

The Washington Post

[Museums](#)

Memorials to Gandhi, Einstein share a surprising common bond



Tourists pose at the Albert Einstein statue at the National Academy of Sciences. (Kate Patterson/For The Washington Post)

By Menachem Wecker January 23

With January temperatures predicted to be considerably colder than the District's relatively warm December, two residents are clinging unabashedly to summer footwear. Outside the National Academy of Sciences on Constitution Avenue between 21st and 23rd streets, Robert Berks's sculpture depicts Albert Einstein seated and sandal-clad, holding a book. A mile and a half up 21st Street, in the park circumscribed by Massachusetts Avenue and Q Street, Gautam Pal's Mahatma Gandhi statue — a gift from

India's government installed beside its embassy — wears the same footgear as he strides forward with a walking stick.

Gandhi's sandals, which along with his eyeglasses and staff were among the few possessions the man famous for living the simple life left behind after his assassination in 1948, are to be expected in the statue memorializing him, which was dedicated in 2000. Although Gandhi wore "proper Anglicized footwear" as a teenager, he opted, after his South African civil disobedience campaign, for "customary Indian dress." That included sandals or meant walking barefoot, notes Dennis Dalton, Barnard College professor emeritus and author of "[Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action](#)." Gandhi's "extraordinary effectiveness came from a determination to achieve consistency between personal and political realms in all aspects of his behavior," Dalton says.

Einstein's clothing is considerably less iconic — and political — than Gandhi's, although Trevor Lipscombe, co-author of "Albert Einstein: A Biography," notes a famous 1945 picture of Einstein wearing sandals at the beach. Einstein was also famous for not wearing socks, adds Lipscombe, who directs Catholic University of America Press.

The story goes that Einstein sought sandals in a Long Island general store in the summer of 1939. Because of Einstein's thick accent, the shop owner heard "sundials." He happened to have one in stock, and confusion ensued. When all was sorted out, Einstein purchased the shop's lone available sandals — a women's pair, reportedly size 11. "I think the story ends up with the store owner and Einstein playing the violin together," Lipscombe says.

Berks's sculpture of Einstein, unveiled on April 22, 1979, was modeled on a bust that he sculpted from life in 1953. Einstein was dressed casually, and the sculptor decided to depict the scientist as he appeared, a move that Robert Oppenheimer resented in the late 1950s. "Einstein was the most audacious man I ever met, and you've made him a humble old man," he said. Further criticism followed the three-times-life-size,

\$1.66 million sculpture at the academy. A 1979 Newsday article suggested it looked “almost like a vagabond,” and Paul Richard’s 1978 review in these pages called it “gross as well as trite.”

Among the thousands of documents related to the sculpture in the National Academy of Sciences’ archives are many complaints to then-academy president Philip Handler. G.M. Temmer, the director of Rutgers University’s Nuclear Physics Laboratory, offered to chip in \$100 to “defray whatever expenses are involved in stopping the project,” which he called an “abomination” that could “only serve as humiliation for those who try to honor him.”

History has been kinder to the sculpture and its attire. Lipscombe says Einstein’s “fairly casual” clothing and appearance make the sandals preferable to formal attire. And the book displaying Einstein’s research which he holds in the sculpture also memorializes his intellectual achievement, adds Lipscombe, who admits he has grown fond of the sculpture over the years.

“Einstein had no real truck with certain conventions,” agrees Peter Galison, co-editor of “Einstein for the 21st Century: His Legacy in Science, Art, and Modern Culture,” and a professor at Harvard University. The sculpture seems “to aim toward the older Einstein, more at ease than he was at earlier times,” he says.

Margaret Olin, who holds joint appointments at Yale University, where she studies theories about commemoration, offers a different perspective. “The Einstein sandals mean ‘casual,’ as though he takes his scientific work wherever he goes, even when on vacation,” she says. Gandhi, however, is “purposefully striding in the attire for which he is famous.”

The sculptures are so different in style that Olin says “it’s unlikely that there is anything to the resemblance or a cross-town dialogue.”

But if you exit the Indian Embassy, cross the street and allow your eyes to dart immediately beneath Gandhi's sandals, you'll find the inscription: "On Gandhi's 70th birthday, Albert Einstein wrote, 'Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.'"

Wecker is a freelance writer.