

Gilbert Barrera Sculpts Justice

By Amanda Reimherr Buckert



Photo by Kim Palmer

The front steps and walkway to the majestic Bexar County Courthouse are once again adorned by the fountain that was there the day the doors opened in 1896. Although the original statue that complemented it may have crumbled into ruin, a new statue has taken its place. Now, Justice — packed with historical significance and symbolism — sits gracefully perched atop the restored fountain.

In 1896, the fountain was purchased new from J. L. Mott of New York and stayed in the east courtyard of the courthouse until 1927 when it was moved to the pump-station park on Market Street. By 1997, its dilapidated and broken pieces eventually ended up in storage at a San Antonio Water System warehouse.

The fountain was recovered and returned to the Hidalgo Foundation so that restoration could begin after the Foundation's president, Tracy Wolff, began a search in 2003 for missing courthouse artifacts. Then in 2006, the Foundation commissioned local artist and sculptor Gilbert Barrera to restore the fountain and create a statue. Through the Hidalgo Foundation, the Herrmann Family donated \$85,000 to create a new sculpture and restore the older parts of the fountain.

"The restoration of the beautiful fountain by the Herrmann Family Foundation and the graceful sculpture of Justice by Gilbert Barrera is a true San Antonio 'family' story," said Hidalgo Foundation founder and President Tracy Wolff. "Both the Herrmann and Barrera families have multiple generations that have served and continue to serve our legal community proudly, and this is a unique way to honor their profession."

Barrera is the son of local well-known attorney Roy Barrera, Sr. and graduated with a Juris Doctor from Texas Wesleyan University School of Law. "After graduating, I just went right into art because it is my passion," he said. Barrera is also the chairman emeritus of the Texas Society of Sculptors and the founder of the Sculptors Invitational, an official Fiesta event now in its seventh year.

Barrera describes himself as becoming one with his sculptures and said he enjoyed every bit of the almost three years it took for the fountain and statue project. Barrera extensively researched both the fountain and the statue. He found a company in Alabama that did cast iron restorations and that had bought the original sand molds of J. L. Mott fountains, including the one the Bexar County fountain was poured from. He took a drive to see if it was what he was looking for and was delighted to find that it was almost an exact match. "The fountain was stored in pieces on pallets, and it had 20 coats of paint on it, half an inch thick of lime crustation and rust," he said. "I was so glad to have the original molds so that I could redo this cast iron fountain properly."

He said the sculpture part of the project took a bit more creative work. "There is some version of Justice at almost every courthouse in the world. More people know and recognize her than even the statue of liberty," Barrera said. "The original statue on the fountain was one of Aphrodite, but I wanted to be original and started to look at the history of Justice."

Barrera traced the roots back to a goddess named Themis and said he wanted to come up with a composition of who she was during her time of popularity, which was about 800 B.C.-1 B.C. "I wanted to create my sculpture as a sculptor at that time would have made her," he said. "I discovered that Themis was one of the children of the gods Gaia, goddess of the Earth, and Uranus, god of the heavens and the sky. She was also the sister

or half-sister of Aphrodite. So, I immediately knew I was onto something with the serendipity that the original fountain sculpture was of Aphrodite."

Themis was the goddess of natural order and defined the night and day, the hours and the order of the seasons. Three female figures at the base of the fountain represent Themis' first generation of children, her three daughters. Each daughter represents a season — spring, winter, and summer; fall was not recognized then. "It is jam packed with symbolism. I designed her to stand on a globe, representing her mother Gaia and the ribbon floating behind her is a symbol of her father, Uranus," he said. "Themis became known as Justitia because she was the first counselor and gave advice on the natural laws and order. Eventually, we came to know her as Justice."

Barrera's Justice features her classic symbols of the blindfold, the sword and the scales. None of the details is without meaning; he researched the true meaning of each piece and added his own symbols to help embody their profound significance. Barrera chose to emphasize these well-known accessories by placing gold leaf on them so that they stood out from the rest of his sculpture.

"The scales were the common man's measuring device, and I designed them as they would have been during her time," he said. He added that they scales help her weigh both good and bad evidence, and so to reflect that, he has a snake on top of one scale for the bad evidence and a dove on top of the other to represent the good. "Then, beneath one scale is a Gemini to show the he said/she said aspect of witness evidence. The other has beneath it a dagger and a paper scroll to symbolize the weapon and the written law," Barrera said.

Justice's sword symbolizes the idea of enforcement and that, for there to be enforcement, there must be a respect. Her blindfold represents the fairness of her decision without regard to power or popularity. Barrera did, however, add a bit of humor into it all because the blindfold is not completely sealed to her eyes.

Barrera had such a clear vision of what he wanted her to be like that he bypassed some usual steps in his creative process and went right to his wax maquette. Once approved, he created his four-foot wax model and then carted it off to the bronze foundry, where 120 pounds of bronze was poured. He said it took more than 200 individual

steps between the wax mold and his finished work of art.

Despite the thought and time that went into every painstaking detail of the piece, Barrera said he is bothered by the questions about the statue's nudity. He said he doesn't think the people who have raised the issue completely understand the historical significance of it. "At that time, all Greek gods and goddesses were depicted with little or no drapery. In that day, nudity was a sign of purity, virtuousness, and justice. It is an authentic representation, and otherwise, all of the meaning of it would be lost and it would have been tantamount to killing the art," he said. "Besides, she reveals nothing more than does a child's plastic doll. I am glad the city and the county kept it the way it is for the sake of pure art. She is an accurate and meaningful reflection of what Themis, Justitia, and Justice stand for. She means a lot to the art world, a lot to the legal world, and I want her to mean a lot to the San Antonio community."

County Judge Nelson Wolff said that before the renovation of the front lawn and installation of the fountain, the space was just a pass-through for people coming into or leaving the courthouse and/or waiting at the bus stop that was in front of the Courthouse. "Now we come out of the courthouse daily and see people posing for pictures in front of the fountain or on the steps of the Courthouse. And with the façade lighting it's also a beautiful urban space that people can enjoy in the evening," Judge Wolff said.

On a recent sunny afternoon, tourists and locals alike were congregating around the fountain. Some posed for pictures in front of the fountain; others zoomed in for pictures of Justice herself, and a few just stood looking up at her. John Ruiz had a camera hanging around his neck, a backpack over his shoulder and Segway under his feet. "I'm from Chicago and just here for a visit. So far, this is my favorite stop on this Segway tour around downtown (San Antonio)," he said still looking at the statue. "I am not really an art kind of guy, but this is beautiful. It really is amazing. I have never seen another Justice like it, and I can't take my eyes off of it."

Sitting at a table in the coffee shop across the street, Barrera looked out the window and watched as dozens of people came to admire and photograph his work. "It is rare that an artist is able



Photo by Kim Palmer

to see people enjoy his work like this, especially on such prime real estate," he said. "It is just so wonderful to sit here and see how many people come by and look at it and take pictures of it."

Barrera said it is a not just a sculpture, but a landmark. "I think it has the potential to become one of the most photographed places in San Antonio, especially with the beautiful backdrop of the red brick courthouse. She will be a marquee for photography. I hope she will be to the courthouse what the boots are to North Star Mall," he said with a grin.

Judge Wolff said he is pleased and proud of the 18-foot fountain and statue structure. "We first must give Gilbert credit for restoring the beautiful Justice fountain that is now the focal point of the Courthouse as you approach it from any point in Main Plaza or the adjoining streets," he said. "There is no greater symbolic sculpture that exemplifies the justice system than Justice. It's an outstanding piece of public art and a great addition to the historic fabric of downtown San Antonio."



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