Children's Fountain, Kansas City, by Tom Corbin; photo courtesy of Corbin Bronze

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Sculptural Fountains | Art That’s Meant to Get Wet
by Barbara MacRobie

*Up from the bronze, I saw / Water without a flaw / Rush to its rest in air, / Reach to its rest, and fall.*

— from Roman Fountain by Louise Bogan

Fountains can be highlights of secluded private havens or focal points for entire cities. Early civilizations built stone basins to capture precious drinking water. Now, computerized technology combines with gravity and mechanical pumps to create stunning spectacles for beauty alone.

A remarkable variety of fountains are achieved using only water, like the tallest fountain in the United States, the Gateway Geyser across the Mississippi from the Gateway Arch, created by the St. Louis firm Hydro Dramatics. But there’s another kind of fountain, with a pedigree stretching back to the ancient Greeks, one that incorporates sculpture as an integral part of its design. This June as Missouri heads into summer’s swelter, we’re taking a dip into a few of our state’s notable sculptural fountains, exploring both their beauty and the hazards they experience as art that’s meant to get wet.

KANSAS CITY | Children’s Fountain
1995, by Tom Corbin of Kansas City
North Oak Trafficway and Missouri 9

We couldn’t start our tour anywhere but Kansas City—officially nicknamed “the City of Fountains” and boasting more fountains than any other city in the world except Rome. (Exact numbers are hard to pin down, but the best guess for Rome is about 300, for Kansas City about 200.) The first city-built fountain went up in 1899. A significant step was taken in 1973 when Hallmark executive Harold Rice and his wife, Peggy, established the nonprofit City of Fountains Foundation. The foundation raises funds for the creation of new fountains, and works in partnership with the Parks and Recreation Department to operate and maintain Kansas City’s 47 publicly owned fountains.

The Children’s Fountain, pictured above, is one of the city’s largest. Its giant water basin measures 100 x 60 feet. The fountain is 100 percent Kansas City-designed, with bronze sculptures by Tom Corbin and water engineering by Larkin Aquatics.
There are excellent reasons that bronze is the metal of the choice for the Children's Fountain and most of the other fountains we found in our tour, Tom Corbin told us. “It’s 95 percent copper so it won’t rust,” he said. “Bronze also oxidizes with different colors, black to brown to green.

“Even so, there are corrosive things like chlorine in the water that will affect bronze,” he added. “So every once in a while, Parks and Recreation sends out a contingent to put a coat of paste wax on the statues. Bronze is just like a car. It’s fairly easy to maintain, but you have to be consistent.”

The fountain dedication reads, “The bronze figures represent children everywhere to whom this fountain is dedicated and the activities that shape young lives making childhood a joy.” The six figures are a girl wading, a boy doing a handstand, a soccer player, ballerina, “meeting challenges,” and “joy.” Tom told us that “some of the children were based on actual likenesses, and some were out of my imagination.”

We were surprised to learn that Tom did not work with the water designers when creating his sculptures atop the pedestals, but he pointed out, “No water goes through my pieces. It’s like putting an ornament on top of a Christmas tree.” Larkin Aquatics arranged arching streams of water to meet at each statue, and bubbler jets in between. A 100-horsepower pump re-circulates about 6,000 gallons of water each minute.

For the monumental Firefighters Memorial Fountain in Penn Valley Park (for which Larkin Aquatics created everything but the sculptures), there was at first a thought that water should come through a fire hose. But when Tom looked into the engineering, he realized, “Because of the level of pressure, we’d have been spewing water all over Broadway!”

Other public fountains for which Tom has sculpted are at United Nations Peace Plaza in Independence and the Kauffman Memorial Garden in Kansas City. Born in Dayton, Ohio, he has worked in Kansas City for more than 30 years. His art includes sculpture, furniture, accessories, lighting, and painting.

- **See the Children’s Fountain in action in this video** by KC fountain enthusiast Donald Lee Smith.

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**A fountain of music from the Kansas City Symphony**

Coming up on June 15-17, the [Kansas City Symphony](#) presents the third of three world premieres commissioned from American composers for its City of Fountains Celebration. *Muse of the Missouri* by Stephen Hartke was inspired by the eponymous fountain in the heart of downtown at Main and 8th Street, erected in 1963 with bronze sculptures by Chicago-born artist Wheeler Williams.

The celebration began last September with *Fountains of KC* by Kansas City's own Chen Yi, and continued in March with *Water Music* by Daniel Kellogg. Symphony Music Director Michael Stern called the celebration “a season-long salute to our home city and to these living works of art that so inspired Kansas Citians of all ages.” Not coincidentally, 2013 is the City of Fountains Foundation’s 40th anniversary.

**Crazy chimera fish**

On the *Muse of the Missouri* fountain that inspired Hartke’s music, the fish netted by the goddess occur nowhere in nature. They have the bodies of carp, which do live in the Missouri, and the heads of bluefish, which don’t (they dwell in oceans off the East Coast). Williams had wanted to sculpt fish native to the river but, according to the City of Fountains Foundation, he decided catfish were too ugly and carp were “unworkable.” The fountain honors Lt. David Woods Kemper, killed in Italy during the last days of World War II.

*Muse of the Missouri*, photo by Charvex
To listen and watch

- *City of Fountains: Underneath the Water & Sculpture* – Paul Benson, conservator at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, delves into the history of Kansas City’s fountains and the challenges of keeping them in good shape in this videotaped talk at the Kansas City Public Library, presented on March 29 as part of the Symphony’s City of Fountains Celebration. The video features lots of fountain photos plus an excerpt of Kellogg’s *Water Music* performed live by Symphony musicians.

- Interview on KCUR-FM with Benson, a preview of his library presentation. He’s joined by archivist Ann McFerrin of Parks and Recreation.

To see more Kansas City fountains

- Image Gallery of the City of Fountains Foundation – Clicking on each photo gives you the history and location of the 167 fountains listed.

- The fountain section of Donald Lee Smith’s website features many gorgeous photos taken by this fountain fan.

- A list of guided tours including self-guided walking and driving tours.

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**ST. LOUIS | Rain Man**

1996, by Gregory Cullen
Epstein Plaza, Delmar and Kingsland, University City

Though not on the level of Kansas City, St. Louis is still awash with sculptural fountains. The most obvious and celebrated is the huge (its basin measures 280 x 75 feet) *Meeting of the Waters* tableau by Carl Milles in front of Union Station, but you will find fountains in numerous public parks, on university campuses, in the gardens of the Cathedral Basilica, at street intersections—all over the city and suburbs.

One of the region’s most whimsical fountains was brought back by popular demand. Every April, Washington University and the University City Municipal Arts and Letters Commission collaborate for the Sculpture Series in which temporary art by university students pops up in surprising places all over town. For the 1994 event, graduate student Gregory Cullen placed a plywood figure of a man holding an umbrella over the spigot of an existing fountain. The piece became so popular that after it had been removed, neighbors called city offices asking where it was. “Everybody liked it so much, they did fundraising and made it permanent,” University City’s deputy director of recreation, Linda Euell-Taylor, told us. The Friends of Rain Man were formed, and though it took them two years, they persisted and raised enough money for Cullen to recreate *Rain Main* in bronze.

Top photo courtesy of University City Department of Community Development
Bottom photo courtesy of Mary Baldwin
COLUMBIA  |  The People
installed 1976 (sculpture 1971),
by Don Bartlett of Columbia
Boone County National Bank, 8th Street entrance

Fiberglass over foam core is often used to construct fishing boats and speedboats, but it makes a unique artistic statement to express the spirit of community in The People.

Sculptor Don Bartlett was a professor of art at the University of Missouri for 26 years and a major force on Columbia’s vibrant art scene until he died in 1986. Other city spots adorned with his works are the Columbia Activity and Recreation Center (overlooking the basketball courts), the lobby of the Boone County Government Center, Boone County Courthouse Square, and the Columbia Public Library. “Don was interested in patterns of volume and shape accidentally produced by spontaneous groupings, such as people standing in a line at a post office, at a bus stop or perhaps at a library check-out desk,” his wife, Beatrice, told the library.

Like bronze and stone, the fiberglass was not impervious to water’s erosion. By 2008, much of the original protective patina was gone, the raw fiberglass was cracking, and the foam support frame was crumbling. The sculpture was restored by Mark Alan Mueller, who four years previously had received his Master of Fine Art degree from the university and who was working in Columbia creating sculptures and providing restoration services (he is now based in Arlington, Texas). Mueller repaired the cracks and deterioration. He then re-fiberglassed, repainted, and clear-coated the entire surface with a mat UV protectant—restoring The People for another 40 years and more.

SPRINGFIELD  |  Park Central Square Fountain
1970, by Lawrence Halprin of San Francisco
Park Central Square

Is it sculpture or architecture, or both? Does it matter? However you classify it, this fountain is at the heart of Springfield. Its designer, Lawrence Halpin, in fact designed the entire Park Central Square, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010 and is currently undergoing a major restoration to restore it to his original vision of “an active space for public assembly, devoted to pedestrians and their needs and comforts.”

A native of Brooklyn, Halprin was one of the 20th century’s most influential landscape architects, designers, and teachers. He is best known for another public space—Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco—and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C. His fountains were often built of large cubist shapes, but they were always “an abstraction based on the natural world,” wrote Washington Post architecture critic Benjamin Forgey. “I reject any implication that what I do is decoration,” Halprin told the San Francisco Chronicle in 2007. “Landscape architecture deals with things that are so important. It's partly nature, it's partly culture, it's partly social—it's all of these.”
Clustered around the State Capitol and Governor’s Mansion are five extraordinary fountains. In front of the mansion is the *Missouri Children’s Fountain*, created by Rolla artist Jamie G. Anderson in 1996. On the Capitol grounds are *Fountain of the Arts*, *Fountain of the Sciences, Fountain of the Centaurs* combined with *The Signing of the Treaty*, and the *Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Monument*. The Lewis and Clark monument was dedicated in 2008. The other three fountains date from the 1920s, and like most of the other splendid Capitol art, we have the Capitol Decoration Commission to thank.

When the Capitol was completed in 1917, a million dollars were left over from the tax bond issued to fund its construction. The decision was made to channel all the money into artwork for the building and grounds. From 1917 to 1928, the Commission sought bids and chose artists, resulting in one of the most beautiful capitol complexes in the country.

But just why are there unbridled pagan creatures cavorting in front of the stately relief that marks the signing of the Louisiana Purchase?

Ostensibly, it’s just a coincidence, the happy result of combining two previous designs from two World’s Fairs. *The Signing of the Treaty* was cast in bronze from a plaster relief that Austrian-born sculptor Karl Bitter had made for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904. The water centaurs and what the Commission described as “roguish sea-urchins” were designed by German-born sculptor Adolph Alexander Weinman for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco in 1915. In 1927, Weinman created the entire fountain layout for the Capitol site.

Weinman denied there was any particular meaning to juxtaposing the raucous centaurs with the dignified statesmen. “Sometimes it’s good to get away from symbolism and do something for the joy of the thing,” he wrote. The statues were “simply water centaurs having as bully a time as I had in making them.”

But Bob Priddy and Jeffrey Ball, the authors of *The Art of the Missouri Capitol: History in Canvas, Bronze and Stone* (from which we derived our information), think Weinman did intend a deliberate contrast with Bitter’s relief.

“One might view the fountain as representing the untamed wilderness the United States was acquiring through the treaty, a land that might be filled with new and perhaps dangerous species of creatures that could only be imagined,” they wrote. Or as the Commissioners said in their final report, “Here the artist has envisioned the wild untamed life of the vast forests primeval which covered these hills and spread over these plains in the long ages before the white man came.”
JEFFERSON CITY

Fountain of the Sciences
1926, by Robert Aitken of San Francisco
Capitol lawn, on the side of the driveway from High Street

We’re including an extra fountain for Jefferson City because it’s the only one on our tour with sculpture made of stone (in this case, Bedford limestone from Indiana). The man (right) is Geometry. The woman (left) is Astrology, “elder sister of Astronomy,” holding an astrolabe for determining the altitude above the horizon of heavenly bodies. The two Sciences we can’t see are Chemistry and Geology. Sculptor Robert Aitken also created the bronze statues representing the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers that flank the south entrance.

photo courtesy of Missouri Division of Tourism

JOPLIN

Memorial Fountain
2011, by Sandstone Gardens of Joplin
Cunningham Park

The tiered pedestal style of fountain sculpture is common, but there cannot be such a fountain anywhere with more meaning than the one in Joplin. This memorial fountain was dedicated last year on November 22 during the community service held on the six-month anniversary of the deadly tornado. The fountain’s design represents the tornado’s date of 5-22-11. The top bowl has five holes for the water to drain through, the second bowl 22 holes, and the third bowl 11 holes.

We got the story of the fountain’s creation from Christopher Cotton, City of Joplin parks director. “During the park clean-up,” he said, “Patrick Tuttle [director of the Joplin Convention and Visitors Bureau] and I were discussing putting the first of the 161 memorial trees in a concrete ring that was in the park. I met with Tuttle and Mark Rohr [city manager] on location to discuss, and the more I looked at it the more I was convinced that at one time it was a fountain ring. I had the parks crew dig it out, and sure enough it was an old fountain base.”

Brad Belk, executive director of the Joplin Museum Complex, discovered that in 1909 a 9-foot fountain had been donated to the park. “Pictures in the early 1920s showed only the ring remaining and planted with flowers,” Christopher said. “After getting Mark’s permission to re-create the fountain as a tribute, we got busy trying to re-build it. Max Carr at Sandstone Gardens designed, built, and donated the fountain.”

Joplin has another notable fountain in Spiva Memorial Park. At the corner of 4th and Main Streets, the park was built and donated by local businessman George A. Spiva in 1966. The park features a marble statue of a miner, in memory of Spiva’s father, standing in a pool that overlooks a waterfall and a larger pool with four statues of nymphs representing the four seasons.
ST. JOSEPH  |  Felice
1993, by unknown artist of Carrara, Italy
Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art

“Welcoming guests to the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art,” said Director of Marketing & Communications Jane Graves, “is a fountain that is perfectly placed in the rose gardens that line the walks leading to the main entrance. When a spacious addition to the museum was completed in the early 1990s, a benefactor of the museum commented that ‘the place is beautiful and the statue in the fountain will add the finishing touch.’”

The dedication plaque reads “In Loving Memory of Patricia Stewart Rogers by Her Sister,” and Jane says the statue has lived up to her name, which means “happy” in Italian. “Not only has she been the subject of both children’s and adults’ art classes, but her placement and her beauty have provided many photo opportunities for both residents and those passing through. She has been known to don garland or a Santa’s hat during the holidays, and she oversees many weddings in the gardens when the weather turns nice.” A loving tribute has become a community treasure.

CARTHAGE  |  Central Park Fountain
2005, unknown Italian artist
Central Park

As we searched for Missouri fountains, sometimes all we found were phantoms. Structures that had once delighted their communities survived only as photos on library websites and postcards on eBay. But the citizens of Carthage did not let that happen to theirs.

In 2005, the city department of parks and recreation undertook substantial repairs to keep the beloved Victorian fountain in Central Park in tip-top shape. Unfortunately, the central statue was beyond hope. “We did everything we could to save the statue, but it literally just fell apart,” Parks and Recreation Director Alan Bull told us. The GFWC Women’s Service League came to the rescue, spearheading a community-wide fundraising campaign to help with the plumbing repairs and to purchase a new statue from Italy that was as close to the original as possible. The situation was an echo of the fountain’s origin in 1900, when the ladies of the Carthage Federation of Clubs brought it to the park.
The water basin and the Carthage stone blocks on which the statue rests “have never been changed,” Alan said. Now the fountain continues to flourish as “a backdrop for many events that occur in Central Park,” said Wendi Douglas, executive director of the Carthage Convention & Visitor’s Bureau.

“Central Park was established in 1875 by a mayor with a heart for environmentalism,” she said. “There is a beautiful bandstand and wading pool with over 50 maple trees, a playground, statue of hometown boy Marlin Perkins, and a Veterans Memorial. The way the fountain is built makes it a perfect lunchtime bench or a great way to relax and watch the sunset.”

**CAPE GIRARDEAU | Civil War Monument**

1911, by J.W. Fiske Company of New York
Common Pleas Courthouse Park, 44 North Lorimier Street

It’s the oldest fountain sculpture on our tour. For just over a hundred years, a cast-iron soldier has stood atop a tiered pedestal that rises above a fountain pool “in memory of the soldiers of the Civil War.”

“My understanding is that the soldier is not shown wearing the uniform of either side,” said local historian Tom Neumeyer, who filled us in on the fountain’s history. “And I think the wording on the plaque is clear that the memorial is a non-partisan effort for all the soldiers, no matter which side, upon the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s beginning.”

The author of the book *Cape Girardeau Then and Now* and an active member of the board of directors of the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri, Tom told us that a ceremony on Memorial Day 1911 marked the dedication of the fountain, for which the $3,000 to cover its costs had been raised by the Women’s Relief Corps of the Grand Army of the Republic. It turns out that the soldier has many cast-iron brothers in arms.

“Ironton, Missouri; Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; and Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts are among the communities that have similar castings of the statue,” Tom said. “All of them share the same anomaly, the coat buttons the opposite way of convention,” right over left rather than left over right.

Not surprisingly for a fountain so old, it has had its share of vicissitudes. In the early 1950s, the basin was filled with dirt and planted with flowers. In 1961, the fountain was restored and a masonry-lined pool edged with red granite replaced the original iron basin. In 1982, the fountain was almost shut down rather than repaired. “Cooler heads prevailed,” Tom said, “and a re-circulating pump was installed. Private money helped defray the cost.” Several years ago, a falling limb from a nearby oak tree damaged the statue, but it was restored to like-new condition. “Over the years,” Tom said, “members of the Cape Girardeau Fire Department have maintained the statue and fountain on their own time.”

Partly because of Cape Girardeau’s location along the Mississippi, it was a key spot during the Civil War. Union troops manned four forts in the heavily fortified city during the war. The Battle of Cape Girardeau on April 26, 1863 was a fierce four-hour artillery barrage. And more than 100 Civil War veterans are buried in Old Lorimier Cemetery, the city’s original cemetery.

photos courtesy of Tom Neumeyer
Since fountain designers so often take advantage of the watery environment to populate the fountain with creatures that would naturally be getting wet, we thought we’d end our story with a few more of the unusual and entrancing characters we discovered in our fountain search.

**ST. LOUIS | Otter and Fish**
1995, by Robert Lee Walker of St. Louis
Missouri Botanical Garden, Kemper Center

Playful raccoons, peacocks, geese, otters, fish and other critters moved into the Kemper Center gardens in the mid-90s, all created by local sculptor Robert Lee Walker. Water sprays and jets in, out, and around the bronze animals. “I wanted to create realistic animals, but with a sense of whimsy,” Walker said in a 1995 interview.

photo courtesy of Missouri Botanical Garden

**ST. LOUIS | Elephant**
1989, by William Timym of England
Saint Louis Zoo

An authentic depiction in bronze of a 5-year-old male African elephant does with water what elephants love to do to cool off, and the result is this delightful fountain by the Zoo’s Living World building. The pool feeds into a cascading stream that carries fresh water into a cove. From there, the water flows into the south and north lakes. A pump connected to the crystal-clear stream re-circulates the cove water. The fountain was the gift of Sadie and Sidney Cohen. British sculptor William Timym also created the Zoo’s beloved statue of Phil the Gorilla.

photo courtesy of Saint Louis Zoo
Just how old are these horses? The records are ambiguous. On one hand, there is no question that real estate developer and philanthropist J.C. Nichols bought a Baroque-era sculpture in Venice and in 1924 had it made into a fountain for Kansas City. On the other hand, we found references that by 1994 the sculpture had sustained considerable damage, and the figures were recast in sandstone and replaced. Though this opens up fascinating questions of artistic identity, we’ll avoid them for now and just end our water-drenched tour by enjoying the sea horses’ unequivocal charm.

Thanks!
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