Since the 1930s, the life-size bronze warrior Tommy Trojan has been the unofficial mascot of USC and a central campus gathering spot.

Now he has a female counterpart at USC Village — the $700-million complex of residential colleges, shops and restaurants just north of the main campus.

The new development is the university’s largest construction project, and USC President C. L. Max Nikias from the start saw a sculpture as its centerpiece.

Tommy Trojan, modeled after USC football players, flexes every muscle in his body at once. Nikias wanted the new statue to do something perhaps equally impossible: embody the breadth of campus diversity.

That’s what he told local sculptor Christopher Slatoff, whose work includes the new “Enduring Heroes” memorial to soldiers in Pasadena.

Tommy Trojan, meet your female counterpart: Hecuba, queen of Troy
Nailing down the concept

The sculptor pored over images, which he taped around his Lincoln Heights studio, and studied subtle differences in coloring and finish on ancient Greek bronzes at the Getty. He read from "The Iliad" and "The Aeneid. "I listened to lectures on Greek tragedy. He watched movies about Ancient Greece — and said he got goosebumps seeing Katherine Hepburn play Hecuba in "The Trojan Women."

Meanwhile, Nikias sent a steady stream of suggestions. On a visit to the Acropolis in Athens, he admired the caryatids' braids and texted photos to Slatoff, asking him to finish on ancient Greek bronzes at the Getty. He read from "The Iliad" and "The Trojan Women." He studied subtle differences in coloring and texture; found it too reminiscent of the "Trojan Women." His sculpture had to look as though it were shot out of a ceramic-like shell. When heated to 1,700 degrees Fahrenheit, the wax melted and molten bronze could be poured into the voids.

Slatoff began shaping Nikias' vision of Hecuba, he said, was a model of resilience. "Hecuba was Priam's wife, and the mother of Hector and Paris, familiar to many from "The Iliad." In some accounts, she had as many as 19 schools at USC." Hecuba was a queen of Troy in Greek mythology. "She’s putting the armor on Hector. So what I wanted to do was have her with the helmet extended out here, where if you stood underneath her, it would be like she’d be putting the armor on for you when you leave USC — your diploma as your armor. But in the end, look what I'm doing, I'm militarizing it. I'm taking the queen of Trojans, I'm taking the female character, and I'm making her, once again, merely the cheerleader."

Patina specialist Karl Reichl...
file, Slatoff polished and perfected.

“Now comes the fun part: the patina,” he said. He had spent months studying how to achieve the texture and tones Nikias wanted — heating the bronze with a torch and spraying on chemicals to change the surface composition. Scrub it with cupric nitrate for greenish tones, with ferric for a brownish red. In places, he polished to let the raw bronze show through.

In early April, Slatoff, son at his side, arrived at Nikias’ office with photos and a sample of the patina. He straightened his shoulders and held his breath.

“Christopher, you make it look so real!” Nikias said.

Bringing Hecuba home

On a Friday night in July, a fully assembled Hecuba was strapped onto a flatbed truck and driven 390 miles south. USC Village project director William Marsh, with the help of a structural engineer and a dozen others, figured out how to cradle the 3,600 pound sculpture onto large furniture dollies, push her across the plaza and slowly rock her upright with a forklift. They built scaffolding and a chain-rig system to hoist her up in the morning, when the president would decide exactly how she should be positioned.

It had been more than seven years since USC had first announced its project plans, three years since the groundbreaking. The campus had overcome early opposition from neighborhood activists — agreeing, among other things, to pay $20 million to support affordable housing in the area and $20 million for street upgrades. Now, the fountain was up and running, the 180 trees were planted, the residential halls were furnished, ready to house 2,500 students.

When Nikias arrived to see Hecuba — framed by a California coastal live oak, lined up with the new clock tower — he admired her greenish tint and the way it harmonized with the new buildings’ brick facades.

Hecuba looks so majestic, so regal — she’s beautiful, he told Slatoff. But could her arm perhaps be lowered a little so that it wasn’t covering her neck? And on her right hand, he said, the bracelets were not quite of the era. “Those could be removed,” Slatoff said. Nikias nodded.

He circled the sculpture, craning his neck, studying the patterns, the braids, the sunlight on the ribbon’s curves. He examined the three quotes etched onto the statue and checked that the English translations from Euripides’ “Hecuba” matched the ones he had chosen and handwritten in ancient Greek:

“Those who have power ought not exercise it wrongfully, nor when they are fortunate should they imagine that they will be so forever.”

A crewman hoisted Hecuba off the ground. Nikias directed her to be rotated about three inches to the right, beckoning toward the main campus.