

## Field Guide to Coronado History:

### Coronado's Most Iconic Public Art

By Bruce Linder & Lisa Krause



There is a piece of important artwork in Coronado, a sculpture, that just radiates history — and represents the absolute best in public art with its clean presentation, mystical subjects, and renowned creator.

It sits in plain view but is routinely overlooked by those passing by. Its history and its “story” are the stuff of legend ... perhaps as important as the piece itself.

Its “story” begins at the turn of the last century with a messy divorce.

Future sculptor Donal Hord was born in Wisconsin in 1902. When he was but six years of age his parents divorced and, to escape, his mother moved the boy immediately to Seattle and then to San Diego. The boy had been born Donald Horr, but in a fit of new independence or spite, Donald's mom forever altered the boy's life trajectory by taking the final "d" in his first name and shifting it to his last.

The young artist soon gathered fame and expertise with a flair for distinctive sculptures with California, Mexican and oriental themes. Despite his soaring esteem, Hord struggled during the 1930s with little work or commissions during the Great Depression. Hord turned to the Federal Arts Project, a work-relief program, where he could earn a regular salary (\$75 a month) to produce works for public places.

It was then that Hord turned his eyes toward the city across the Coronado Ferry.

A new addition to Coronado High School had risen in 1938 at the corner of D Avenue and Seventh Street — a Depression era project by the Works Progress Administration. The new building, minimalist and relatively severe in appearance, held an expansive library and several classrooms. Coronado appealed to the WPA to add decorative architectural panels to the exterior to add a degree of artistic gravitas. Hord jumped at the chance.

The result was an accidental intersection of fate: a noted sculptor anxious for any commission and a school seeking inspiration and flair. The outcome might have been mundane, rushed, plain. Instead, an enchanting historical saga rose from Hord's passion — seven grand panels, intricately sculpted in Indiana limestone, to tell the sweeping saga of the land called California.

This sculpted relief was immaculate, strong in conception and craftsmanship and an exceptional blending of both history and a 30's style of presentation. Hord followed the "direct carving" school of sculpture, rarely working from a preliminary model but allowing the limestone to dictate form and curve.

Hord's central panel features the mythical isle of California and its Amazonian ruler Calafia. The rest of the composition symbolizes different eras or dimensions of California life. The figurative work is intricate with bold carved lines alternating with delicate soft chisel cuts. The panels are best

viewed in strong direct sunlight to fully accentuate artistic subtleties.

The panels were finished in late 1939 and mounted shortly thereafter. During the panel's dedication in February 1941, Coronadans spoke lavishly of Hord's work as a "lasting value to Coronado" and a "permanent contribution to the community's art resources."

The final dedication speaker that morning reflected on Hord's broader goals: "to recapture the colorful centuries of a golden past and to bequeath to us and to the generations behind us, a record which cannot be valued, and which will remain in Coronado centuries after this brief ceremony."

Fitting words — on this, our panels' 75th anniversary.

*Historical Note: Regrettably, Donal Hord's jewel is beginning to show its age. Weathering has taken its toll and this treasured Coronado icon may soon require professional restoration to return it to its true glory.*

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