

APRIL 9, 2021

# MASTER OF THE MONUMENT THE GENIUS OF WALTER S. ALLWARD

*The Battle of Vimy Ridge not only defined a key military moment for Canada, it marked a turning point in the nation's art history.*



Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial, 1921–36



At the height of his career, Walter S. Allward (1874–1955) created the majestic Vimy Memorial in France, commemorating the Battle of Vimy Ridge which began 104 years ago today. The monument—pictured on our \$20 bill and a symbol of a pivotal touchstone in Canada's history—revealed Allward's virtuosic talent as one of the nation's foremost sculptors. Yet despite his accomplishment Allward was largely forgotten in the years following his death in 1955. Today, the Art Canada Institute proudly publishes *Walter S. Allward: Life & Work* by Philip Dombowsky. The book shines new light on the sculptor's career and his role in designing Canada's most esteemed and iconic public monument, which honours the 11,285 Canadians killed in France throughout the war with no known graves. In the excerpts below, Dombowsky addresses why the Battle of Vimy Ridge was a historic moment and how, over the course of fifteen years, Allward built an unforgettable tribute to Canada's fallen soldiers, one that today is celebrated internationally as a symbol of peace.

**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

Read an editorial about [Walter S. Allward and the Vimy Memorial](#) written by Philip Dombowsky and published in today's [Globe and Mail](#).

## A BATTLE THAT DEFINED CANADA



Canadian machine gunners positioning themselves in shell holes on Vimy Ridge, April 1917, photographer unknown

This vivid photograph captures Canadian soldiers aiming machine guns as they crouch in shell holes during the Battle of Vimy Ridge. The brutal four-day conflict, which saw more than 10,000 Canadian men killed or wounded, began on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917 and became a defining moment in Canadian history. It was the first time the four divisions of the Canadian Corps fought as a unit, and after capturing the ridge from the German army they earned immense international respect for their skill and bravery. This picture, originally taken in black and white, is featured in the Vimy Foundation's publication [The Fought in Colour: A New Look at Canada's First World War \(2018\)](#), which brings this important period to life through colorized documentary photographs.

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## THE UNVEILING OF A GREAT MASTERPIECE



Georges Bertin Scott, Unveiling Vimy Ridge Monument, 1937, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa

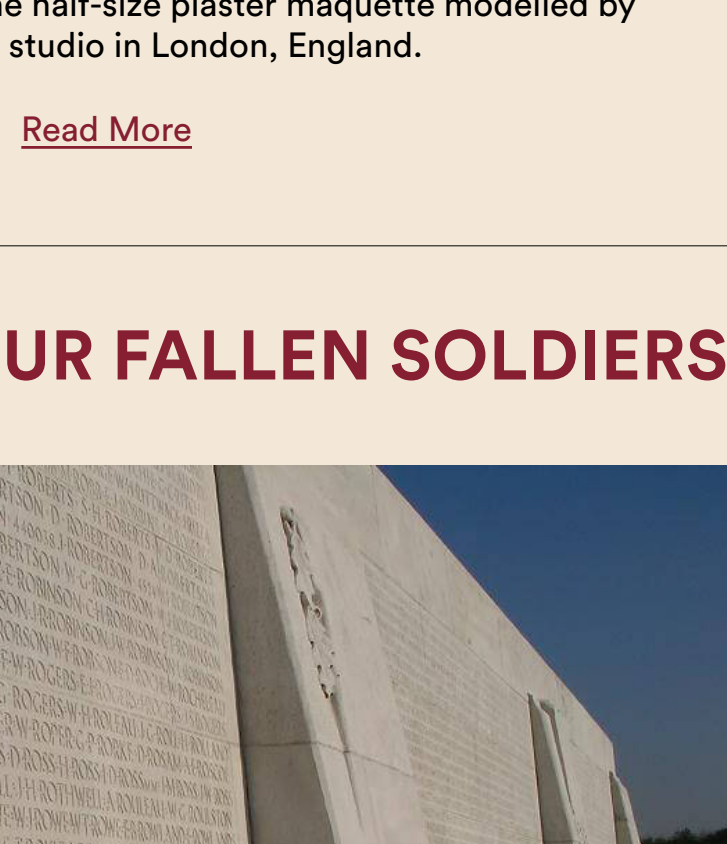
Created by French artist Georges Bertin Scott (1873–1942), this painting depicts the grand unveiling ceremony of the Vimy Memorial on July 26, 1936, officiated by King Edward VIII in the presence of President Albert Lebrun of France—both standing in the foreground—and an estimated 100,000 spectators, including more than 6,000 Canadian veterans and their families. Among those to address the large crowd was the king, who said: “This glorious monument ... is the inspired expression in stone chiseled by a skillful Canadian hand of an area at the base of the soaring twin pylons that had been reserved for government officials and special guests.”

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## A NATIONWIDE COMPETITION



Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission Design Competition, 1921, photographer unknown

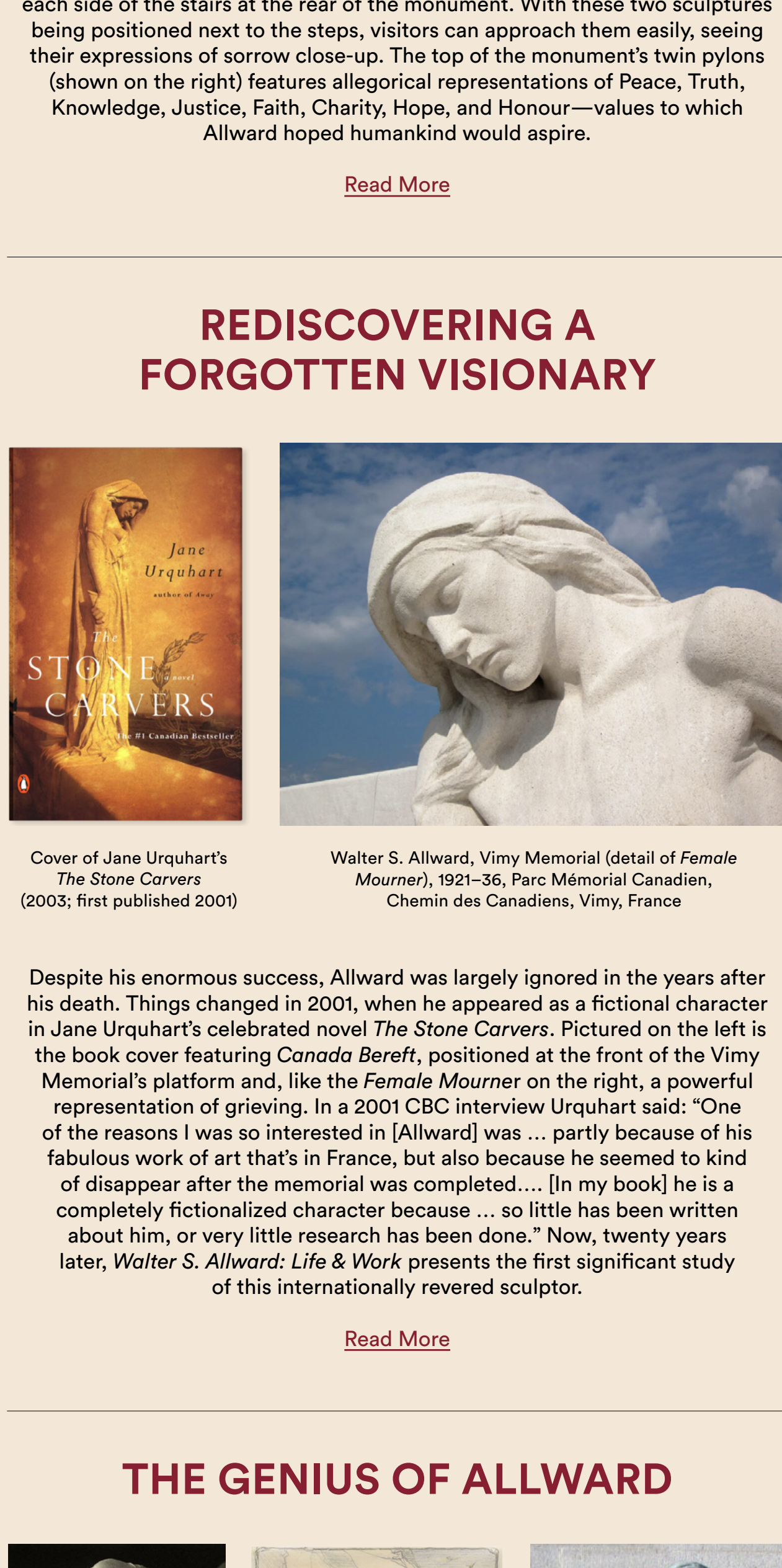


Walter S. Allward, Maquette for Vimy Memorial, c.1921

Allward embarked on the making of the Vimy Memorial—the most ambitious and demanding project of his career—after winning a national competition organized by the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission in 1920. The image on the left shows the models representing the seventeen finalists selected from a total of 160 entries; Allward's is visible in the right background. On the right is his maquette, which featured sculpted allegorical figures adorning two pylons and a horizontal base signifying an “impregnable wall of defense.” Inspired by a dream, Allward's final design was unanimously chosen by the jury of the competition for its “individuality and complexity.”

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## THE SCULPTING OF SACRIFICE AND REDEMPTION



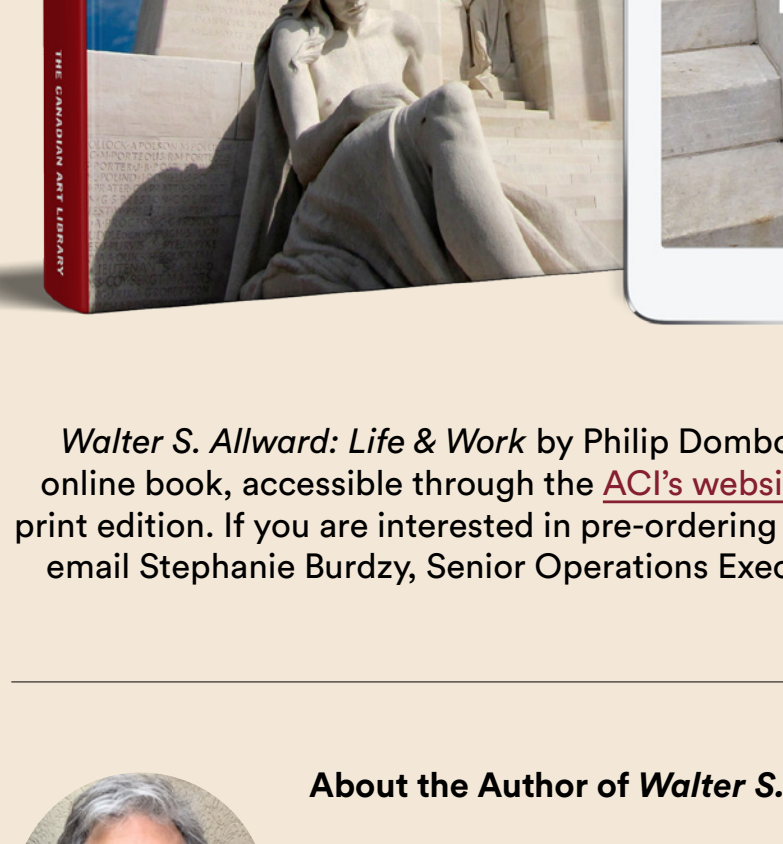
Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial (detail of *The Spirit of Sacrifice and The Passing of the Torch*), 1921–36, Parc Mémorial Canadien, Chemin des Canadiens, Vimy, France

Departing from the tradition of monuments glorifying military victories, Allward envisioned the Vimy Memorial as “a sermon in stone against the futility of war,” with figures such as this dramatic pair conveying themes of sacrifice and redemption. Situated at the base of the monument's two towering pylons, the dying soldier in the foreground is reminiscent of the crucified Christ. He stands next to a figure portraying *The Passing of the Torch*, a reference to one of the most famous poems of the First World War, “In Flanders Fields” (1915), by the Canadian Army Medical Corps officer Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae.

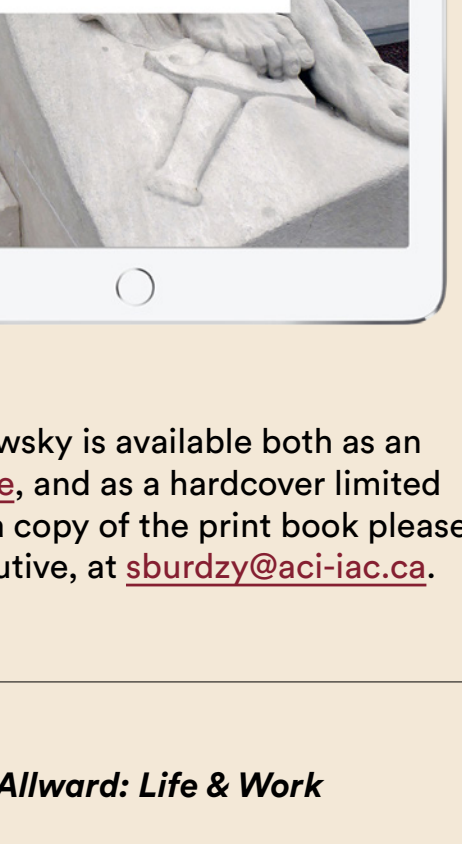
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## A COLOSSAL CONSTRUCTION



Men working blocks of stone in Pietrasanta, Italy, for the Vimy Memorial, n.d., photographer unknown

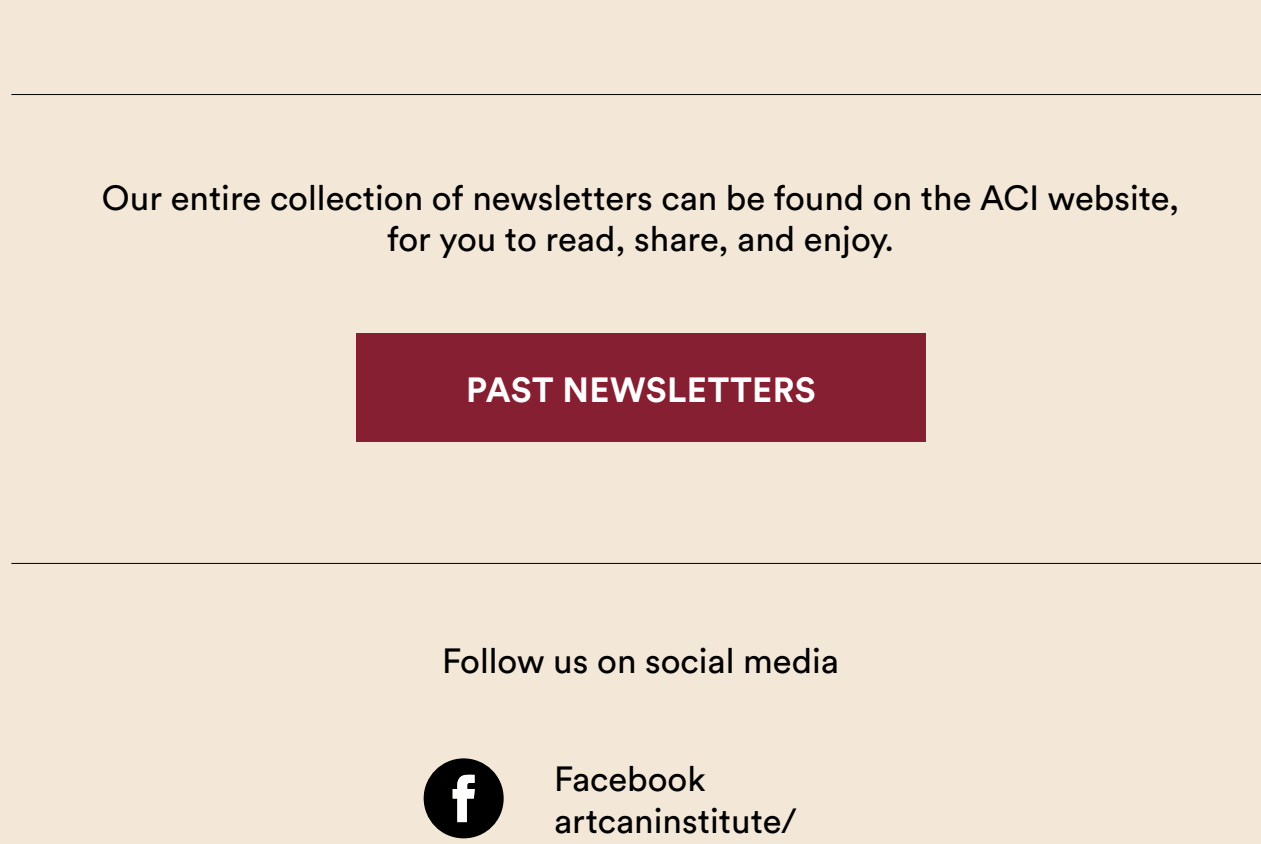


Carvers working on sculptures for the Vimy Memorial, n.d., photographer unknown

The building of the Vimy Memorial spanned a lengthy fourteen years, beginning with Allward spending nearly two of them travelling throughout Britain and Europe searching for a stone that possessed a colour, texture, and luminosity suitable for the north of France. In the photograph on the left, men in Pietrasanta, Italy, chisel blocks of Seget limestone—transported from an ancient Roman quarry at Split, in Croatia—for the monument. In the image on the right, carvers work on *The Sympathy of the Helpless* sculpture for the Vimy Memorial, n.d., the Helpless sculpture, located at one end of the Memorial's horizontal base. In the right foreground is the half-size plaster maquette modelled by Allward in his studio in London, England.

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## HONOURING OUR FALLEN SOLDIERS

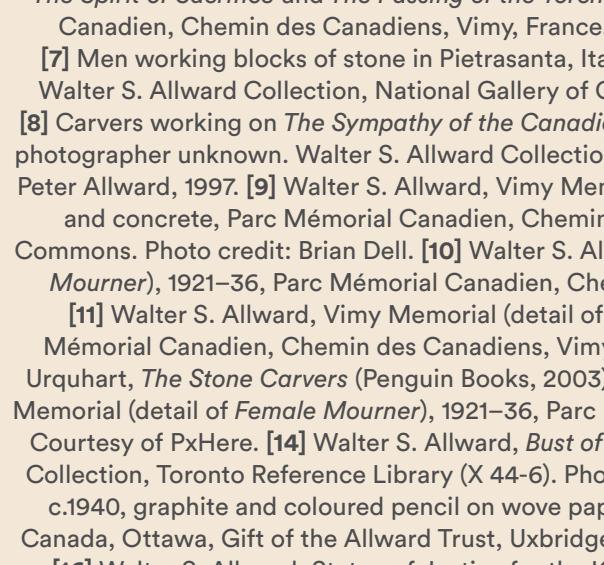


Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial (detail of soldiers' names), 1921–36, Parc Mémorial Canadien, Chemin des Canadiens, Vimy, France

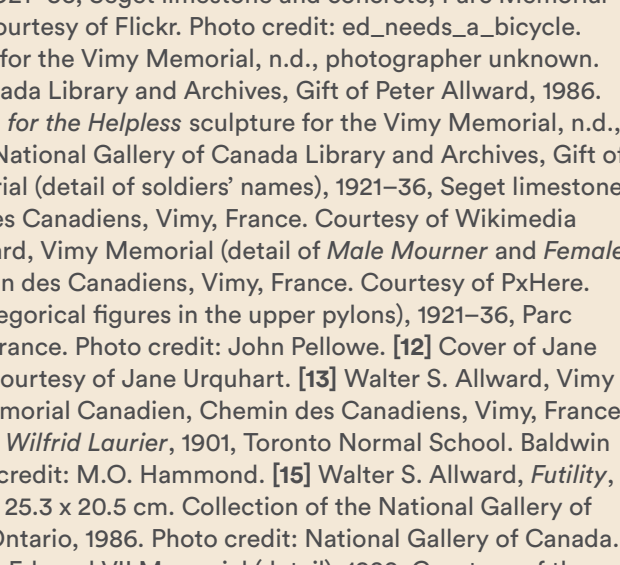
Engraved on the lower walls of the Vimy Memorial are the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers killed in France during the First World War whose final resting place is unknown. For Allward, the inscriptions were an integral part of the monument's design, as well as a way of offering homage to those who had paid the ultimate price in service to Canada. He designed the lettering and chose to list the names alphabetically from left to right across the memorial's lower walls. The exacting task of engraving was entrusted to the acclaimed British artist and designer Percy Delf Smith (1882–1948).

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## A POIGNANT SYMBOL OF PEACE



Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial (detail of *Male Mourner and Female Mourner*), 1921–36, Parc Mémorial Canadien, Chemin des Canadiens, Vimy, France



Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial (detail of allegorical figures in the upper pylons), 1921–36, Parc Mémorial Canadien, Chemin des Canadiens, Vimy, France

The award-winning military historian Tim Cook describes the Vimy Memorial as “a monument to peace ... an homage to loss and death, and a call to remembrance.” Inspired by Michelangelo's (1475–1564) *Medici Tomb*, 1520–34, in Florence, statues symbolizing the grieving parents of dead soldiers sit on each side of the stairs at the rear of the monument. With these two sculptures being positioned next to the steps, visitors can approach them easily, seeing their expressions of sorrow close-up. The top of the monument's twin pylons (shown on the right) features allegorical representations of Peace, Truth, Knowledge, Justice, Faith, Charity, Hope, and Honour—values to which Allward hoped humankind would aspire.

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## REDISCOVERING A FORGOTTEN VISIONARY



Cover of Jane Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers* (2003; first published 2001)



Walter S. Allward, Vimy Memorial (detail of *Female Mourner*), 1921–36, Parc Mémorial Canadien, Chemin des Canadiens, Vimy, France

Despite his enormous success, Allward was largely ignored in the years after his death. Things changed in 2001, when he appeared as a fictional character in Jane Urquhart's celebrated novel *The Stone Carvers*. Pictured on the left is the book cover featuring Canada Bereft, positioned at the front of the Vimy Memorial's platform and, like the *Female Mourner* on the right, a powerful representation of grieving. In a 2001 CBC interview Urquhart said: “One of the reasons I was so interested in [Allward] was ... partly because of his fabulous work of art that's in France, but also because he seemed to kind of disappear after the memorial was completed ... [In my book] he is a completely fictionalized character because ... so little has been written about him, or very little research has been done.” Now, twenty years later, *Walter S. Allward: Life & Work* presents the first significant study of this internationally revered sculptor.

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## THE GENIUS OF ALLWARD



Walter S. Allward, Bust of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 1901, Toronto Normal School



Walter S. Allward, *Futurity*, c.1940, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa



Walter S. Allward, Statue of Justice for the King Edward VII Memorial (detail), 1920, Supreme Court of Canada, Ottawa

The Vimy Memorial was the culmination of Allward's extraordinary career as a sculptor, during which he created a unique body of work that revealed his mastery of classical and modernist styles. The early realistic portrait bust of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier on the left, commissioned by the Toronto Normal School, is one of numerous statues of prominent politicians made by the highly sought-after artist. The dramatic statue of Justice for the King Edward VII Memorial, 1920 (far right), exemplifies the expressive style that marks Allward's later works and finds its full expression in the Vimy Memorial. In his final years, Allward's creative output consisted mainly of drawings—such as *Futurity*, c.1940 (centre)—that expressed his despair and disillusionment with the onset of the Second World War in Europe. These highly personal sketches were never shown in public during his lifetime.

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## WALTER S. ALLWARD: LIFE & WORK

by Philip Dombowsky



*Walter S. Allward: Life & Work* by Philip Dombowsky is available both as an online book, accessible through the [ACI's website](#), and as a hardcover limited print edition. If you are interested in pre-ordering a copy of the print book please email Stephanie Burdzy, Senior Operations Executive, at [sburdzy@aci-iac.ca](mailto:sburdzy@aci-iac.ca).

### About the Author of *Walter S. Allward: Life & Work*



Philip Dombowsky is an Archivist at the National Gallery of Canada, specializing in private collections and visual resources. He holds a MA in art history from Concordia University and a Master of Library and Information Studies from McGill University, Montreal. Commenting on this book, Dombowsky notes, “I first became aware of Walter Allward's work as sculptor through resources at the National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives, which include a large collection of photographs that depict his masterpiece, the Vimy Memorial, in various stages of construction. Further research and greater awareness of Allward's broader accomplishments led to the inevitable question: “Why has Allward, an artist who achieved success at an early age and went on to become one of the foremost sculptors of his generation, been largely ignored in Canadian art history?” [Read More](#)

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