

Art of frozen motion propels Kent sculptor

By: Bob Deakin 11/01/2002

It's a most wonderful time of the year for Denis Curtiss.

The Kent-based sculptor has just shipped some of his biggest works to singer Andy Williams, in Branson, Mo. The animal sculptures, some weighing in excess of 650 pounds, were picked up by crane and put on a flat bed truck last Friday morning in preparation for the journey.

A veteran of the Peace Corps, Mr. Curtiss, 55, has been creating large steel sculptures of animals and people for the past seven years, ever since he and his wife, B.J., returned to this country.

Following a two-year stint in the Peace Corps, which ended in the mid 1970s, he and his wife taught for the American School in Switzerland, which had opened a branch in Greece. After a few years, they moved to Saudi Arabia, taught school there, and stayed for the next 10 years. They finally returned to the United States in 1993, after a total of 18 years abroad.

"We came back home and things got started here and they've just taken off," he said with satisfaction. Once back in the U.S., Mr. Curtiss, who had taught tech courses overseas, decided to explore his artistic side. The results of that exploration can be seen in the yard of his home along Route 7 in Cornwall Bridge, formerly the site of Harry Holmes Antiques.

The Oliver Wolcott Technical School graduate was Mr. Holmes' stepson and, as a teen, apprenticed with the dealer, for many years a cabinetmaker and antiques restorer. Mr. Holmes passed away last week after a long illness. Trained in woodworking, the sculptor was no stranger to creating figures out of big blocks of hardened materials.

"I've always been sculpting," he said. "There were a couple of people in the sculpture business that were very influential in my design, which is revolutionary. That's what makes it work and that's what makes it sell. I'm building representational works because everything is fabricated in this shop out of eighth-inch sheet metal-either steel or bronze.

"Dancers are what I sell the most," he said, gesturing toward photos of life-size wood carvings depicting dancers in various poses, each balanced so delicately on toes or fingers that they appear ready to float away. He also has dancers made of steel on display in his yard and showroom. He hasn't sculpted with wood since he switched to metal, though Mr. Curtiss is not likely to be turn his back on any art form for long.

"I wanted permanence and it just kind of came together," he said of the switch. "All my pieces are three-sided. That's what lets the parts become juxtaposed."

The artist makes precise patterns for each piece, which are then cut out and welded together. The pieces fit together like puzzle pieces, forming angular but surprisingly delicate shapes, particularly when seen from a distance. Each creation, human or animal, appears poised for movement.

"Yes. Hopefully there's motion," he said. "Sculpture, forever, has been to take a static figure and try to make it move. If I've done that for you then I've been successful."

"Most people don't see it," he added ruefully. "It can't be explained-you have to just see it." He also noted out that all of the pieces have an aloof air. "The animals don't look you straight in the eye, they kind of look over your head," he said.

Originally trained in mechanical drawing, Mr. Curtiss has a natural bent for physics and a keen mind for numbers and geometry. He has never taken a welding class but has picked up pointers and techniques from many professionals.

He raves about the craftsmanship of W.J. Layman and Sons in Warren. "They're my mentors," he declared. "I put everything together and they come down here and 'finish weld.' They are masters of welding. When they weld it, it's perfect the first time."

Layman & Sons also gives him occasional help lifting heavy pieces and provide another benefit. "They have a water-jet cutter," the sculptor said. "With 60,000 pounds of water pressure, they can take my drawing and cut out a 12-foot giraffe."

The cutter is like a tremendously powerful sandblaster with a computerized directional guide. Once the pieces have been cut out, Mr. Curtiss takes over and finishes the creation. His art originates from his own inspiration and the thought of a sale doesn't enter his mind during the creative process, he said.

"The job that you saw loaded is just a person who discovered that they have the same taste that I do," he said. "I build for myself. If [the sculptures] sell, they sell."

According to Mr. Curtiss, Andy Williams has friends in the area that may have alerted him to the sculptures, or it's possible that he drove by and noticed them. Almost 20 pieces will eventually find new locations at the singer's home or at the Andy Williams Moon River Theatre in Branson.

Mr. Curtiss appears to be done with extensive traveling for the immediate future though he never quite knows what's coming around the corner. "There's no way to know in this business," he said. "You certainly wouldn't want to try to do what I do to put your

children through school. I call it the sixes. I've gone six months with no sales, whatsoever, and I've also sold six pieces in one day to six different people."

Mr. Curtiss's work can be seen at the Interlaken Inn in Lakeville, which has him keep a fresh supply of dancers and animals on the property.

The well-traveled artist has no misgivings about his trade and eagerly looks forward to each new day, which he begins at 5 a.m. with two hours of reading. He and his wife are active in animal rescue, especially with the Little Guild of St. Francis, in West Cornwall, and he refers to himself as an "ad hoc" historian of Cornwall.

"Happiness and tranquility" are two words he uses to describe his life these days. "I've been all over the world and there's no place like Northwestern Connecticut," he said.

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