REVELATIONS IN SLEEP, STONE, AND WOOD:

The Vivid Dreams and Narrative Sculpture of Raymond Coins

The most prominent natural landmarks in the remote section of rural North Carolina where sculptor Raymond Coins lives are the Sauratown Mountains. Stretching in an east-west orientation between the Dan and Yadkin rivers in the northwestern counties of Stokes and Surry, these craggy volcanic ridges have been the source of myth and legend no doubt since they were first encountered by human beings more than 10,000 years ago. Their highest points--between 2,500 and 3,000 feet above sea level--are Moore's Knob/Hanging Rock, Sauratown Mountain, and Pilot Mountain. The latter peak is capped by a dramatic treeless dome of quartz, slate, and mica that can be seen for many miles in all directions, and the Saura Indians who once inhabited this territory called it *Jomeokee*, meaning "great guide." Early white explorers in this part of the Appalachian Piedmont named it Mount Ararat and circulated the legend that it was the island on which Noah landed his ark when the great flood described in the Old Testament began to subside. The lore of our own age identifies Pilot and its two companion mountains as cosmic energy centers that are reputed to attract extraterrestrial craft.

The Indians for whom these mountains were named were a Siouan people who migrated here in the 17th century to escape the disease and social problems that European traders had brought to their original home in the coastal plain of what is now South Carolina. Before the Sauras arrived, this territory was extensively explored and hunted by the Catawba Indians who lived further to the southwest, and artifacts from

both cultural groups can still be found in the creek bottoms below these mountains. It was these relics, simply but expertly carved in native stone, that provided the impetus for Raymond Coins' art-making activities. And Coins' art has itself become the stuff of legend.

Now in his early nineties, Coins is vague in his recollection of exactly when he took up stonecarving but remembers that it was sometime in the 1970s, after he retired from his former job managing a tobacco warehouse. He also recalls the circumstances that got him started. A young neighbor, the son of Coins' longtime friend Harvey Lynch, had found some Indian artifacts in a plowed field. Coins describes these stone objects as "a tommyhawk and a little Indian bowl," and says he bought them from the boy for fifty cents each. Something about them inspired him, so he took them home, found a couple of stones roughly their same size, and used a few farm tools that he had on hand to carve approximate replicas. Soon afterward he showed these copies to the owner of a cafe in the nearby town of Pilot Mountain, who bought them for three dollars--three times what Coins had paid the Lynch boy for the originals. This was encouragement enough for Coins to begin what soon became a post-retirement career. His so-called hobby eventually brought him the national acclaim that he so casually shrugs off.

*

Coins was born on January 28, 1904, and spent the first years of his childhood near Stuart, Virginia, about twenty-five miles from where he now lives. When he was seven years old his family moved to Stokes County, North Carolina, where his father bought a small farm. Coins grew up working on the family farm, and as he continued to

rely on his farming skills to make a living as an adult. He married his wife Ruby in 1927, and to support her and the three children they had together, he labored as a field hand for rural landowners in the area. It wasn't until 1950 that he was able to buy a simple one-story house and a little more than 100 acres in a quiet valley a few miles north of Quaker Gap. He and his wife have lived in the house ever since, although in recent years he has sold about twenty acres of the surrounding property. During the 1950s and '60s Coins used much of his land for cultivating tobacco, the North Carolina Piedmont's traditional staple crop, but he also grew corn, rye, wheat, and oats. To supplement his farming income he worked during the winters as manager of a tobacco warehouse.

While his work and family responsibilities occupied much of his time until he retired in the late 1960s, they didn't completely dominate his attention. Long before his artistic talent emerged, he began cultivating a deep spirituality, which manifested itself in his devotion to his church--a Primitive Baptist congregation in which he remains active to this day--and more dramatically in the vivid, symbolically loaded dreams he began having as a young man and continued to experience through his middle years. Although he says it has been a long time since he had such dreams, he has recorded several of them in the form of stone reliefs that he carved in recent years, and he still enjoys recounting these dreams in as much detail as he can remember. During an interview in late 1994, he seemed disinclined to talk much about his art, but as he exclaimed five or six times on that occasion, with almost boyish eagerness, "Now, I don't mind telling about my dreams!"

Which is exactly what he did for most of the interview.

As a devout Christian, Coins is a strong believer in divine guidance and revelation, and he claims to see evidence of these miraculous forces in his waking life as well as in his dreams. “I was showed everything to do,” he insists--clearly implying that it was God who showed him--“and I’ve stuckto everything I’ve been showed.”

As is the case with more than a few self-taught artists in the Bible Belt, Coins’ religion is the core of his life. He still gets excited describing the inner conflict he experienced more than sixty years ago when he had his first taste of heavenly admonition. “When I was first showed to join the church, I fought it for a year and a half,” he recalls. But he finally acquiesced and began attending services at Rock House Primitive Baptist Church, he says, and soon afterward a disembodied voice in the church sanctuary informed him, “God has give you us for a deacon.” Coins obediently followed the implied directive and was soon installed as a deacon in the church. Once in office, he began to involve himself in the politics of the Fish River Association, a regional confederation of Primitive Baptist congregations including that of the Rock House church.

It was around this time, during the 1930s, that the unusual dreams started. They were remarkably real to him, sometimes to the point that they included intense physical sensations. Given the centrality of religion in Coins’ life, he figured the dreams were divinely inspired in order to convey special information, including suggestions about governing the Fish River Association. Believing he was duty-bound to report these suggestions to his church and his fellow officers in the association, he did so. As he tells it, the result was ostracism by his fellow Primitive Baptists.

“The folks at the church wouldn’t even talk to me about my dreams,” he says. “Everyone turned against me, and it hurt me so bad I could hardly stand it. But I didn’t vilify ‘em, didn’t hold nothing against ‘em. I suffered so much I thought I’d go to preaching to relieve my feelings. But I had a dream that I was standing there in front of the church, and everybody in the church was coming around to shake my hand and telling me how good a job I’d done preaching, and I hadn’t preached a word! So I quit thinking about preaching right there. But I tell you, I went through something in Rock House Church!”

Despite the emotional pain that this situation caused him, Coins remained devoted to his church and endured the hostility of other church members until the unpleasantness surrounding his dream-inspired pronouncements were forgotten. His memory of the dreams stayed with him, but he learned to avoid discussing them with fellow congregants.

Among the dreams that made a particularly strong impression on Coins was one in which he and the pastor of his church traveled to “the Valley of Dry Bones.” Recounting this dream, which he later depicted in several of his stone reliefs, he says, “Me and Preacher Martin stopped at this little house at the head of the valley, and we looked down into the valley, and there was skeletons laying there in rows and rows as far as you could see. And then this gospel sound started coming out of that little house, and those skeletons just started rising up one after the other and coming to the house to hear that gospel sound.”

In another dream that he has illustrated numerous times in stone relief, he made a prophetic visit to the house he would later buy and retire in, seeing it as it would look

fifty years later. “I didn’t plant those two maple trees and that crabapple out yonder till after we moved into this place,” he explains, “but in that dream they were already there, and they looked just like they do now. And this white road come right down out of the sky by that crabapple tree, and I stepped up on that white road and just kept walking. I kept going higher and higher till I cometo a road that turned off to the right, and there was a little boy standing there who smiled at me, so I turned to the right. And I kept going on that road till I come to another road that turned off to the left, and there was that little boy smiling at me again, so I turned off to the left. And I followed the road on till there was a place where there was two turns--one going off to the right and the other one goig off to the left. Then I heard this voice that said, ‘Turn neither to the right nor to the left. And the next thing I know there was a big mocassin wrapped around me.”

He pauses to explain that he’s normally afraid of even the smallest snake, but that he felt unusually fearless while wrestling the giant “moccasin” entwined around him in this dream. “It was the best feeling I ever had in my life,” he declares with enthusiasm. “That big mocassin was bound to have been the devil, but I wasn’t afraid of him because I had that gospel feeling.”

Those who give credence to Pilot Mountain’s reputation for attracting extraterrestrial craft will no doubt take special interest in a dream Coins remembers having more than fifty years ago. It’s a dream that bears striking similarities to widely published eyewitness accounts of alleged U.F.O. abduction incidents. In it, Coins was standing under a grape arbor outside a small log cabin on the farm of his neighbor Thornton Smith, when he noticed “balls of fire coming down from the sky.” Instead of fearing the apparent danger posed by this fiery rain, Coins says, “I come out from under

that grapevine and walked out in it." Far from causing any pain, he insists that the experience of walking into the plummeting flames--like his previously described dream struggle with the demonic snake--gave him "the best feeling I've ever had." Just as he was beginning to savor the exhiliration, though, he recalls being suddenly transported skyward with startling speed. "I was picked up off the ground just like I'd been shot out of a big gun," he says. "I was moving so fast, and I mean I just kept on going way on up till I came to a white building in the air. And there was a kind of door in the side of it with the top part open, and I was hanging on that door by my arms, looking in where it was open there like a window. There were two people wearing white robes inside this white building. I didn't see their faces. Then a voice spoke and said, 'Let him come in. All he's ever done he didn't know any better.' And right there's where the dream stopped."

*

Coins says that his years of intense dreaming ended long before he retired and took up stone carving--"cutting rock," in his terminology--and it wasn't until relatively late in his art-making career that he began to illustrate these experiences in stone relief. Before that, he carved conceptually simpler pieces, usually inthe round. The replicas of Indian artifacts that got him started in this pursuit were followed by a series of bulb-headed humanoid figures that he calls "baby dolls." He initially carved these life-size or smaller sculptures of infants or very young children from soapstone and other sedimentary rocks that he found near his farm, but he later took to carving them from parts of fallen trees. He was still carving variations on this form when I first visited him in the mid-1980s. The mass-produced Cabbage Patch dolls were popular at the time, and

Coins greeted me on that first meeting with the announcement that he was almost finished cutting a Cabbage Patch doll of his own.

"Looks just exactly like a real Cabbage Patch doll," he boasted just before bringing out a small stone figure that looked like no such thing. Its stubby arms and legs were splayed out like those of a gingerbread man, and its irregularly rounded head lacked any defnining features save for two tiny slit eyes between puffy-looking lids and a similarly shaped mouth carved in relief.

This piece and Coins' other sculpted figures invite loose comparison to the work of artists ranging from self-taught African-American stone carver William Edmondson to the Olmec sculptors of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. They're as stripped-down and stylized as ancient Cycladic effigies, but they're almost brashly crude and awkward. Coming as he does from a no-nonsense Calvinist culture that eschews frivolity and elaborate ornament, Coins clearly takes pride in the directness and simplicity of his art, which he has self-mockingly characterized as "rough stuff."

The most ambitious examples of Coins' in-the-round figural sculptures are his roughly life-size depictions of men and women carved from the trunks and branches of mature trees. He has made and sold several such pieces over the years, usually in pairs, and they have been presented in exhibitions as portraits of the artist and his wife, although that may not have been his original intention in carving them. Even on this scale Coins dispenses with all but the most basic details, such as the roughly stylized eyes, mouths and (sometimes) ears. Far from resembling himself, his wife Ruby, or anyone else, these bald-pated, squinty-eyed figures suggest specimens of some mutant biped creature from outer space.

Coins' other in-the-round sculptures, in both stone and wood, depict wild and domesticated animals common to the farms and forests of northwestern North Carolina. Often these are even more formally reductive than the "baby dolls" and larger humanoid figures--sometimes to the point that they lack individually articulated limbs. In at least one case--a piece commissioned by a collector in the early 1980s--Coins carved a number of small animal and humanoid figurines intended to be displayed together as a tableau depicting the New Testament story of Christ's Nativity.

And then there are Coins' bas-relief stelae such as those on which he has illustrated several of his previously recounted dreams. He generally reserves this format for his more spiritual subjects, including the dream narratives as well as material from the Bible and references to his church. The figures in these reliefs strongly resemble those Coins sculpts in the round, with the same bald heads, small ears, and inscrutable faces.

Fourteen such figures appear in a stele that Coins made in the mid-1970s to commemorate the founding in 1889 of his regular house of worship, Rock House Primitive Baptist Church. At the center of this soapstone relief is a small figure standing before an altar or pulpit, but this portrait of the church's founding pastor is dwarfed by the image of the crucified Christ atop the peaked roof that stands for the church building. Also more prominent than the pastor's portrait are the Last-Supper vignette and open-Bible emblem that share the lower half of the composition. In this piece Coins uses relationships of scale to stress the overriding significance of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the holy scriptures in the Primitive Baptist world view. Many of the artist's works in stone have an aged, time-worn appearance, but this one looks positively ancient. Were

it not for the date and brief text incised at the bottom of this stele, it could almost pass for an early Celtic ritual site marker.

In one ingenious, double-sided stele that may be unique among his body of work, a portrait of Satan appears on the reverse side of a Garden of Eden vignette. The content and compositional format for this unusual piece was in part determined by the shape of the rock from which Coins carved it. The size and shape of the bulbous protrusion at the top of this stone slab suggests a human head tilted to one side on a broad torso formed by the slab's larger lower section. Using s rasp, handsaw, sander and other tools, Coins has articulated the features of this head, emphasizing the pointed chin that represents a goatee, a traditional distinguishing characteristic of Satan in popular illustrations. On the reverse side of this diabolic portrait, the rounded protrusion becomes the crown of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in an exceptionally animated version of the temptation of Adam and Eve. The devil portrayed in human form on one side of this piece appears on this reverse side in his serpent guise, undulating across the special tree's trunk just above the heads of the original man and woman. Depicted in the moment of yielding to the serpent's temptation, Adam and Eve are evidently so overjoyed in their transgression that they're dancing. Their right hands are joined , and Eve's legs are crossed at the knees as if she's doing a jig. Meanwhile, their left hands are raised above their heads to pluck the forbidden fruit.

Coins has rendered this archetypal scene in a style that might be "primitive," but it's as vivid in its way as his compelling accounts of the dreams he had so many years ago. For him, the Genesis myth and all the other stories in the Bible are no less real

than those dreams, which are themselves no less real than the hunks of stone and fragrant cedar from which he has carved his distinctive body of work.

At this writing, in 1994, Coins hasn't produced any new sculptures for three or four years, and he attributes the lapse simply to a lack of interest or inspiration. The audience and market for his work are larger than they've ever been, so he stands to profit handsomely from the sale of any pieces he might be moved to create in the future. But he isn't one to fake it, and lacking the requisite inspiration, he'll no doubt remain creatively inactive.

"I have to feel something," he says in explaining what motivates him to sculpt. "The spirit's got to be there." He compares his situation to that of a preacher: "Can't just no man get up and preach the gospel any old time. There's got to be a feeling to it."But Coins hasn't forgotten what it's like to be singlemindedly immersed in the creative process.

"When I was cutting on my rock, nothing would come on my mind to worry me, and I didn't count no time," he recalls. "I could work a half a day and it wouldn't seem like no time at all. I got as much out of that as any man could get.

"That's the best life anybody ever lived and the best feeling anybody ever had--me cutting on that rock."

Originally published in different form in Pictured in My Mind: Contemporary American Self-Taught Art from the collection of Dr. Kurt Gitter and Alice Rae Yelen*, Birmingham Museum of Art, 1995. Quotations from Coins are from my interview with him on December 1, 1994. Coins died in 1998.*