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FEBRUARY 2004

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The Expatriate

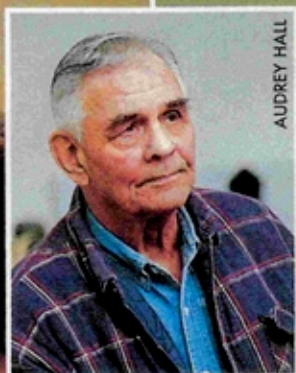
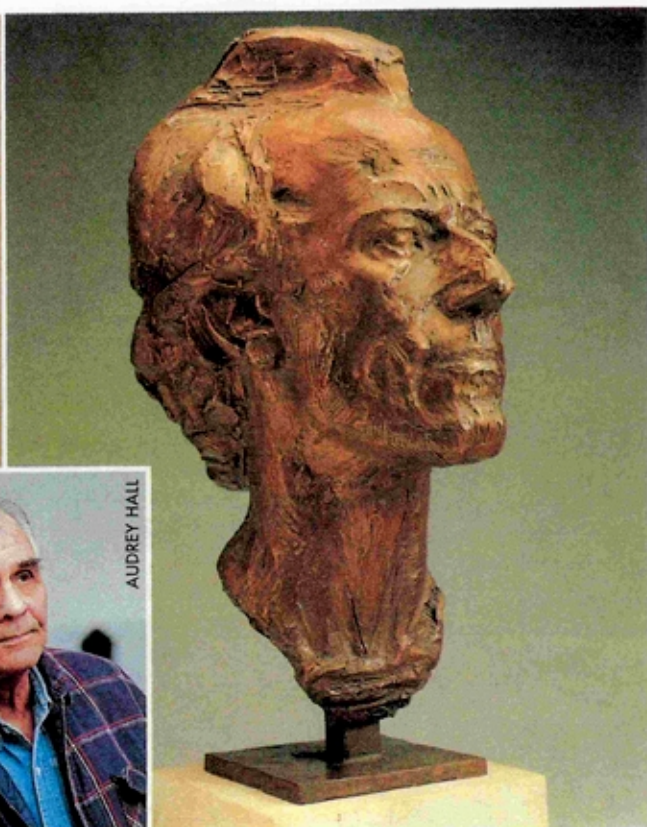
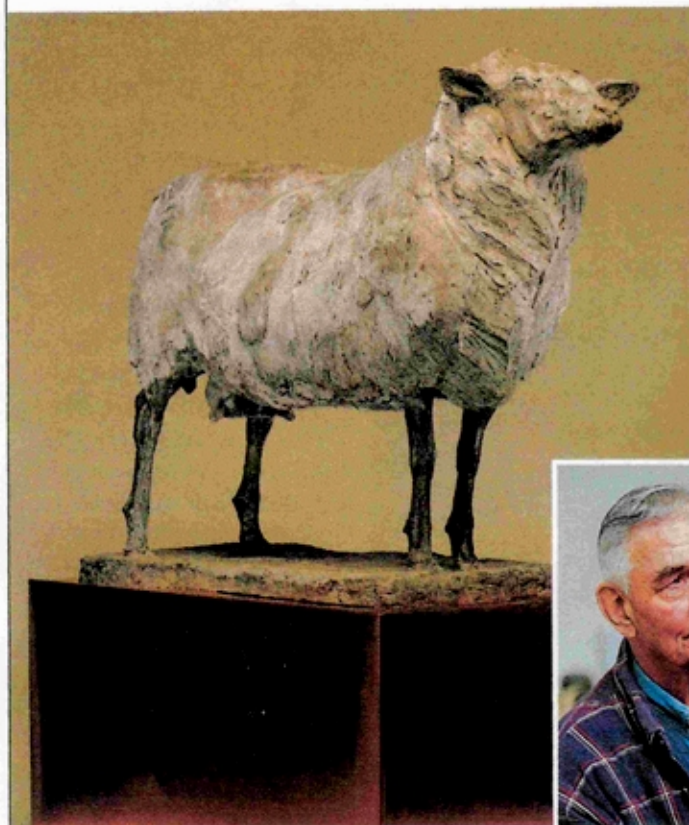
By Todd Wilkinson

Floyd Tennison DeWitt hails from the Old West, but his sculpture is classically Old World

FLOYD TENNISON DEWITT fits the classic profile of a curmudgeon living reclusively at the end of a country lane. His enigmatic mystery—at least in the eyes of his neighbors—is heightened further by the fact that DeWitt commands far greater public visibility 5,000 miles away from his home in rural

main roads and turn toward the looming slopes of the Bridger Mountains, then navigate through a patchwork of ranchettes cluttered with camper trailers, hunting dog kennels, and horse pastures.

The path to DeWitt's door, however, departs from the suburban scene around it; it is



AUDREY HALL

LEFT: MOTHER OF THE RAM, BRONZE, 42 X 24 X 54.
MIDDLE: FLOYD DEWITT.
RIGHT: THE TITAN, BRONZE, 21 1/2 X 9 1/2 X 9 1/2.

Montana than he does in his own back yard.

To find the sculptor's inconspicuous studio on the outskirts of Bozeman, one needs to leave the

demarcated by a couple of horse-and-rider monuments that look nothing like the western art in galleries downtown. Although industrial in its initial outer appearance, DeWitt's studio from the inside is framed by a cathedral ceiling and huge bay windows that pull in every alpine sunrise.

Schubert fills the air, and a plaster casting of Greek sculptor Phidias' legendary CHARIOT HORSE OF SELENE rests on its side.

Strolling through his realm, the 70-year-old artist nods a welcome without saying a word, knocks back a demitasse of thick coffee, and proceeds to engage a work in progress—a life-size homage to a provincial symphony conductor he's been modeling for months. Human and bestial bronze figures are everywhere: tempestuous torsos, sensuous belly dancers, stoic falconers in their saddles, and primordial busts of bison.

Most importantly, silently emanating their own eminence are the forms with which DeWitt has become synonymous: a scattered herd of equines that spans the life of his long career but shares little in common with the ultra-realistic horses so ubiquitous on this side of the Mississippi.

DeWitt's steeds—expressive, full of character, yet spare—are the kind of statuary one might more likely encounter at the Parthenon, along the boulevards of Barcelona, or flanking the fountainheads in Trafalgar Square. Rising as four-legged metaphors are the mythical PEGASUS, the untamable Indian pony CAYUSE, the fragile newborn called THE COLT, a triumvirate of converging mules that toil as beasts of burden in THE FAMILY TRINITY, and an ominous, disturbing biblical vision titled THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE, which, as a monument, resides in the permanent collection of the Dutch Ministry of Culture.

"It doesn't matter whether his pieces are 10 inches or 10 feet high. They all convey a dramatic largeness that is engaging to the eye. Floyd has such a wonderful sense of monumentality, particularly with

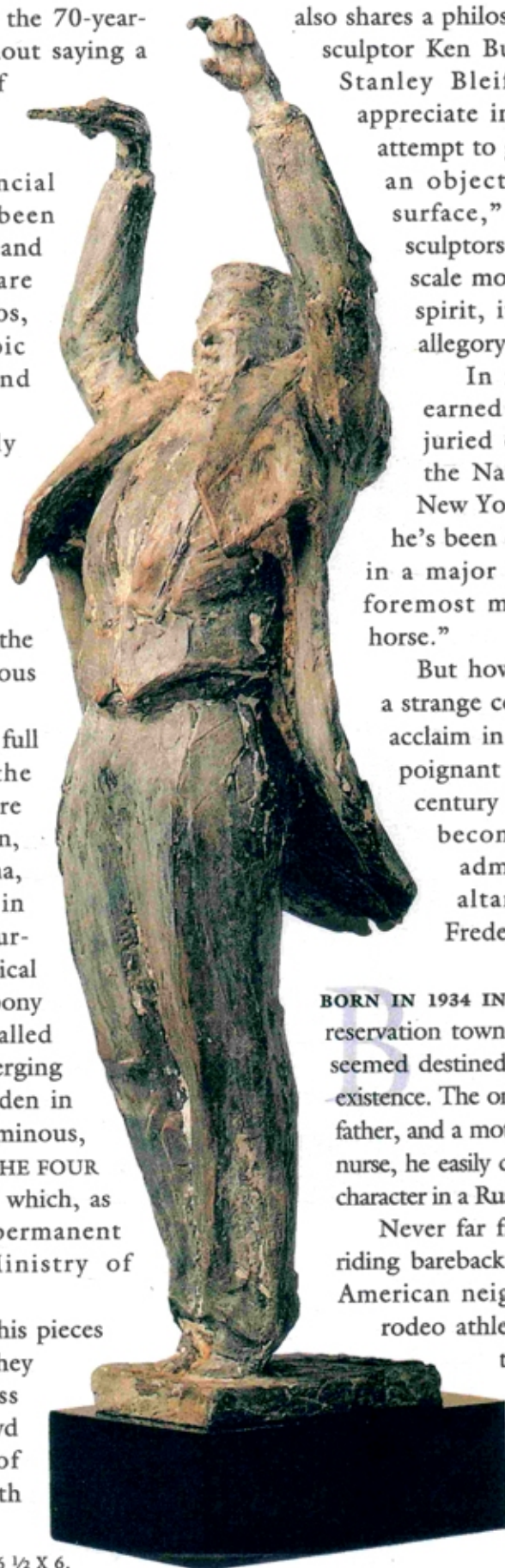
the horse," notes acclaimed American sculptor George Carlson, a colleague and friend of DeWitt's. Along with Carlson, DeWitt says he also shares a philosophical kinship with animal sculptor Ken Bunn and figurative sculptor Stanley Bleifeld. "I think what we appreciate in each other is a heartfelt attempt to go after the essence of what an object is instead of simply its surface," Carlson explains. "Most sculptors are interested in rendering scale models. We're after a subject's spirit, its statement as metaphor, allegory, and archetype."

In recent years, DeWitt has earned top honors at the annual juried competition sponsored by the National Sculpture Society in New York City. Across the Atlantic, he's been described by a fine-art critic in a major newspaper as "Holland's foremost modern interpreter of the horse."

But how did DeWitt arrive at such a strange convergence of obscurity and acclaim in his own home state? It's a poignant question, given that half a century ago he sincerely aspired to become a "cowboy artist" and admits to worshipping at the altars of Charlie Russell and Frederic Remington.

BORN IN 1934 IN THE SMALL, dusty Indian reservation town of Wolf Point, MT, DeWitt seemed destined for a less-than-cosmopolitan existence. The only child of a barber and farmer father, and a mother who helped the infirm as a nurse, he easily could have become a provincial character in a Russell painting.

Never far from a horse, DeWitt began riding bareback as a toddler with his Native American neighbor friends. He idolized rodeo athletes, worked on ranches as a teenager, and developed a special affinity with horses that enabled him to break and train the most ornery beasts in a corral. Growing up, he also filled sketchbooks with drawings of



THE JOY, BRONZE, 24 X 6 1/2 X 6.

horses depicted from every angle, turning some sketches into illustrative easel paintings like the derivative Russell roundup scene that hangs today in his guest bedroom.

"In towns like Wolf Point, art was not something you did to be a real man or to earn a

eventually receiving an invitation to attend the National Academy of Fine Art in Amsterdam.

In a poignant turn of events, DeWitt had too much to drink as he packed his bags in Minneapolis, and, on a whim, buried most of his sculptural

"Every day in nature, we have things to celebrate."

respectable living, but my pictures of horses were the first things I ever got complimented for doing, so I stuck with them," he reminisces. "When I was a teenager, I thought that in order to be a successful artist you needed to paint and sculpt like Russell and Remington, so those were the kind of pictures I made."

DeWitt, however, was gripped by a restlessness he didn't understand. He held odd jobs after high school and then enlisted in the Army, stationed in Germany at the dawn of the Cold War. Somehow his artistic talent came to the attention of his superior officers, and he was assigned to sculpt a life-size battalion monument. On furlough, he visited the great European museums. Exposure to works by ancient Greco-Roman artists, Renaissance masters, and more recent influences such as Auguste Rodin and Marino Marini ignited a hunger which still persists.

After his military service ended, DeWitt returned to Montana but drifted away from Wolf Point to escape its smallness. His promising talent earned him a scholarship at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where his instructors introduced him to the studio method of painting and sculpture but given the times tried to steer him into non-objective abstraction. DeWitt, who has always been naturally surly, resisted and became so conflicted that he sent snapshots of his work to schools in Europe,

portfolio in the back yard of the house he rented, intending to return one day and excavate it. While he was abroad for a quarter century, however, an apartment complex was built over the site and

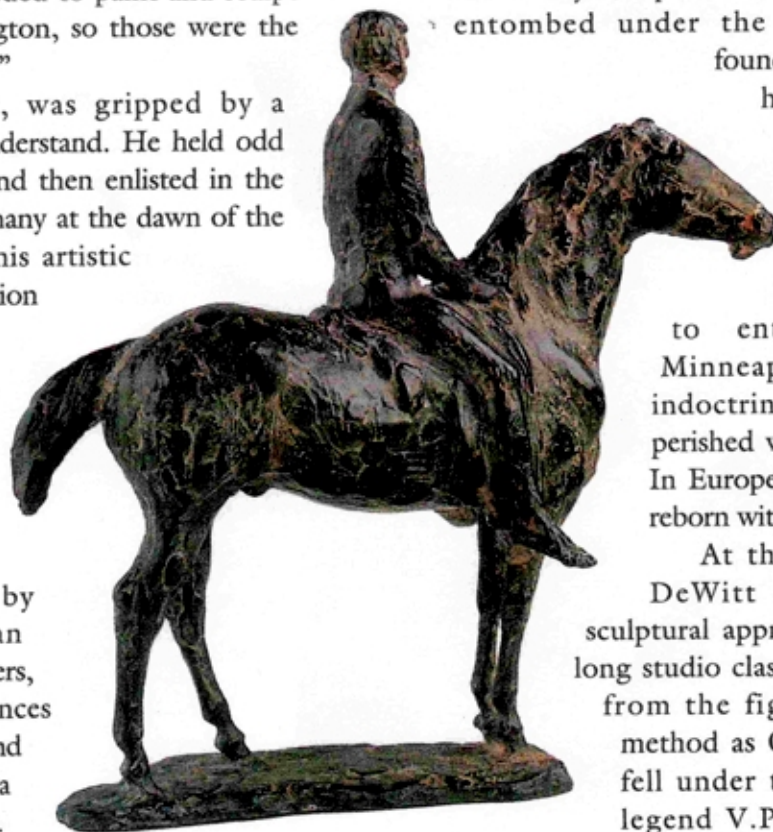
DeWitt says the pieces are either long gone or still entombed under the building's concrete foundation. It's just as well,

he says: "In Montana, I was raised with a fairly narrow view of the world. That perspective died when I moved east

to enter art school in Minneapolis. In turn, my indoctrination into abstraction perished when I left for Holland. In Europe, I felt as if I had been reborn with a new set of old eyes."

At the National Academy, DeWitt spent six years as a sculptural apprentice, inundated with long studio classes modeling classically from the figure, using the same method as Old World masters. He fell under the tutelage of Dutch legend V.P. Semeijn Esser, who encouraged DeWitt and was one of the strongest stylistic

influences on his work. Having "the ego punched out of him," DeWitt recalls how students and instructors engaged in lively, unflinching critical discussions which colleagues learned not to take personally. "Students were required to work out their problems, talk was cheap, and it was there I learned that sculpture is in itself a language—the silent language of form." Along the way, DeWitt's interpretations of the horse were noticed and



THE INHERITOR IV, BRONZE, 9 1/2 X 4 X 10.

nurtured. Upon graduating and finding a studio, he was solicited for work.

Meanwhile, back in the U.S., the western art firmament of the 1960s went through a growth spurt, with artists and galleries hustling to take part—and DeWitt left out. Indeed, if there's an artistic skill that DeWitt lacks, it's the ability to schmooze. This is not a man who would attempt to persuade a prospective gallery owner or collector to become interested in his work.

After three decades as an expatriate in the Netherlands, DeWitt returned to Montana in the 1980s. He felt out of place. The sensation, DeWitt says, was as if he'd suddenly barreled out of a jet flying over the high plains at 30,000 feet and landed in an ancestral province that had ceased to be familiar.

EVERY DAY IN NATURE, we have things to celebrate," DeWitt says. "It might be the emerging lilacs, or the sun setting just right over the mountains, or a woman discovering the essence of her femininity. To me, those things are beautiful, and sculpture is just one way of making them known."

DeWitt's brooding intensity, particularly in social situations when cheerfulness is demanded, has sometimes left him alienated, even though he's made appearances at the Prix de West show in Oklahoma City, the Buffalo Bill Art Show in Cody, WY, and the annual sculpture shows in Loveland, CO. Yet he and his wife, Carla, have largely maintained a solitary existence. "But that's also part of the endearing quality of Floyd," notes George Carlson. "Some artists will do anything to make a sale. They're always thinking about *the sale*. Not him. You're either the kind of person who appreciates the brilliance of his work or you are not."

Divining a non-literal world so different from the iconic West which surrounds him, DeWitt wants his art to build on a knowledge base reaching back to antiquity. "Here in America,"



THE DANCER, BRONZE, 18 ½ X 7 ½ X 5 ½.

he points out, "we've been taught that the creative use of new materials is important. Well, yes, it is important, but what about the creative use of old materials? Western art does not stand in isolation from the history of humanity. You don't have to tear down an old building to build another one. You can build onto it, add to it, enhance it. To me, art is about learning how to see, and we can learn much from what others have seen before us." □

Todd Wilkinson lives in Bozeman, MT, and writes regularly for *Southwest Art*.



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