

## The Astoria Column *Creating the Monument*

- **HOME**
- **PLAN A TRIP**
- **NORTHWEST EXPLORATION**
- **SCENES ON THE ASTORIA COLUMN**
- **CREATING THE MONUMENT**
- **FRIENDS OF ASTORIA COLUMN**
- **ENGRAVE YOUR NAME**
- **PDF VERSION**
- **EMAIL: ASTORIA COLUMN**

"Workmen constructed a donut-shaped, wooden scaffold for the artist, which hung by ropes from the Column's 110-foot-high viewing platform. Each day Pusterla raised or lowered himself to work on the frieze. A small canvas tent suspended over the scaffold protected the artist from the inclement weather. Pusterla took his large completed cartoons up on the scaffold. After laying down the dark base coat, he placed the cartoon over the wet plaster. He then blew colored powder into the holes poked in the outline of each figure. Lifting the cartoon away from the plaster, he could see the outline in powder. He then added the upper, lighter coat of plaster, and finished the image by incising shadows and outlines. Pusterla frequently chiseled away images from the previous day's work if he found them unsatisfactory after viewing them from the ground."

Gail Evans  
Author

### A CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT

The Astoria Column is the final crowning monument in a series of 12 historical markers erected in the early 1900s between St. Paul, Minnesota and Astoria, Oregon.



The markers were the pet project of Ralph Budd, president of the Midwest-based Great Northern Railroad. In 1925 he announced that, along with other businessmen and scholars, he wanted to properly salute Astoria's explorers and early settlers for their critical role in the expansion of the United States to the Pacific Coast.

Budd, architect Electus Litchfield and the citizens of Astoria agreed that the stunning vista from Coxcomb Hill made it the perfect home for such a monument. They enlisted the support of New York philanthropist, Vincent Astor, great grandson of businessman John Jacob Astor, whose Pacific Fur Company settled Astoria.

The construction contract was awarded to A. B. Guthrie and Company of Portland. They started work in March 1926 and construction of the base, the column and the cupola at the top of the shaft moved rapidly. The Column was ready for exterior decoration by late May.

Ralph Budd had hired an Italian immigrant artist, Attilio Pusterla (1862-1941) because of his expertise in a bas-relief technique called sgraffito ("skra-fe-to"), an Italian Renaissance art form. Born in Milan and educated in Italy, Pusterla had studied with the Italian painters Cremona and Giovanni Seggantini. In the 1880s he became a leader of the Revolutionary School of sunlight painters, who believed that works painted outdoors had more integrity and life than those done in a studio. In 1899, Attilio Pusterla came to the U.S. and taught in the Leonardo da Vinci Art



This laborious process yielded only three completed bands of historic images by dedication day that was attended by an audience of 8,000 on July 22. By all accounts nothing dampened

the spirits of the crowd or the speakers for the Column or the three days of events planned to mark the occasion. After the festivities, Pusterla and his assistants resumed work, which was finally completed on October 29, 1926.

### WEATHER RAVAGES THE ART

Within three years of the Column's completion, the wind and rain raking Coxcomb Hill had taken an evident toll on the mural. While the technique fared well in Mediterranean climates or building interiors, the ravages of Pacific Northwest storms threatened the carvings and pigments. Southwesterly gales seeping off the Pacific Ocean dimmed the beauty and threatened the carvings.

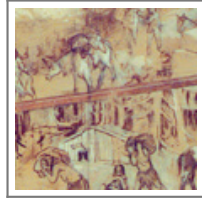
The onset of the Great Depression in October 1929 crushed fund-raising efforts. Column architect Electus Litchfield told Astoria city officials that Pusterla was the only man who could stabilize the mural but the \$5,000 estimated cost seemed unattainable.

Once again, the Astor family contributed the majority of the funds needed and in 1936 Pusterla returned to Astoria to make repairs and waterproof the mural. The various chemicals employed are further described in the *Astoria Column*, 2004. They were state of the art in 1936 and came with a recommendation for repeated treatments at five-year intervals. But other events were looming.

During World War II the site was closed to the public and a blimp squadron for coastal reconnaissance controlled Coxcomb Hill. The Column reopened to the public in 1947 and a short time later the Column was sprayed with tung oil in the belief that this would improve waterproofing. This approach was repeated in 1958 and exacerbated original problems in addition to trapping dirt and lichen. By 1968 the Column had developed multiple problems



School in New York City and lived with his wife, Henrietta, in Woodcliff, New Jersey.



During the spring of 1926 Pusterla was still working in his New York studio on the sketches, drawings and final "cartoons" that would comprise the mural scenes.

The Column dedication date of July 22, 1926 had been formally announced and tensions were high among the project leaders. But the cartoons were finally finished and approved, and on July 1st, Pusterla and his assistants began the work of transcribing the images onto plaster freshly placed upon the concrete surface of the Column.



including cracks on its surface and fading in the murals.



Efforts to mitigate the damage were as well intended as they were ineffective. Years passed and the great exterior mural continued to deteriorate until 1984 and a chance meeting between Astoria's then-Mayor Edith Henningsgaard and Portland philanthropist, Jordan Schnitzer.

*"This magnificent column deserved to be restored."*

Jordan D. Schnitzer, President,  
Friends of the Astoria Column

**Learn how Friends came to the rescue.**



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