

About New York

Stone Carver Comes Out of Retirement at 71 to Do Pointing on Church Edifice



The New York Times

Araldo Perugi inspects handiwork at Roman Catholic Church of Our Saviour, Park Avenue and 38th Street.

By MEYER BERGER

STONE carvers are a vanishing breed in New York City. In the whole metropolitan area there are only eighteen unionized experts on statuary and on other carving for building exteriors. Most are from 60 to 70 years old, or more.

When Vermilya, Brown, Inc., local builders, found an item calling for \$755,000 worth of stonework for the new Roman Catholic Church of Our Saviour at Park Avenue and Thirty-eighth Street, they had no idea how scarce good carvers were.

But Henry J. Pizzutello, whose family has run stoneworks in New York for generations, undertook the church job on subcontract with some misgiving. Half of the carvers in the New York area were at work on the Baltimore Cathedral and on the National Catholic Shrine in Washington.

In despair, Mr. Pizzutello turned to men in retirement. He finally coaxed Araldo Perugi, tall but weary, to do the pointing and some carving. Araldo is 71. He has worked with chisel and hammer since he was a boy in Carrara in Tuscany, where the lovely Carrara marble has been quarried for well over 1,000 years.

Araldo has forgotten the names of some of the churches and skyscrapers decorated with his works since 1910. "Names and places," he says, "recede in memory. They go to hide in dark places when you are past 70." But the Park Avenue edifice needed him. He was the only stone pointer around.

Now, a good pointer, Mr. Pizzutello explains, is rarer than a good carver. The pointer transfers the work, with calipers and other ancient instruments, from the plaster model, in true scale. You are fortunate, it seems, to find one pointer among thirty to forty ordinary artisans in the trade.

Araldo Perugi held back at first because he did not want to journey from his home in Brooklyn each working day to the church and to Mr. Pizzutello's yard in the Bronx. He said, "Old bones complain when they carry the load that was feather-light in youth."

But the boss stoneman, a patient man, got around that. He arranged to send the work to his cousin's stoneyard, to S. Pizzutello's, at Thirty-eighth Street and Eighteenth Avenue in Brooklyn. Araldo sighed, heaved his weary shoulders, and undertook the task.

He did the pointing for all the major pieces so that other

carvers could do the detail to proper depth and width. He finished all the carving for the reliefs in two of the tympani and arches, one in Park Avenue, the other in Thirty-eighth Street.

The carvers' union made a rare concession for the church project. It has ever been union rule that its members must do their work manually, as their great ancestors did, with a kit of 125 to 150 chisels of varying degrees of sharpness or breadth. They were not to speed up the work by using automatic devices.

On the church assignment, however, the oldest carvers like Araldo work with airhammers, pneumatic machinery that gets the job done four to five times as fast as with hand-wielded tools. It is a rare privilege, but even as they grab at it the old ones seem a bit ashamed. Secretly they tell you it is profanation of their ancient art.

Mr. Pizzutello says the carving on the Church of Our Saviour is the largest assignment undertaken in this city since St. Bartholomew's Church went up in Park Avenue, just north of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, twenty-seven years ago. The depression and the sober planes of modern architecture kept reducing the call for carvers.

It is altogether likely, Mr. Pizzutello thinks, that the carving and statuary on the Church of Our Saviour may be the last major carving job New York will ever see. He said, "The older men are gathered in by time and they have no apprentices to replace them. It is so even abroad. The art dies there, too, and with sickening rapidity."

Araldo Perugi nodded. A veil seemed to film his eyes. When he spoke the words were sad, edged with bitterness. He said: "The sons of carvers in America drive buses. They have no heart for the work of their fathers. If they do not drive buses they aspire to college and to engineering. In my time it was not so."

There have been, as every reader knows, an overabundance of muttnik witticisms, but in Jackson Heights the other day Frank G. M. Corbin, an executive, stopped short at sight of a pampered mutt trotting downstreet in a mink jacket. He reports, "It wasn't just that; the dog also wore a wrist watch (left front paw) which seemed of good make and expensive. The most charitable thought I had was that perhaps the gadget was merely a symbol of office. Watch dog, you know."