



ARCHIVING THE ARCHIVISTS:

A CERAMIC COMMISSION BY NUALA CREED

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Imagine walking into the sacred space of a church. The right and left sections of pews are filled with people and yet, you are the only breathing being. The room is pulsing with energy and yet, you are the only entity with a beating heart. Such is the experience of entering the Great Room of the Internet Archive in San Francisco. Here, two server towers hum with miniature blue LED lights blinking intermittently in alcoves at the back of the room and over one hundred pint-size vibrantly-colored, ceramic human figures stand at attention all facing the front of the room as if listening intently to an invisible speaker on the stage. These clay people are the work of ceramic artist Nuala Creed.

It is fitting that an innovative institution like the Internet Archive, would offer the rare invitation to an artist to create such a body of work. The Archive's impressive goal is to become a contemporary Library of Alexandria; to digitally preserve swaths of the Internet along with books, television, film, radio, and music in order to give researchers and the general public permanent, unfettered access to this rich cultural record for generations to come. Founder Brewster Kahle decided to honor individuals who had dedicated at least three years of service to the Internet Archive with a ceramic portrait of them after he encountered the 2,300-year-old Xian terracotta warriors in China. Thus, along with its other ambitious goals, the Internet Archive committed to creating an archive of the archivists and to displaying the entire collection of Creed's sculptures in its temple-like headquarters, a former Christian Science Church.

Nuala Creed, an Irish-born artist who is based in the San Francisco Bay Area, took on the daunting commission five years ago. One by one, Creed got to know her subjects through interviews and photographs. A keen observer, she carefully chose the distinctive characteristics and gestures she would highlight in her ceramic sculptures. Every archivist is depicted in his/her own style of dress and is often holding an object that is significant to them such as a book, a camera, or a mandolin; one man cradles his newborn baby. These “props” come to stand as personal attributes similar to those found in portrayals of mythic gods and religious saints, such as Neptune’s trident, Juno’s peacock, or St. Jerome’s desk.



Creed models each figure in two or three sections for practical and artistic reasons. This enables her to fire the pieces in her home studio kiln and to easily transport them to the Archive. Creating the head separately gives her the opportunity to hone in on the facial features of the sitter. The sculptures’ bright colors come from oxides, underglazes, and stains. (Interestingly, the Xian warriors were also originally painted in vibrant colors.) Creed fires her figures to cone three (approximately 2100°F).

Standing at around three-and-a-half to four feet high, these sculptures don’t fit the traditional expectation of a monumental statue honoring a notable historic or contemporary individual. The archivists stand just a bit higher than the church pews that they fill. Viewed from the back, they could be full-sized figures sitting in the pews. Despite their diminutive height, they exude personality and energy. Their individuality draws visitors to identify with different ones. Though the room is vast, an intimacy is forged through the personal connections. People have told Creed there is such a presence to the archivists that they feel as if they could sit and have a chat with them.

Taking in the one hundred plus sculptures, one is reminded of the great human effort and sense of humanity behind the Internet Archive where the main intention is to preserve humankind’s culture. Creed’s series offers a snapshot of San Francisco’s culture in the early twenty-first century. Sadly, it also already serves as a memorial—Aaron Swartz, an Internet archivist and emphatic proponent of public access took his own life in 2013 after a harrowing situation in which the U.S. government pursued him for illegally accessing data from MIT.

Clay is a particularly appropriate artistic material for this project since it has been used for centuries to communicate human activity in image and text. Cuneiform, one of the earliest writing systems, dating back to the fourth millennium BCE, was inscribed with a stylus on clay tablets. To make a ceramic piece is to interact with all four basic elements—earth, fire, air, and water. Though technology and the Internet may seem distant from these four life-giving elements, Creed’s archivists and the endeavors of the Internet Archive invite us to realize they might be a lot more closely connected than we thought.

Learn more about Nuala Creed at www.nualacreed.com

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Image opposite left to right: Ted, Mary, Brewster Kahle and Aaron Swartz.

