

## Victor M. Contini Is Dead at 81; Translated Visions Into Bronze

By ROBERT McG. THOMAS JR.

Victor M. Contini, a fifth-generation artisan who helped transform sculptors' artistic creations into some of the nation's most notable statues and then translated his ancient mold-making craft into a space-age skill as an aviation pattern maker, died last Sunday at Vassar Brothers Hospital in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. He was 81 and lived in Esopus, N.Y.

The cause was complications from a stroke, his family said.

While they may seem so alive as to have stridden full-blown onto their pedestals and struck their compelling poses on the spot, the bronze statues that gaze out over battlefields, public plazas and city parks didn't just happen.

Between the artists' painstakingly sculptured clay conceptions and their lasting forms in bronze stand the stuccori, the mold makers whose plaster craft is an indispensable and

delicate link between artistic vision and metallic reality.

It is a process that has changed considerably over the years, but when Mr. Contini learned it as a boy at his father's studio on East 12th Street in Manhattan, it was as fresh as 15th-century Italy and every bit as delicate. For when the stuccore coats the clay original with soft plaster to make the initial mold, sometimes in a dozen or more pieces, the artist's clay creation is destroyed.

The hardened plaster pieces are then reassembled to make a mold, which is used to cast a rock-solid plaster maquette, which, in turn, is used to make further molds for use by the foundry in casting the statue in bronze.

Richard Stone, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's senior conservator, spoke admiringly last week of the unlikely precision of the multistep process. "Sometimes," he said, "you can see the artist's thumb print on the bronze."

Mr. Contini, whose grandfather Augusto worked for the Vatican, was at least the fifth generation of his family to practice the craft, said his son, Alexander. He said Mr. Contini's father, Attilio, had brought the craft to the United States in the 1890's.

Attilio initially worked in foundries, but his recognized skill allowed him to set himself and his sons up as independent craftsmen. Their commissions included Frederick Remington's "Bronco Buster," James Earle Fraser's "Theodore Roosevelt," an equestrian group in front of the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Shradys' "Gen. Ulysses S. Grant" in front of the nation's Capitol, several state memorials at Gettysburg and two West Point statues, Fraser's "George S. Patton," and Laura Gardin Fraser's "American History Panels."

Mr. Contini, who participated in the Normandy invasion in World War II, worked with his father through the 1940's, but as the demand for public monuments declined in the 1950's and newer and cheaper processes competed with his family's ancient skills, Mr. Contini went to work for Republic Aviation on Long Island, making plaster



1956  
Victor M. Contini, right, and his father, Attilio, prepare to make a cast for the Hans Christian Andersen sculpture.

### Harriet Bell

Rights Advocate, 72

Harriet Bell, a polio survivor and advocate of handicapped rights who directed the Polio Information Center from her bedroom as a resource center for the country's 250,000 polio victims, died last Sunday at her home on Roosevelt Island. She was 72.

The cause was cardiac arrest, Cathie Bell, one of her daughters, said.

Crippled by polio in 1954 at the age of 31, Ms. Bell spent the next 25 years living at Goldwater Memorial Hospital on Roosevelt Island, where she helped to raise her three children. As president of the community board of the hospital, Ms. Bell helped to write its patient's bill of rights.

In 1982, she received an award for her work on behalf of patients' rights from the Wonder Woman Foundation, an organization that gives grants to accomplished women over 40. In 1985, she became a co-founder of the Polio Information Center, creating the largest international data base available about the disease. She published the center's newsletter.

Ms. Bell is survived by her three children, Cathie, of Manhattan, and Lori and Douglas, both of Staten Island, and seven grandchildren.



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times, 1995

George Lober's statue of Hans Christian Andersen in Central Park, for which Victor M. Contini made the bronze-casting molds.

patterns for high-tolerance metal parts used in jet warplanes and eventually the space shuttle.

Even during his years in aviation, however, Mr. Contini remained on call for the family business, which his brother, Cesare, continued until his death in 1989.

The projects he worked on included Donald DeLue's "Rocket Thrower" for the 1964 New York World's Fair and Stanley Bleifeld's "Lone Sailor" for the Navy Memorial in Washington.

For all the imposing generals and war monuments, however, perhaps his most celebrated work, and certainly his most beloved, is a pair of distinctly unimposing statues in Central Park.

The sculptors were George Lober and Paul Manship, but as a generation of delighted children have had no real need to know, if there had been no Contini to make the molds, there would be no "Hans Christian Andersen" or "Alice in Wonderland."

In addition to his son Alexander, of Newburgh, N.Y., Mr. Contini is survived by his wife, Josefine; two other sons, Michael, of Pasco, Wash., and Richard, of Salt Point, N.Y.; a daughter, Katherina M. Osgood of Albany; two brothers, Orazio, of Ulster Park, N.Y., and Aniello, of Trumansburg, N.Y.; two sisters, Elena Pickles of New Albany, Ind., and Concetta Caycedo of Larchmont, N.Y., and seven grandchildren.

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