

Desert Christ Park

In the five decades since it was first dedicated in Yucca Valley, California, “Desert Christ Park” has endured a major earthquake, Satan-referencing graffiti, pipe-wielding teenage vandals, a five-year-long legal fight, and even the destructive powers of its creator, former aircraft patternmaker Antone Martin. But Martin had in mind an earthly fate far more dreadful than these when he began creating his glowing, larger-than-life-size concrete figures, grouping them along a hillside in the Mohave Desert to represent scenes from the Bible’s New Testament: The artist had envisioned sculptures of sufficient physical and spiritual weight to warn against—and, if need be, to withstand—atomic warfare. As Martin explained to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter several years after he had moved from his home in Inglewood, California, to live and work on the Yucca Valley site: “Civilization will certainly go down beneath atomic destruction against the religious people of the world get together. My statues may bring mankind together before we are obliterated completely.” He had carved his first figure of Jesus around 1949-1950, while he was still living in Inglewood, after a scientist told him “reinforced concrete would withstand atomic assault.”¹

The Park today provides no mention of Martin’s disquieting vision of atomic destruction, although visitors may acquire other background on the artist and the 3 ½ acre site (dedicated “to the concept of peace and goodwill on earth”) from a brochure and website produced by its current caretakers, the Desert Christ Park Foundation. And yet, to this previously uninformed visitor at least, the artist’s message was clear on first viewing: his stiff, stunned figures—highly detailed and finished in a light-reflecting mix of silica and plaster, each distinctly outlined by a deepening blue sky—seemed as though they had been embalmed in white ash, or frozen. They eerily invoked thoughts of a post-apocalyptic world.

¹ “Artist Makes Statues to Survive Atom Blast,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9 January 1955.

Too, the artist's critique of those intent upon worldly things—a reference I discovered later in a 1958 article in which Martin described becoming “alarmed at the drift toward gross materialistic concepts” and the need for “a ‘concrete religion,’ something people could actually feel with their hands”—was conveyed in his doleful figures of “ordinary,” modern people, in among the biblical figures. A businessman, stopped in time, carries a briefcase; a jumpsuited worker has a newspaper tucked under his arm and tears raised on his face.²

Although aspects of Desert Christ Park resemble a kind of Bibleland in Concrete (and many articles over the years have made note of the similarities between its high desert landscape and biblical settings) much of its power, to me, comes not from its recreation of familiar bible stories but from its maker's effective use of setting—the brown hillside dotted with desert scrub, twisted Joshua trees and cottonwoods; the seemingly scaled down, boxy houses clustered in the valley below; and the blazing sun overhead—to create a shifting sense of drama, a heightened awareness of the figure of Jesus, and to effectively translate into visual form his concerns about materialism and atomic obliteration.

Antone Martin: “To give it away”

Who was Antone Martin? Unfortunately, printed details are often contradictory and unsubstantiated. Several accounts report that Martin (sometimes identified as Frank Antone Martin in Desert Christ Park Foundation literature) was born in 1887; one cites his place of birth as “near Cincinnati, Ohio.” He was orphaned young, and, after escaping a foster home at age 12, he was said to have lived independently, working at a broad range of jobs, including mining camp roustabout. In 1916, at a mining camp in Oatman, Arizona, he

² Vollie Tripp, “Yucca Valley's Unique Desert Park,” *The Villager* (March 1958).

married Alice Walsh, widow of early aviator and casualty Charles F. Walsh. (Charles Walsh's plane crashed before 50,000 spectators gathered at a fairgrounds in Hamilton Township, New Jersey, in 1912.) Antone and Alice later had two children, Eugene and Frank.³

A 1939 *Los Angeles Times* article provides the first available account of Antone Martin, *artist*. "Employed on a WPA [federal Works Progress Administration] model project," Martin created a detailed miniature of covered wagon pioneers and presented it as a gift to the City of Los Angeles. His "Westward Ho!" scene, made out of molded plaster and "discarded odds and ends," depicted a man walking alongside an oxen-drawn wagon, followed by a lone dog. The unnamed *Times* writer was especially taken by Martin's placement of finely crated figures in a landscape of "desert and mountain, with miniature rocks, hills, brush, gravel and sand."⁴

Ten years later, the *Times* would again produce a feature on Martin, this time comparing his skilled work with plaster (he was by then a senior pattern-maker for Douglas Aircraft) with the larger-than-life-size cement figures he sculpted nights and weekends at his Inglewood home. "It's the same kind of creative work, except that at home I can choose my own subjects," the "long-haired, Van Dyked sculptor" told the reporter. Prehistoric animals were his favorite, Martin said, and pointed to the huge saber-tooth cat and prehistoric lion he had fashioned out of "lamp-black cement" in his backyard. Also on display were several oversized human figures: "a nude, symbolizing the spirit of flight; another diving into a lily pad (spirit of the garden); a symbolic girl clasping a dagger behind her back (spirit of Hollywood); a dancer ('Miss Grace'); and a bare-torsoed workman lifting a weighted bar

³ See Desert Christ Park Foundation website, www.desertchristpark.org; Jack W. Kriege, "Desert Christ Park, One man's monument to his religious convictions," *Desert Magazine* (December 1981): 37-38; Beverly Beyette, "Braids Tied Under Her Chin, Excitement of 1st Family Airplane Flight Recalled," *The San Diego Union*, 18 August 1961.

⁴"Covered Wagon Miniature Presented City By Artist," *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1939.

(“Modern Atlas”).” The artist told the reporter he did not sell any of his work. “It’s more fun to give it away,” Martin said.⁵

Park Beginnings: The Savior That Nobody Wanted

Desert Christ Park began with one sculpture that Martin had tried to give away—a three-ton, steel-reinforced concrete figure of Jesus, arms raised in benediction. Still working at Douglas, Martin made the statue during his downtime and offered it to the National Parks Service for placement in the Grand Canyon. When his offer was refused (a law prohibits the installation of statuary in the Canyon) Martin announced to reporters that he would give the figure to anyone who would display it publicly.

Eventually Reverend Eddie Garver, “Desert Parson” of the Yucca Valley Community Church, said he would adopt the sculpture that reporters had taken to calling “the Savior that nobody wanted.” Martin drove from Inglewood to the high desert and discovered that travelers on State Highway 62 would be able to see the statue from either direction if it was placed on the intended hillside 50 feet above the roadway. He agreed to its relocation. Garver and a friend hoisted and trucked the ten-foot high figure over 130 miles to Yucca Valley, using a borrowed crane, block and tackle, dock-side loading rollers, and a truck just slightly heavier than its cargo. *Life Magazine* documented the journey of the new “Desert Christ” into the “extreme southwest reach of the Mohave.” The statue was positioned by two-dozen volunteers and the park dedicated on Easter Sunday 1951.⁶

⁵ “Sculptor Puts Grace in Air Parts—Statues, Too,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 1949.

⁶ See the following *Los Angeles Times* articles: “Yucca Valley New Home for Christ in Concrete,” 17 March 1951; Charles Hollinger, “Desert Christ Park—A Symbol,” 16 December 1965; “Patience of Job,” 4 November 1995. Also, *Life Magazine*, 25 April 1951, and Howard D. Clark, “Hi-Desert Shrine Park,” reprint of pamphlet published in Yucca Valley, circa 1958.

Martin returned to Inglewood. By late 1952, he had produced a second statue—a seated, 15-foot-high figure of Jesus surrounded by smaller, standing figures of children. He moved this one to Yucca Valley, too, and called the grouping “Suffer Little Children to Come Unto Me.” Again, when questioned by a reporter about his motivation, the artist referred to his concerns about atomic annihilation. “I have made figures of all kinds, but these are my first two religious statues,” Martin said. “I made the first Christ statue after an atomic scientist friend of mine described the world as it would be during an atomic war. His story was one of horror. And I believe if religious leaders don’t get together and cast aside their differences to combine in an all-out effort to stop war—and they have the power as a unified force to accomplish this—then such a war is inevitable. I think religion is vital to the establishment and preservation of peace and if I can do my part to bring people’s attention to this fact by making them aware of Christ, then I think I have accomplished something.”⁷

Martin must have felt he had not sufficiently drawn viewers’ attention to his cause. Within a year of transferring the second figure to the desert, he retired from Douglas Aircraft, and, unaccompanied by his wife, moved into a trailer at the foot of the Park site. Garver welcomed him. The two spoke of plans for more displays, including a grouping of the twelve Apostles, a Garden of Gethsemane with Jesus and the sleeping disciples, Jesus and the woman at the well, a chapel of native stone, and a vast bas-relief reproduction of the Last Supper—all of which Martin would later accomplish. Although the artist called the move “temporary” when he first arrived, he never returned to the city. Using his own funds (later supplemented by donations) Martin labored steadily on Desert Christ Park for eight years, enduring “biting winds and searing desert heat.” He produced more than 40 larger-

⁷“Huge Statue of Christ Erected in Yucca Valley,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1952.

than-life-size sculptures on site—the smallest estimated to weigh about four tons and the largest eighteen.⁸

The Desert Sculptor

Except for the “Little Chapel” of stone and mortar Martin built with his friend Frank Garski, the artist seems to have worked alone to create his massive works, and he believe he had “originated” his process. As he described his technique to reporters, he began by embedding steel rods (three per sculpture) into blocks of cement, then formed “a layer of heavy wire netting” over the framework and worked in a “rich cement mixture.” After the cement was allowed to set, but before it hardened, he shaped the figure’s general outline, using “a tool resembling a pick chisel.” He applied more layers of cement and worked by hand to gradually form finer details. The artist finished the figure with a “smooth coating of rich silica sand and white cement.” He estimated that a “lesser figure” might take about a month to construct using this technique.⁹

But before he set to work on his statues, Martin clearly calculated their placement, determining if they should stand in groups or singly, in sun or shadow. Walking through the park, one can see that the figures of Jesus have been placed to face the sun, so they glow with greater intensity than the others. (They also face the development below.) Turned to one side or shadowed by different statues, the features of the other figures shift according to cloud cover and time of day. A 1963 article tantalizingly suggest that Martin had been a set designer in his youth and that he sometimes spoke about “the early days of Hollywood.”

⁸ “Sculptor Near Completion of Desert Shrine,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 1954; Tripp, “Yucca Valley’s Unique Desert Park.”

⁹Ibid. For description of sculptural technique see: Tripp, Joan Wilson and Carol Evans, Desert Christ Park brochure (Yucca Valley Park & Recreation District, Yucca Valley, CA, circa 1970.)

While these assertions have not been confirmed, the tiered placement of the statues and the dramatic use of light do suggest a stage set. Still more articles imply the influence of another early vocation. “Martin’s concrete figures of prehistoric animals are on display in museums throughout the country,” one claims, while another extends his work’s placement in “museums around the world.” None are specifically named, but “a saber-tooth tiger” created by Martin was positioned near the highway in Yucca Valley and was said to “attract wide attention” with its “static ferocity.”¹⁰

Desert Christ Park, too, was attracting crowds. Martin told one reporter that his creation was drawing 50,000 visitors annually. By now his park included a performance element, too—though only on weekends. A tall man with long white hair and “a stringy white goatee,” Martin went about his business during the week, traveling alone at great speed “in his beat-up car...or sitting quietly by himself in a bar, nursing a beer.” But on the weekend, he would trade his usual “cement-spattered pants and shirt” for “a white shirt, bolo tie and pressed pants.” And Martin would trade in his taciturn weekday ways to host the weekend visitors. Wearing “his Sunday straw hat,” he would greet his guests, and “explain each piece of art, pose for pictures, and visit with sightseers.”¹¹

Broken Noses, Changing Fates

Antone Martin was the first to deface the statues of Desert Christ Park. Although “Desert Parson” Reverend Garver had helped launch the Park by accepting Martin’s first statue and by offering land for more, his conception of the site diverged greatly from the image held by the artist. In early May 1957, when Garver proposed they charge admission to

¹⁰ Ed Barnum, “The Story Behind the Hi-Desert Shrine,” *Desert Magazine* (December 1963): 24-25; “Huge Statue of Christ In Yucca Valley,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1952; Tripp.

¹¹Ibid.

the site, Martin protested vigorously, retorting: “My statues belong to all mankind. No one should ever have to pay to see them.” He promptly knocked the noses off all the figures, except the statue of Judas. “I spared Judas on purpose, as a symbol,” he later explained.

Within a few days, Martin was back, restoring the noses. Reconciliation between the Desert Sculptor and the Desert Parson seemed likely. In June, however, Martin changed course and made it abundantly clear he was through with Garver: he hired a bulldozer, and after receiving permission from the owner of an adjoining property, moved twenty statues. Some were further damaged in the move and Martin set out to repair them.¹²

During late 1957 and early 1958, the park’s boundaries were reconfigured and Martin completed his 75-foot-by-32-foot bas-relief reproduction of the Last Supper. (Actually, all but the head of Jesus is in bas-relief; the portrait is three-dimensional and surrounded by an open window, through which visitors may gaze out on the valley.) This colossal sculpture—thirteen figures on a 9-foot scale, gathered at a 30-foot-long table—was to be the artist’s last major undertaking. Never in good health while he labored at the park, Antone Martin died on December 23, 1961 and was buried at nearby Twenty-Nine Palms. Alice Walsh-Martin and their two sons survived him.¹³

For many years, the future of Desert Christ Park seemed secure. In accordance with Martin’s wishes, the site was administered and maintained by the Yucca Valley Parks and Recreation District. No admission was to be charged for the “publicly-owned, non-denominational park, open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.” But in 1987, the “publicly-owned” aspect of Desert Christ Park came into question. Five county residents,

¹² See Dan L. Thrapp, “Bible Statues Lose Noses in Dispute,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 May 1957; “Sculptor Takes Statues From Religious Park,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1957; and Charles Hillinger, “Desert Christ Park—A Symbol,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 December 1965.

¹³Tripp; Desert Christ Foundation website, www.desertchristpark.org.

represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, filed suit against the Parks and Recreation District to have Martin's park removed from public taxpayer support, asserting that it violated separation of church and state provisions of the state and federal constitutions.¹⁴

The legal battle took years to make its way through the courts. A local Save Our Park Committee raised \$12,000 to help the county fight the lawsuit. When the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court ruled in July 1991 that Desert Christ Park violated the state constitution by showing a preference for a particular religion and by using government property for religious purposes, the county appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Early in 1992, the nation's highest court allowed the lower court's decision to stand. The county was to divest itself of ownership.

That was also the year the park was significantly damaged in a major earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. Sculptures were uprooted and cracked; the torsos of some figures were torn away from their cement-rooted feet. The park was littered with ruined statues—the result of a natural disaster far greater than anything its maker had visited upon it.

What private party would want to adopt the site and its rubble, never mind restore the figures' missing hands, heads, and feet? Surprisingly, a local institution stepped up the following year. With the agreement of Martin's heirs, the Hi-Desert Nature Museum, a non-profit educational organization focused on desert wildlife, minerals, and Indian artifacts,

¹⁴ Wilson and Clark, Desert Christ Park brochure. On the lawsuit, see Carl Love articles in *The Press-Enterprise*, including: "Yucca Valley park unconstitutional, lawsuit charges," 26 November 1987; "Religious statues stir debate," 13 January 1987; "Chamber of Commerce offers to take control of Christ Park," 16 January 1987.

purchased the property for \$350—its appraised value, minus the estimate cost of bulldozing and hauling away the statues.¹⁵

Fortunately demolition did not occur. The Museum lacked the staff, funds, and the inclination to do much for the site beyond simple maintenance. The non-profit “wasn’t so much interested in the statues as the history behind them,” a Museum registrar explained; and even the \$3,000 they spent annually for insurance and cleanup was taxing them. Museum staffers were delighted, then, when local builder Wolfgang Maschler offered to help restore Martin’s creation. He had walked through the park and found himself taken with its lingering beauty.

By 1996, Maschler had formed a separate non-profit for the park’s administration, the Desert Christ Park Foundation. With a crew of volunteers including youth groups from the neighboring Evangelical Free Church, Maschler worked long days to clear the land of dead scrub and damaged trees that made passage difficult through the site. But work crews left at sundown, and sometimes they would arrive in the morning to find teenage vandals had visited the park overnight. They would “knock the heads off the figurines, break arms from statues or damage anything else nearby,” a reporter noted. In March 2000, after vandals toppled a figure of Jesus and scrawled “666” on the statue’s forehead, Foundation volunteers organized volunteers to drive through the property at night.¹⁶

Maschler, who died unexpectedly in early 2003, developed a multi-year improvement plan for the property. With some donations, volunteer labor, and a Community Block Grant, the group has installed perimeter fencing for security and temporary walkways for access to

¹⁵ Michael McBride, “Biblical park gets name back,” *The Press-Enterprise*, 23 March 1993 and Lauralee Ortiz, “Group plans salvation of Desert Christ Park,” *Hi-Desert Star*, 24 January 1997.

¹⁶ Alisa Poole, “Vandals attack religious statues at Desert Christ Park,” *The Desert Sun*, 1 April 2000.

the statuary; graded the parking area; landscaped; upgraded the park's deteriorating irrigation system; printed park brochures; and developed a website. Planned statuary repair by a qualified sculptor and the construction of a visitor's center await sufficient funds.

The park seems in sympathetic hands. Although Foundation literature makes no reference to the sculptor's fear of atomic destruction, this dedicated group is clearly committed to offering the park in accordance with Martin's wishes—as a gift to all who venture there. “The park will always be open (daylight hours) free of charge, to the public,” states a Foundation fact sheet. And perhaps the site's awkward, wind-swept statues, which strangely convey both foreboding and peace, will lead visitors to reflect upon the rest of Martin's weighty concerns, which remain urgent to this day.