
Longer biographical obituary

Peter Barstow Rockwell (1936-2020)



Peter Barstow Rockwell died peacefully on February 6th, 2020 at the [Kaplan Family Hospice House](#) in Danvers, MA.

He passed away at the age of 83, spending his last weeks at peace in a quiet room visited by children and grandchildren. He died surrounded by small ceramic monsters with a sketchbook nearby.

Peter was born in New Rochelle, New York, on September 16th 1936 to Norman Percevel Rockwell and Mary Barstow Rockwell. He was the youngest of three sons after Jarvis and Thomas. He used to tell a story about being conceived at a lively New Year's Eve party at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City, but he would always follow it up by pointing out that the dates didn't quite work out. Such was his joy in telling stories, even when they stretched the facts.



Brothers Thomas, Jarvis and Peter

Peter grew up in Arlington Vermont, going at one point to a one room school where, according to him, many of the older boys had to be disarmed of their hunting knives every morning and his neighbor shot turkeys from the front porch. It was one of the happiest times of his life.

When he was older the family moved to Stockbridge Massachusetts so that his mother could be closer to the [Austen Riggs Center](#), an open psychiatric facility where Mary, who suffered mental health and addiction problems, could check herself in. While struggling with his own mental health issues, he later reflected on childhood moments when he had to care for his mother. He also talked about the challenges of being an artist son of a famous painter. While his art was always full of joy, he would talk about how in life he also suffered from anxieties and occasional “dark thoughts”.

Peter met his future wife Cynthia Ide when he was sent to the [Putney School](#) back in Vermont; a school where students learned not only in class but also in the barn doing farm chores. Peter and Cinnie fell for each other in 11th grade, went off to different schools and then fell in love again during college, eventually getting married in February of 1958 when he was finishing off his undergraduate degree at Haverford College.



Cynthia and Peter, Marriage, Feb. 1958

Peter's college experience at Haverford was transformative. In his first year he was run through the lungs and outer heart by a fencing foil at a match against Princeton. The tip of his opponent's foil snapped off and the foil went in and out. Thanks to the care he got at the Bryn Mawr hospital he survived the accident though he was sufficiently traumatized to later run away to New Orleans with a friend before exams. When he returned to college, as an alternative to fencing, Peter decided to try sculpture, studying with [J. Wallace Kelly](#). Sculpture at the time was an extracurricular activity at Quaker Haverford, but he kept at it while majoring in English with a thesis on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, novels that he would later read aloud, in their entirety, to his children. He married in his senior year and graduated in 1958, after which he enrolled in the [Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts](#) studying sculpture full time. He would reminisce about the strange looks he got when he carried large bones home on the train that he had signed out from the PAFA bone library to sketch.

Sculpture and a honeymoon hitch-hiking around Europe led Peter and Cinnie next to Italy. Peter received a small fellowship to study carving in the workshops below the Carrara marble quarries

and he took his wife and 18-month old son, Geoffrey on a Polish freighter across the Atlantic in 1961.



Peter with children (from the top, Tom, John, Mary and Geoffrey) in Carrara

It was in Italy that he developed as a professional sculptor, learning to work stone in the [Nicoli workshop](#) in Massa where he was one of the first American visitors. Unlike those he considered as lesser sculptors, Peter didn't simply mock up a model in plaster and send it to Nicoli to be carved in statuary marble. No, at Nicoli's Peter learned to read the materiality of stone and to carve in ways that brought out the textures and veins in the stone. Many of his carvings explore the individuality of a piece of stone combining polished surfaces with roughed out sections where you can see the marks of the point, tooth or flat chisel.

After a year Peter and family moved down to Rome where he would live and work most of his life. In Rome three more children were born (Thomas, John and Mary) and he joined the community of [St. Paul's Within the Walls](#) where he was a parishioner for over 50 years, serving multiple times as Senior Warden. (There is a lovely sculpture garden with Peter's work by the

entrance.) He would joke that he was the most senior non-catholic lay person in Rome and he was proud that it was during one of his turns as Warden that St. Paul's was the site of the first ordination of a woman within the walls of Rome. His volunteer work also included serving on the Board of the [Keats-Shelley House](#), serving on the Board of [St. Stephen's](#) and helping out at the [Non-Catholic Cemetery of Rome](#) (where he will be buried).

In Rome he developed an artistic practice working in different types of stone, in bronze, in wood, casting in resin and in clay, usually showing back in the USA to earn a living. Most popular were his bronzes, many of them composed of figures like acrobats in movement. After he bought a farmhouse in Tuscany with no electricity he began making bronze candelabras that later also became popular.

Carving large stone works was, however, his passion, though you can only do so many before getting crowded out of your studio. Fortunately, over the years he received numerous larger commissions including climbing sculptures and memorials in Philadelphia like the [Ned Wolf Memorial](#) and a commission for Boston College called the [Tree of Life](#), both cast in bronze.

A commission to carve gargoyles for the Washington Cathedral led to a lifetime love of monsters. His monsters now grace the small chapel in Giogalto, Tuscany, where he had an old farmhouse and studio. They can also be found in Plymouth, Michigan; Philadelphia, PA; Chioggia, Italy; and Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He loved to carve large arrangements of stone monsters in public, inviting students to help him as he did at [Haverford in 1990](#). These public works were organized so that school groups could come and learn about sculpture first hand. For Peter it was the carving, in both the sense of the activity and the finished work, that was to be shared.

Peter loved teaching art and art history. Over the years he taught at the [American Overseas School of Rome](#), then [St. Stephen's School](#) and eventually at some of the college year abroad programs in the city. He also gave unique guided tours of the sites, notably showing Rosalynn Carter the Roman Forum. He had a remarkable ability to talk about art whether his own or that of an anonymous carver of faces on the New York State Capitol building in Albany. Generations of students at St. Stephen's will also remember how loud he was when yelling "Art History" in the courtyard when he called students to him for a field trip.

One advantage of being self-employed was that he could take long trips with his family in the summer. He loved to take us family on long camping trips from Rome to Turkey and back or, in the opposite direction, to Scotland and back. These trips often involved visiting quarries to buy, for example, a small block of Parian marble. Alternatively they involved detours to remote museums to see the work of favorite sculptors like Tilman Riemenschneider.

Peter's engagement with the materials, quarries and techniques of stonework led him to develop a parallel career as an expert in ancient stone carving technique. For years he inspired conservators to read the tool marks on the unfinished parts of statues through a course

organized by ICCROM. This interest led to consulting work on such notable works as Trajan's column, the Trevi Fountain, and Bernini's Angels (on the bridge leading to the Castel Sant'Angelo). When he lectured about the history of carving he spoke with the experience of someone who practiced the craft. Some of his knowledge, along with many of the thousands of photographs he took of tool marks, are gathered at the website [The Art of Making: Stoneworking in the Roman World](#) that was developed by researchers at King's College London. He also published a number of articles and books including *The Art of Stoneworking* (Cambridge, 1993) and, with Vidya Dehejia, *The Unfinished: The Stone Carvers at Work in the Indian Subcontinent* (Roli Books, 2016). The latter book involved a number of trips around India with Dr. Dehejia to learn about the stone carving traditions of the subcontinent.

Peter was predeceased by his beloved wife [Cinny \(Cynthia Ide\) in 2013](#). After trying to live alone in Rome he moved back to Massachusetts in 2017 to be closer to family. He found an assisted living apartment in Beverly, MA near his daughter, Mary Faino who also gave him a last show in her store in Rockport. His son John was also near and would come down weekly to give him a massage and take him out. The apartment was within walking distance of Clay Dreaming, a ceramic studio, where he would go almost every day and sculpt clay monsters and mermaids. We thank all those who supported him in these last years.



Peter at Clay Dreaming with his work.

Peter will be buried in the Cimitero Acattolico in May of 2020 beside his wife and among other poets and artists after a service to celebrate his life at St. Paul's Within the Walls. Having spent many days volunteering at the Cimitero he could tell you of the Roman cats that make it their home, sunning themselves on the graves, or of his favorite carvings there. But really, the little sculpture of Cinny dancing that he made for the foot of the grave says it all.

Peter Rockwell will be missed by his brothers Jarvis (Nova) and Thomas; children Geoffrey (Margaret), Thomas (Rosemary), John (Lan) and Mary (Matthew); and by his grandchildren Peter, Alethea, Mateo and Alaska.

With love,

Geoffrey, Thomas, John and Mary

An out of date web site is available at <http://www.geoffreyrockwell.com/PRportfolio/index.html>



Dancing at the end



Peter and Jarvis Rockwell (Peter is wearing a John Rockwell original jacket)



Peter Rockwell sculpture in the garden of St. Pauls



With Dr. Vidya Dehejia (photo by Jay)



Rockwells and friends in Giogalto (Peter has the "Virginia is for Lovers" shirt)