



Figure 1. John B. Flannagan,  
*Monkey*, Arizona State  
University Art Museum, Gift  
of Mable Davis James.

**Death and Mystical Liberation in  
John B. Flannagan's *Beginning***

John B. Flannagan (1895-1942) is best known for his zoomorphic sculptures. Flannagan chiseled these small images from field stones that he collected because they sparked what he called an "occult attraction."<sup>1</sup> The natural quality of the field stone was undisturbed by his simple but precise direct-carve method, as seen in *Monkey*, (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The immediacy of his approach was essential to the creative absorption that enabled him to expend a great energy to produce, during one period of his career, a sculpture a day. Flannagan was so totally absorbed in his work that in 1934 he had to spend seven months in a sanitarium because of the intense strain. His psychiatrists tried to lessen the creative compulsion that isolated Flannagan from the world around him, Flannagan only resented their efforts.<sup>3</sup> He felt that "creation is revelation— to that instrument of the subconscious, in the hand of the sculptor, there exists an image in every rock. The creative act of realization merely frees it."<sup>4</sup> 'Truth to material' was the essence of his compulsive obsession to create.

In *Beginning*, (Figure 2), 1941, Flannagan was forced to the less physically exhausting method of clay modeling because of a serious automobile accident he suffered in 1939.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this accident Flannagan suffered extensive damage to his head. A series of four operations on the brain were undertaken which resulted initially in his loss of speech and periods of depression. Flannagan wrote of this, "...since my surgical experience, I have some little difficulty speaking — at least, it causes me to speak slower than ever. As a matter of fact for awhile right after the operations, I couldn't speak at all, which for an Irishman, would make it fatal."<sup>6</sup> To continue working he had to resort to power tools and clay modeling to avoid the exhaustive strain that stone carving would have placed on him.

The small bronze *Beginning* was the last work completed by the artist. It is an especially significant work because it typifies the tragic "mystic liberation"<sup>4</sup> Flannagan chose for himself. Flannagan committed suicide

on January 6, 1942, just six weeks after he had completed the clay model for this small bronze.<sup>5</sup> His last letters speak of this work and also of the ultimate end to which he seemed serenely resigned.

It was on November 21, 1941, that Flannagan finished this small work and sat down to write his wife, Margherita:

It is consummated – *Beginning* is done as an act of gratitude – perhaps not full-bellied, but my kind of feast. I'm glad – another step – next *Pietà* and the figure, they are a stride in this the year of completion.

Who is gloomy? There is nothing about the inexorably ultimate of what I said and do say – anyway I'm speaking of being prepared. There is no tragedy in going when it is felt that it only is the passing of an identity. The spirit survives always and please God the work of that spirit likewise if great lives on wanting no name identity to be a part of the vast reservoir just as the soul is. Jesus and Gautama both whisper to me. Mystic Liberation. After the spring show [Major retrospective, Buchholz Gallery, New York, March 18 – April 11, 1942] I shall never exhibit more – and perhaps it's time to go – and this is forboding when the spirit is tired – sure sign that the work is done. Until then we have tools and stones – and my pipe – these have not betrayed.<sup>8</sup>

In a letter to Curt Valentin Flannagan referred to his "accident" of 1939.



Figure 2. John B. Flannagan, *Beginning*, 1941, cast bronze, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Oliver B. James.

I'm putting everything I ever had into the work for this forthcoming show. [Retrospective,] All my life has been but a preparation – not for the show, but its works, notably "Pietà." Then and only then I'm finished – perhaps. I wrote you once before that I couldn't die in Boston because I couldn't feel free to go with my work undone – or incomplete and it was sheer "will-to-live" that made me recover even when it was attempted suicide, because I was not yet ready for that mystic liberation – not ready for rest. My forboding is it's time to go when the spirit is tired, that sure sign the work is done – and until then I go on with the companionship of tools and stones and my pipe. These have never betrayed.<sup>9</sup>

To Carl Zigrosser he jotted a few lines:

I've just spent a grateful day by completing in clay that old opus of birth *Beginning*. That card I sent you on my birthday should have read – Sentence "life in Solitary." Even so I have tools and stones and my pipe and want no more.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3. John B. Flannagan, *(Mother and Child)*, Arizona State University Art Museum, Gift of Mable Davis James.

The Christology that Flannagan evokes with *Beginning* is a theme seen in *Not Yet*, (Figure 3), 1940, and in other earlier works.<sup>11</sup> The title of *Not Yet*, completed about a year before Flannagan's death, discloses a premonition of Flannagan's tragically predestined "heritage," a step toward his ultimate end. In *Beginning* the naked infant lies in its mother lap, an image as universal as it is monumental in spirit, it transcends the boundaries of religious doctrine and is clearly a manifestation of Flannagan's isolated faith. Seen against the tragic suicide that ended Flannagan's life, it assumes a significantly profound prophetic meaning.<sup>12</sup> It recalls the heroic dialogue of Michelangelo's with this theme. Like Michelangelo, there is for Flannagan a universal metaphysical link between this theme and his own spirituality. He wrote of this universality only six months before his death.

In the austere elimination of the accidental for ordered simplification, there is the quality of the abstract and lifeless... the artistic representation of the organic and living now take on an abstract lifeless order and becomes, instead of the likeness of what is conditioned, the symbol of what is unconditioned and invariable, as though seeking the timeless, changeless finality of death, sculpture like this is inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

In Flannagan's *Beginning* the naked madonna powerfully conveys the psychic power found in her archaic past. Symbolic of life, fertility and vitality she cradles

the universal image of hope, the naked infant, symbolic of the human soul, between her splayed legs. Into these universals Flannagan instilled his own paradoxical meaning. He noted on the edge of a drawing how he felt about this theme:

The profoundness and pity of a mother [huddling] her dead – so instinctive that impulse to cover – and in making the two – as one . . . we get the perfect symbol of death – return to bring part of the mother principle as we all shall and be covered by *motherearth*.<sup>14</sup>

Flannagan's sense of fate was distorted by his compulsive nature. During the period after his "failed suicide" of 1939, he appears to have drawn an imaginary point in time, that once reached, would hold his "mystical liberation" from the pain of his creative obsession. The works, *Beginning* and *Not Yet*, are not only the apparent culmination of a creative theme that Flannagan had made his own, but are also his spiritual and psychological epitaph.