

**Bronze Nymphs and Fluid Waterways in 1915:  
Anna Coleman Ladd's *The Rock and Flower***

In 1915, Anna Coleman Ladd completed a strange sculpture titled *The Rock and Flower* (Fig. 1). This monumental bronze work was first displayed at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Francisco, California. The expo was a celebration of the achievement of the Panama Canal. Spanning thirty years of labor, the canal was perhaps the greatest imperialistic mission ever accomplished. In short, the unimpeded waterway would connect the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean: and alas, man had conquered even the movements of the ocean.

Ladd's elemental sculpture *The Rock and Flower*, was first shown inside the manicured landscape of this transnational expo in California. Her sculpture however, resisted the obsequious pageantry of wealthy nations on display. Cast in bronze, *The Rock and Flower* shows two figures emerging creature-like from a buttressing set of rocks. It is a kind of mythical scene of birth: a pair of sinuously slashing figures orient the work vertically; and two mammoth boulders neatly construct the book-like frame of the composition. The sculpture dwells somewhere between the epic, the geologic and the human.

Entangled within a cavernous cleft of stone, two mostly mortal-beings hypnotically sway within the slab walls of earth. A man squats, and his neck gently hangs downward; his elbows each rest atop two respective pillars of earth, and his languid pair of hands droop with gravity. Poised inside the splayed gripping legs of this adult figure, a slenderer nymph-child reclines in repose. Together, Ladd's limp statues are trapped in some kind of primeval vaginal wound, perhaps even lathered in an ominous menstrual spillage: her sculpture is perversely vegetal, both fecund and deathly. There is a disquieting vulgarity to the entire scene.

How does this peculiar sculpture relate to early 20<sup>th</sup> century stories of American expansionist violence? Could Ladd's dissolving protean feminine spirit act as a recuperative tool in the face of global colonialism and the catastrophe of impending war? What can *The Rock and Flower* reveal about Ladd's more celebrated 1917 sculptural projects for the American Red Cross in Paris where she constructed prosthetic copper masks for badly disfigured WWI veterans (Fig. 2)? My project considers Ladd's sculpture, these types of question, and the global import of her work.



Figure 1. Anna Coleman Ladd, *The Rock and Flower*, 1915.



Figure 2. Anna Coleman Ladd, *WWI Soldier Facial Reconstruction Casts and Masks* (circa 1918)