

John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum, sculptor of Mount Rushmore, was born 25 March 1867 in Ovid, Idaho. The son of Danish Mormon immigrants, he lived in a polygamous household until the age of five, when his mother, Christina, left the family. He spent most of his childhood in Fremont, Nebraska, where his father, James, practiced medicine. Young Gutzon Borglum quickly discovered his love for drawing and by the age of fourteen knew he would be an artist.

In the early 1880s, Borglum worked as a lithographer's apprentice and fresco painter in Los Angeles, California. He began studying at the San Francisco Art Association in 1888. A year later, he married fellow artist Lisa Putnam, and the couple moved to Europe. There, Borglum gained recognition as a painter, receiving memberships in the Society of Beaux-Arts and the Royal Society of British Artists.

In 1901, Borglum separated from his wife, set up a studio in New York City, and devoted himself to sculpting. He gained instant recognition, due in part to the fame his brother Solon had already achieved as a sculptor. In 1904, one of Gutzon Borglum's works won a gold medal at the Saint Louis World's Fair, an accomplishment that led to other successes.

Borglum married Mary Montgomery in 1909, and they had two children, James Lincoln and Mary Ellis. In 1915, he accepted a commission to sculpt a Confederate memorial on Stone Mountain in Georgia. Disagreements with his sponsors left the project unfinished but gave Borglum the experience he needed for another colossal mountain carving, the Mount Rushmore memorial in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

State historian Doane Robinson had originally conceived of immortalizing western heroes in the rocky spires of the region's "Needles" formation. Upon being hired to undertake the project, however, Borglum lobbied to carve the likenesses of United States presidents from an entire mountainside. In 1927, the sixty-year-old sculptor began blasting rock from Mount Rushmore. A lack of regular funds and dangerous working conditions slowed the project at various times, but the flamboyant Borglum proved to be an effective promoter of the monument, which took nearly \$1 million and fourteen years to complete.

Gutzon Borglum died 6 March 1941 in Chicago. Less than seven months later, Lincoln Borglum finished his father's most famous work.

by B. Katie O'Mara

Dakota Images



Gutzon Borglum

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