

FOOTSTEPS

The Whitney's Founder and Her Spanish Statue

Visiting a Columbus tribute in Huelva made 90 years ago by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.

By FIONA DONOVAN

Standing on the banks of the sparkling Rio Odiel in Spain, I watched the sun set over this wide estuary that stretches out to marshy grasses and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. Here, in a park full of palm trees in the southwestern port city of Huelva, soars a 114-foot-tall limestone statue of Christopher Columbus. My great-grandmother, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, made it in 1929, near the spot where Columbus embarked on his 1492 voyage.

Her aspirational spirit spoke to me that April day, as if bound up in the warm stone that forms this largest of her public commissions. I sensed her outsize creative ambition and her patriotic idealism, and I began to appreciate in a more nuanced way the narratives that fed her life as an artist and art patron. My great-grandmother is less well known as an artist than as the founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Fresh off a flight to nearby Seville, I was in the company of an enterprising group of Huelva volunteers — members of the Asociación Huelva Nueva York — dedicated to promoting cultural exchange. They had invited me to join them for a few days to celebrate the Columbus Monument's 90th anniversary here in the country's Andalusia region. I arrived curious about Whitney's artistic life and wanting to learn more about her deep feeling for Spain.

Whitney's abstract figure of Columbus gazes across the broad Odiel Estuary, on the Punta del Sebo, the point of confluence of Huelva's two large rivers, the Odiel and the Tinto. Cradling a shoulder-height cross, Columbus stands on a pedestal, with carved reliefs representing the earth's four hemispheres on each of its four corners. The haunting simplicity of the monument's grand yet minimal Art Deco stylization reminded me of the art and architecture Whitney had observed in Egypt in 1927, shortly before designing the statue.

I had driven the short distance here after a lunch of squid-ink paella at Restaurante Garum in Huelva's center, with my hosts, Juan Antonio Márquez, a dentist and president of the Asociación Huelva Nueva York, and his wife, Maricruz Navarro, a physician. Now approaching the pedestal's base, we entered an interior crypt-like shrine, which holds a statue of Columbus's patrons, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. Describing her subjects, Whitney wrote: "A romantic queen emerged in royal regalia, strong, proud and yet feminine too, a king thoughtful yet full of pomp."

Back outside, the fading sun at our backs, my companions regaled me, in animated, splintered English, with tales of the monument, of grandparents who played in its shadow and swam at the beach next door, of Huelva's connections to America, of their friend Diego, a Walt Whitman-reciting ecologist and astronomy buff, who gives tours dressed in the top hat and dark wool suit favored by the American lawyer William Page, who hatched the idea for this public sculpture in 1917. I met a caricaturist named José Manuel who showed me some of the fanciful cartoons he has published of my great-grandmother with her statue. Listening to them, I realized just how meaningful this imposing, noble statue is to Huelva's people. It has become their city's symbol, and my great-grandmother is a revered figure in this place so far from her home.

As I glanced up at the monument again, the sun glinting off its time-softened edges, I marveled at Gertrude's creation, her imagination and technical skills, and couldn't help wondering what my progressive great-grandmother would think of the current controversy and fissures surrounding Columbus — and other polarizing historical figures — in the United States today. Given criticism of Columbus as a European colonizer whose journeys led to the decimation of American indigenous populations, I can imagine she too might prefer Indigenous People's Day to the Columbus Day holiday.

For her, this commission, and another major sculpture she completed in Brittany in northwest France in 1926, to commemorate the 1917 landing of American troops there during World War I, were uplifting "links which will serve to bind Europe and the United States even closer," according to her papers in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. In the same way that French citizens underwrote the cost of the Statue of Liberty, hundreds of Americans contributed funds for the Columbus Monument in Huelva.

LATER THAT DAY, Juan and Maricruz took me back downtown, to the Café Bar Whitney — on Miss Whitney Avenue — its walls decorated with photographs of the Columbus Monument's construction. We walked through Huelva's center, a compact area of broad pedestrian malls with a mix of modern and historic whitewashed and stone buildings. Its narrow cobblestone streets lined with restaurants, bars and shops, Huelva (pop. 150,000) has a relaxed conviviality, with locals running into friends and stopping to chat or unwind in the ample sunshine of its many plazas.

Whitney, the daughter of the transportation tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt II, and by most accounts during her lifetime, the wealthiest woman in the United States, was married to the entrepreneur and sportsman Harry Payne Whitney. Tall, trim and graceful, with cropped brown curls and a distinguished face, she was a stylish dresser who loved costumes, modern dance and putting on plays with family and friends.

Courageous and whimsical, she could also be vulnerable. In 1907, at 32, recognizing that the life of a society wife and mother of three children stifled her ambitious creative spirit, she established a studio in Greenwich Village in New York City, and embarked on a serious career as a sculptor.

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Right, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1921. Above, La Rábida Monastery, which dates from the 14th century. Above that, the pier, El Muelle de la Río Tinto, in Huelva. Top, the limestone statue of Christopher Columbus in Huelva, Spain.



ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

A 114-foot work of art highlights the ties between Spain and America.

winning large public commissions in the United States and abroad.

"Because she worked in a number of different styles, it is tricky to evaluate her art, but her sculpture is nevertheless a significant part of the history of American art and should be treated as such," said Ellen Roberts, the Harold and Anne Berkley Smith Curator of American Art at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, and curator of the 2018 exhibition and catalog, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney: Sculpture.

Ms. Roberts said the statue was particularly important to Whitney because "it marked her first experimentation with a new, abstracted style and allowed her to further build her international reputation."

Before World War I, Whitney traveled in Europe and Asia and set up a studio in the 16th Arrondissement in Paris. There, she could think and create, away from the responsibilities of her family and New York's professional and social pressures. If France provided a home away from home, Spain's romantic allure fueled her imagination.



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In the fall of 1920, my great-grandmother returned to Europe for the first time since World War I, during which she set up and tended to the wounded in a field hospital near the French front, and created some of her most compelling small-scale sculptures of those affected by war. This time she went to immerse herself in new places and cultures. For a month, she took the bold step of traveling alone in Cordoba, Granada, Madrid and Seville, riding on hot and dusty trains, reveling in her anonymity and striking up conversations with fellow passengers, hotel guests and locals.

In March 1929, my great-grandmother arrived in Huelva to oversee the last stones of the Columbus Monument hoisted in place. Then 54, she stayed in a modest rental room at the back of a noisy restaurant. While there is no record of exactly where this room was, my grandmother, Flora Whitney Miller, in Huelva for the monument's unveiling, recalled it being simple, and was taken aback by its worn furniture and threadbare rug; her mother had no complaints though.

Once Whitney saw the monument — having wrestled for over two years with contracts, searching for sites, materials, and engineering challenges — she wrote ecstatically in her journal, "to see suddenly before you the real dream in great blocks of stone is overpowering. The cloud shapes one visualized come down to earth. God. The fascination of building, of creation!"

Scouting sculpture sites, my great-grandmother marveled at Huelva's harbor life, as did I. I walked on an extraordinary lattice-work pier that juts out three-quarters of a mile over the Rio Odiel. It was built in the 1870s to facilitate the shipping of copper, gold and silver. Strolling along, I watched groups enjoying the offshore breeze, taking selfies or fishing. I wondered at this feat of industrial design that looked like it could have been constructed by Gustav Eiffel.

Huelva is in a period of transformation, with an energized band of community leaders, educators, artists and environmentalists dedicated to revitalizing the city. I heard of plans for an interpretive center to chart the history and relevance of the Columbus Monument, and a museum of the Americas — for which Gertrude and other American citizens donated \$15,000 to the Spanish government in 1928 — that would offer context and a greater understanding of the ties between Huelva and the Americas.

In my great-grandmother's day, patchworks of marshlands and beach graced Huelva. It still doesn't take long to find protected wilderness. Knowing of my great-grandmother's yearning for the wilds she explored during summers at our family's rustic camp — 100,000 acres of virgin forest and cool, clear streams and lakes in the Adirondack Mountains — I imagined her loving the magnificent sun-dappled spits, marsh grass, white-sand beaches and tide pools here. No doubt she would have relished the expansive Doñana National Park, which I was able to visit on my last day.

Starting at La Rocina Visitor Center, we ambled along the two-mile boardwalk over the Charco de la Boca marsh, stopping in one bird blind, a camouflaged shelter from which we spotted a rare purple heron just a few feet away. Wild yellow irises bloomed amid the marsh grass in this tranquil oasis, and umbrella pines gave shade, while glossy ibis, coots and purple gallinule chattered and splashed in the pond.

We lunched on the porch at the nearby rustic Aires de Doñana restaurant, better known as La Choza (the hut) for its whitewashed, thatched roof and relaxed vibe. Its view is breathtaking, with Ermita del Rocío, a church consecrated in the 13th century, seen over La Marisma Madre lagoon, a sanctuary for hundreds of flamingos and spoonbills, peacefully coexisting with herds of wild horses, the ancestors of America's mustangs. Our delicious almuerzo included ortiguillas de mar (sea anemone), asparagus, wild mushrooms and jamón de Jabugo, from the pigs raised in the meadows and oak forests adjacent to the Tinto River, where they root around for the acorns that give this ham its distinctive character.

Driving along the sandy roads for the horses and carriages that provide the main transportation in El Rocío, which has the incongruous look of a frontier town, with hitching posts on its wide, dusty streets. I was reminded of a spaghetti western, though here the draw is the Virgen del Rocío. Every year during Pentecost, celebrated 50 days after Easter, a million people make a pilgrimage here to honor the small carved statue, completely transforming this sleepy village. I was particularly taken with the votive chapel, a large independent structure filled with candle armatures, thousands of candles lit in homage to the Virgin. When I was there, a mother held a newborn at the entrance, waiting for the child's father, who appeared shortly with a fat bunch of votive candles to light.

AT THE END of the day, we stopped at a magnificent white-sand beach a short drive from town. Maricruz told me that in the summer it is often crowded, but in April we had the widest beach on the Spanish mainland — running west to Portugal and east to Cádiz and beyond — to ourselves.

Near sunset, driving north through the piñones and juniper groves that line the dunes, we headed to El Rompido, a sedate old fishing village. El Rompido lies on a stretch of water protected from the ocean by a lovely spit of tall grasses and sand; it retains its unspoiled nature despite nearby resorts. We gathered at a bar perched atop the small anchorage with fishing and sailboats below, sipping Cruzcampo beers.

I let my mind wander to my great-grandmother's last days in Huelva. For the unveiling ceremonies in 1929, Gertrude's family and friends, traveled by private train from Paris to Seville, where they boarded a chartered cruise ship and steamed down the Guadalquivir River and along the Spanish coast to Huelva. One evening, Vincent Astor held a celebratory dance on his yacht.

On a windy, rain-soaked spring day, in the cloister of La Rábida Monastery — where Columbus received aid from the monks before his journey — the Duke of Alba dedicated the Columbus Monument. Men wore top hats and decorative military helmets, cutaways and spats, while my great-grandmother looked chic in a fur-trimmed coat, standing between the Duke and the American ambassador to Spain. The next day, it poured. Dignitaries made more speeches at the monument. Some 500 people attended the ceremony, with several hundred more watching from a distance.

The festivities over, Whitney returned to her studio in Paris, spending two more weeks there before sailing home. That would be her last trip to Spain. Later, in 1929, as the Depression intensified, she set about plans for the Whitney Museum, which opened in 1931.

As she said at the museum's dedication: "It is especially in times like these that we need to look to the spiritual. In art we find it." Behind her lay the sun-dappled freedom of her adventures in Spain, the allure of the people and culture she encountered, and the space and time she created for herself to make art.