

## PUBLIC ART

# Ghosts Waiting for a Train

*If these statues could talk*

by JENNIFER POLLAND

Most Syracusans know the ghostly white figures inhabiting the abandoned platform of the old New York Central Railroad station on Interstate 690 West. A narrow-framed woman stands patiently. A workman wearing a newsboy cap looks over his shoulder. Two nuns draped in habits sit quietly in reflection. A lone father mourns the absence of his children. A conductor stands erect, keeping everlasting vigil.

For 23 years, these sculptures have been waiting patiently for a train that never arrives. Syracuse artists Lawrence “Duke” Epolito and Larry Zankowski created

this sculptural tableau to represent the thousands of travelers who waited on that very platform when it was part of the New York Central Railroad station from 1936 until the early ‘60s. They called

it “Waiting for the Night Train.” The figures, made from plaster, polyresin and

cloth, create an eerie effect, reminding by-passers of a time gone by. The muted statues echo the silent, gray station.

These life-sized figures have become so familiar to the people of Syracuse that they almost look as if they could talk. And if

they could speak, what would they say?

“Hundreds of cars whiz past every day,” said the slender woman. “Some slow down and take time to notice us. Others don’t.”

“I’ve seen a lot happen to this city over the past couple of decades,” said the conductor.

“We’ve been here for so long, we have gotten to know you just as well as you know us.”

“Waiting for the Night Train” was a type of civic accident: it was not commissioned by the city or by a private company. In 1982, Epolito and Zankowski planted these sculptures on the bare train platform as an anonymous experiment, a moonlight public art project. The sculptors saw a void, and they filled it with art. In 1982, Epolito told the Syracuse Post-Standard that he created these figures in hopes of “increasing awareness of the arts in Syracuse.” And he did. But what did the statues think of that?

“We were a gift from our creators to the city of Syracuse,” explained the ghostly father figure. “My children and I were the first to be waiting for this train. When Epolito and Zankowski put us here, everyone in Syracuse was talking about us. People loved us so much that the sculptors continued to create more of us. And now we’re all stuck here. Eternally waiting.”

“I think we’ve become one of Syracuse’s favorite pieces of public art,” the elderly nun said. “We belong to everyone.”



Photo by Justin Sawyers

## Spirits of Syracuse Past.

“You don’t have to pay to come see us, or deal with intimidating guards,” the workman said. “And we sure as hell ain’t snooty, like some other art I’ve seen.”

Like any good piece of public art, “Waiting for the Night Train” has become an integral part of the Syracuse community, provoking reaction and response from people who don’t normally notice art.

“Every Christmas for more than a decade, a secret Santa wraps warm red scarves around our necks,” the younger nun said. “On St. Patrick’s Day, we get green scarves which we are actually still wearing right now. And sometimes, if there is a big game at Syracuse University, we will even get orange scarves.”

The scarf benefactor is not the artist. “I don’t know who does it, but I’m glad they do,” Epolito said to the Post-Standard in 1999.

Although most of the community cherishes and nurtures these sculptures, they are vulnerable to the weather and vandals.

“It seems like at least once a year we’ve been vandalized,” the conductor said. “We have been maimed, severed, beaten and stolen. We have been marred with graffiti and knocked down by wind, rain and snow.”

“My children have been kidnapped,” the bereaved father said. “When we were first put here in 1982, my daughter was

snatched from me in the middle of the night. I prayed that she was safe. Later, someone found her in a cemetery in Fayetteville and brought her back here. Now both my daughter and my son are gone, and I am still standing here, waiting and hoping for them to be returned.”

Each time one of the sculptures has been damaged, letters of sympathy and encouragement have poured in from the community. Companies have contributed materials and individuals have donated money—even if it was only \$3 or \$5 donations. In 1990, a charity basketball game, Night Train Hoopla, raised almost \$1,000 toward restoration of the sculptures.

Successful public art brings a community together and stimulates the imagination. There is something about these sculptures that speaks to Syracuse. They are timeless: they could be anyone and anywhere. The white silhouettes capture the sense of eternal waiting—something everyone identifies with.

“Years have passed, and our train has still not arrived,” said the thin woman. “Sometimes I can’t help but wonder: what are we waiting for?” ■

Jennifer Polland graduated from Colgate University, where she earned bachelor’s degrees in English and classical studies and covered arts and for the Maroon News. She has also interned at WHERE Magazine in New York City.



Photo by Justin Sawyers

**Spirits of Syracuse Past.** Sculptures by Lawrence “Duke” Epolito and Larry Zankowski have intrigued motorists on Interstate 690 since 1982.