

1954

# Aesthetic Fingertips

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## Recommended Citation

Olson, Gwen (1954) "Aesthetic Fingertips," *The Iowa Homemaker*: Vol. 34 : No. 7 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/homemaker/vol34/iss7/3>

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# Aesthetic fingertips mold a life

by *Gwen Olson*

*General Home Economics Junior*

**S**CUPTOR CHRISTIAN PETERSEN is a rugged, silent man with a humorous, dancing glint in his eye. His personality is such that students register in his class to get to know him. But how many do know him?

## Studies sculpturing

How many know that he was born in North Slesvig, now a Danish province, in 1885? When he was 9, he and his parents came to the United States and began farming in New England. Petersen became interested in art as a boy in Newark, N. J., and studied art in both public and technological schools in Newark and at the Newark School of Design.

He then went to New York City and learned drawing from George Bridgeman and sculpturing from H. H. Kitson. By reproducing Kitson's clay models in stone and casting models, he gained working knowledge in the field of sculpturing.

For many years, Petersen studied die cutting and then he chose steel engraving as a trade. He engaged in this work so he could capitalize on his training in drawing and modeling. His job was to translate other men's designs into stubborn metal. This was done by calculating the size of the depressions to correspond to the elevations of the design. He rose above mechanical reproduction and acquired a reputation as a die cutter of metals and jewelry. Petersen opened his own

shop and before he was 30 was recognized as one of the three best steel engravers in the nation. At 28 he was listed in "Who's Who in Art."

The first years of his career were successfully spent in the East, but unexpected events took him to the Midwest, thus introducing him to Iowa. He received a commission to design a metal for the Equitable Life Insurance Company, Des Moines. Since he had only written data to work from, the project progressed slowly and he decided to come to Des Moines to study the features of the man he was to reproduce on the metal. Petersen found he liked Iowa and wanted to return one day. He did return in 1934 when he was called to Iowa State to create the bas-relief outside the Dairy Industry Building.

## Reflects Culture

Dr. R. M. Hughes, past president of Iowa State College, was instrumental in bringing and keeping the sculptor on campus. Hughes was interested in integrating more culture on the campus and so in 1937, he asked Petersen to stay on as instructor and campus sculptor.

Petersen says now he never thought he would enjoy teaching, but as he looks back, it is part of his most satisfying work. He feels bringing art into the lives of students is a gratifying experience. His other great satisfaction was helping beautify the campus.

Probably all students are fami-



Petersen's skilled hands quickly create a human figure from a mass of clay.

liar with his nine pieces of sculpture on campus: the watering cows in Dairy Industry Court, the students in the Library, the children playing in front of Home Economics Hall, the sculpture behind Roberts Hall, the Indian women on the Memorial Union fountain, the bas-relief at the Men's Gymnasium and his works in Veterinary Medicine

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## Aesthetic fingertips

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Quadrangle and the Agronomy Building.

Petersen's nine works have an estimated value of a quarter million dollars. This cost is based on the average fees of commercial artists. In his work, the sculptor grasps familiar realities in forms people can instantly understand. The quality of his sculpture lies not in its unusualness, but in its simple, pleasing expression of the ordinary. This simple style comes from his belief that confusion has no place in art. His work is amazing in its expressive and comprehensive details.

### Off-campus sculptures

The campus sculptures are not his only work. Besides conducting an average of 50 class hours each quarter, he also accepts commissions from independent organizations. One of his "off campus" works is the statue of St. Bernard that now stands at the Mount Saint Bernard Seminary. Last year many students saw the statue when they went to the Science Building.

Most of Petersen's studies are done from his personal experiences. He represented the terror of a Mississippi flood by a mother holding her baby in her arms and stepping away from the rising waters. She is looking back, and the viewer can almost see the water at her skirts.

His symbolism of drought is equally moving. A mother sits defeated but defiant, no longer able to feed her child. Her muscles and hands are hard from much work, and she sits waiting because she can do nothing more.

### Future work

A planned project is a sculpture of larger-than-life sized-figures to be placed along Lincoln Way at the east entrance of the college. Petersen has been working on these figures for 7 years, and they are now nearly completed. They, too, will beautify the campus.

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