



Wood Ducks, bronze, 12" long

*"Every idea has a size. In truth, this piece was designed as a wedding present for my duck-hunting partner and his bride-to-be. It is a story of shared intimacy."*

## 'SCULPTURE HAS TO BE INTELLECTUALLY BEAUTIFUL'

*By Mary Nelson*

In 1975, when Maryland sculptor Walter Matia graduated from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, he'd already been an active member of the art world for nearly 12 years. With diploma in hand, he set out for Arlington, Virginia. Despite having earned a degree in art design and being an intaglio printmaker, Matia preferred to secure his future using the skills he had honed while earning a degree in biology.

Once in Virginia, Matia settled into work at the Nature Conservancy, a national, nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of endangered species and unique habitats, where he stayed for 22 years. He started out working in the biological inventory programs and eventually rose to become vice president in charge of land management, a position he held for seven years.

Matia's career choice wasn't his first brush with biology or with natural history. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio from the time he was 10 years old, he had taken classes at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, where he was an avid fan of wildlife and all things in nature. His mother encouraged his interest and enrolled him, he says, in "classes in drawing and future scientist stuff." By the time he was 16, Matia was working in the museum's Exhibits Department under the tutelage of Larry Isard, an award-winning sculptor and longtime museum employee.

"Larry was a very fine sculptor, but mostly we did things that the people in exhibit departments do," Matia says. "We did a little





*High Water Mallards,  
bronze, 80" high*

*"Put corn in water and watch  
for the warden; bring water to  
corn, breathe easy and wait  
with your dog in the November  
dawn. High Water is part of  
past experiences and part hope  
for future cold mornings."*



taxidermy, some exhibit design, cleaning windows, whatever was necessary to keep the doors of the museum open.” Matia loved his work for several reasons. His interest in nature and art was a driving force, but the museum experience was more than that. Teamwork and the cooperation of juggling multiple jobs in concert with a large group of individuals set the stage for his eventual segue into a career as a sculptor.

“The important part for me was that I worked with a lot of people in the arts, who also simply had to organize their worlds around a number of different skills, including timing and budgeting, and being able to work with a large group of people across the whole museum spectrum,” Matia says. “Unlike some of the other arts, painting in particular, which are solitary from start to finish, with sculpture, you work with a number of people.” That, he adds, includes architects and foundry workers, and he enjoys it all.

Although Matia sculpted throughout his college years and during his tenure at the Nature Conservancy, he did it more for fun than as a business—until he met John and Kiku Hanes. He became friends with the couple, who were avid supporters of the Conservancy. When they learned of Matia’s interest in art, they commissioned him to create a couple of sculptures for their home. Duly impressed with his work, they eventually formed a partnership with Matia, and he knew it was time to move ahead with art as his career.

*Oasis, Three California Quail, bronze, 14" long*

*“There is a fine balance between a good story and good sculpture. Is there such a thing as one quail? The artistic challenge is to see the elegant patterns and shapes of the moment and edit them into compositions that have beauty, regardless of the understanding of the story. This all sounds a bit less joyous than the actual artistic experience, but sculpture is about volumes and relationships of those masses to each other. Get those things right, and the surface and story fall into place.”*

*Tolling Ducks, bronze, 8.5" by 11.5"*

*“I wouldn’t presume to say this piece started with a Franz Kline ‘swoosh of paint,’ but in a certain sense the challenge of merging representational work into modern architecture is to acknowledge the need to design for the power of the statement and not get lost in the details of the story. Yes, this is a story of tolling waterfowl, but it is also a sculpture of patterns, negative spaces, energy, and movement.”*





*Sunburst (Fire Screen)*, bronze, 30" high

*"I have always loved architectural detail. My series of fire screens owe a debt to the great ironworker Samuel Yellin and the American master Paul Manship. The incorporation of sculpture with architecture adds to the power of both designs."*

"To be blunt, it was my work and their money," he says, adding that sculpture is an expensive endeavor, particularly in the early stages of a sculptor's career. "You make mistakes so quickly in the beginning, just learning to get the feel of the materials. By eliminating the fear of having to produce art to sell, you can progress so much faster. They provided me with an absence of fear; I could fail uncatastrophically."

Having chosen bronze as his medium, Matia admits that he could have sculpted using any material. Heck, he could have been a wood carver. But, he likes metal, and thus his fate was sealed. For nearly 30 years, he's cast his sculptures with Valley Bronze in Joseph, Oregon. Even though the logistics of living on the East Coast and casting on the West Coast can take on nightmare proportions, he insists that it's worth the extra effort and time involved.

Matia's relationship with Valley Bronze is a long-term partnership, he says, adding that, once an artist has established a good working relationship, he needs to keep it. "Every single casting is a series of compromises, starting with your original idea to how you mold the sculpture, how you cast it, and how you reassemble it. Every one of those steps has slight variations and deviations, and you need people at the casting end who understand what compromises will be acceptable."

The partnership that has spanned 30 years has brought to fruition tiny sculptures the size of medallions 2.5 inches across to an enormous sculpture of seven large Spanish fighting bulls, 50 feet long and 20 feet high. Inspiration for Matia's creations is a combination of market demand and subjects he knows and loves. He's philosophical about the reality of the market, especially in light of the

recent recession. "There is the reality of the market that says I probably shouldn't sculpt wombats, even if I wanted to," he says with a laugh.

Much of Matia's work over the years has centered on the creatures he knows best, including hunting dogs and fowl. "I have built a fairly good clientele in sporting dogs, and I don't have any sporting dog sculptures currently available," he says. "It's been about four years since I've done any. I feel like if I did some now, I could do them a lot better."

Occasionally, Matia says, he is asked if he would like to sculpt an elk. His response? "I don't know elk from pelicans," he says. "What in the world do I have to say about an elk?"

Therein lies Matia's artistic philosophy: He must have something to say about the subject he sculpts. "For me, the hard thing isn't really the hand skills of sculpting, it's having something worthwhile to say,"



*Peace Be With You (Mourning Doves), bronze, 22" long*

*"They are a perfect gift of color, voice, and form."*

*"Sculpture has to be intellectually beautiful, regardless of whether [the viewer] knows the story or not."*

he says. "To have something to say really requires an intimate knowledge of the subject matter."

Currently, Matia is focusing his attention on creating a piece that captures the essence of red knots and horseshoe crabs. The red knot is an endangered shorebird about the size of a mourning dove. It spends about six months every year migrating from South America to its breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic, stopping off in the Delaware Bay to feed on horseshoe crabs before heading north. The bird and crab juxtaposition intrigues Matia, because their shapes interest him, and their interaction has a story. At the same time, he realizes that he needs to be careful to not let the story overwhelm the sculpture.


"A finished object has to read as a perfectly understandable observation

of forms and volumes and weights, apart from whether anyone looking at it has any idea of what it is," Matia says. "Sculpture has to be intellectually beautiful, regardless of whether [the viewer] knows the story or not."

One aspect of art Matia would like to expand into is painting, due in part to the influence of William Reese. "He was a fantastic painter, and his point was [that] everything you do enhances your ability to do the next thing," he says. "If you learn to paint, it will help your sculpture and, if you learn to sculpt, it will help your paintings." As his ability has matured, Matia has begun to look at other avenues he would like to explore, because some things he wants to create cannot be sculpted.

Time, however, is at a premium. Married to Pam for 10 years now, the couple has two children: Charlie,

6, and Helen, 8. Because Pam has a thriving practice as a high-risk obstetrician, Matia spends much of his time during the day with his children. To take time away from his family and from sculpting to pursue painting just isn't feasible right now. Painting, he says, is such a complicated art form that "to take it on any way other than full bore would be disrespectful to my fellow painters."

For now, Matia is content to raise his family, serve on the board of the American Bird Conservancy, and supply the galleries and art shows that clamor for his work. It's all about cooperation, the art of juggling multiple jobs in concert with lots of people. 

*Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.*