

What does a sarcophagus from Italy have to do with a Virginia mausoleum?

By [John Kelly](#)

If anyone knew what to do with Eliza's white marble sarcophagus lid, **Edeltraud Johnson** figured, it would be her neighbor **Claire McArdle**.

After all, [McArdle is a sculptor herself](#), trained in Italy and adept at chiseling a block of stone until a recognizable figure emerges.

And recognizable Eliza certainly was — to someone, at least. Carved to look as if she rested atop a funeral bier — her eyes closed, her hands clasping a cross, her hair fixed in a somewhat antiquated style — Eliza looked like a real person, not some generic Artemis or Athena.

“When we saw it, it just really spoke to us, especially to my husband,” said Johnson, whose tech entrepreneur spouse, **Terry**, purchased the life-size sculpture on the Colorado couple's trip to Florence in 2001. “It's beautiful and peaceful — so very, very peaceful. When you look at it, it goes right through you and just touches you.”

Terry died in 2010. In 2017, Edeltraud was preparing to sell their house outside Longmont, Colo. For 16 years, Eliza had rested near their indoor-outdoor pool, but at 4,800 pounds, she was just too big to bring to Johnson's downsized home. She asked whether McArdle would take Eliza off her hands.

McArdle was raised in Bethesda, Md. Growing up in the Washington area meant being able to visit the National Gallery of Art. As a girl, she would often wander its rooms, drawn to statues by **Rodin**, **Moore** and **Degas**.

After graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1981 with a fine arts degree, McArdle settled in Seattle to teach. On a visit to Carrara, the Italian city known for its marble, she became entranced by the sculptural process: how slabs of stone were cut from the mountain, transported down winding roads, then worked first with pneumatic hammers, then pneumatic chisels, then hand-wielded chisels, then rasps and files.

“You basically remove everything that's not the image that you're trying to sculpt,” she said. “All of that has to go away.”

McArdle knew this was what she wanted to do with her life.

“I basically quit my job and sold everything — all my studio equipment and my car — to get enough money to live there modestly for a few years,” she said.

For the next two decades, McArdle spent half of every year amid the marble quarries of Tuscany, working alongside third-generation stone carvers. At the end of the day, they would shuffle back to their homes — McArdle among them — dressed in powdery coats of stone dust.

Over time, McArdle established herself as an artist, with works in public and private collections around the world. She now lives with her husband, **Steve**, on a ranch near Longmont, north of Boulder. When Johnson asked whether she would take the sarcophagus lid, she arranged for a flatbed truck to carry it to her studio.

“There’s no question you just don’t see that kind of carving anymore,” McArdle said. “I have a lot of respect for the piece.”

The sculpture isn’t ancient — it was completed around 1970 by a man named **Dante Gamba** — but it is well crafted. It depicts **Eliza Smith Howland Remey** (1814-1872) in a Renaissance style. The stitching on the pillows under her head is magnificent, as is the drape of the shift she wears and the folds of the blankets she rests upon.

“What makes Italian marble so famous is that these quarries have marble that has a certain crystal structure that’s really good for detail,” McArdle said. “This particular piece has what’s called a rasp finish. It’s soft, but not highly polished. You get a sort of skin quality.”

With Eliza came a receipt from the **Raffaello Romanelli** studio in Florence, where the sculpture was made before languishing for 40 years until purchased by the Johnsons. Noted the receipt: “We know that this was ordered in Florence by an American architect called Remey who died before his project of a family tomb was completed.”

McArdle was curious. Who was Remey? The name was enough of a clue to send her to the Internet and then to the library at the University of Colorado at Boulder. There, she and Steve found a self-published typescript that told a fascinating story.

“Sitting at a table, we started reading about Eliza,” McArdle said. “It was like a treasure hunt.”


What they realized is that Eliza is apparently the last surviving statue from one of the oddest places ever to be built: the Virginia mausoleum of **Charles Mason Remey**.

Tomorrow: *We enter the crypt.*

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