenomenal portrait of a man and a movement is among the finest memorial sculptures produced in recent years. Like the best examples of commemorative portraiture, the sculpture communicates more than the mere appearance of a person. It also conveys the character of the individual and the ideals of the social movement he led. As did August Rodin in his *Victor Hugo*, Reinertson cloaked her figure with dramatic drapery and posed the magnificent head above the turmoil depicted below. As did Michelangelo in his *David*, she laid bare the soul of the man, fixing his determination in the eyes, the posture, and the powerful musculature. The monument is an appropriate reflection of the man and the struggle for civil rights that was his life's work. King wore the mantle of the movement in life and his bronze posthumous portrait is shrouded with scenes of that struggle.

Local African American community leaders initiated efforts to memorialize King. The City of Kalamazoo sponsored the design competition and the creation of the sculpture with funding from Kalamazoo's Irving S. Gilmore Foundation and a private donor. In addition, the city established a maintenance fund to provide for the ongoing preservation of the memorial. The insight and artistry of the sculptor, coupled with the foresight of the city that commissioned the work, has given to us and to future generations an inspiring memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American civil rights movement.



Lisa Reinertson, *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial*, detail, 1989, bronze.



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