

Walter



Duck Pond

Matia

The making of a sculptor of the sporting life.

Some kids from the youngest age want to know the names of everything around them. Innately curious, they strive to recognize and identify all the ingredients in the web of life. Such yearnings have stirred natural philosophers, from Aristotle in his 4th century BC *Historia Animalium* to Carl Linnaeus, whose *Systema Naturae*, 2,000 years later, gave us the vocabulary to designate all life on earth according to class, order, genus and species.

At age 10, bronze sculptor Walter Matia (b. 1953) “naively, but gamely” set out to learn the names of every animal in the world and began amassing his reference materials. That, combined with God-given eye-to-hand talent, a good education, a gift for life-shaping encounters—plus perseverance, humor and business acumen—have made him a contemporary visionary of the sporting life.

Matia was born into a busy family of five kids in Shaker Heights, Ohio, an early leafy suburb of industrialized Cleveland and its wonderful museums. A rascal who loved nature, he sported a BB gun and set traps for muskrats, inventing adventures out of the pages of *Boy's Life*.

A collector's gene drove him to cut out images of wildlife from *Natural Geographic*, *Audubon*, and *Outdoor Life* during the last years of the golden age of illustration, before magazines turned overwhelmingly to photography in the early 1970s. He built files on his favorite outdoor artists, including Louis Agassiz Fuertes (1874–1927), Lynn Bogue Hunt (1878–1960) and Bob Kuhn (1920–2007). “But my favorite was—and is—Charles Livingston Bull [1874–1932],” insists Matia. “Bull was the most creative and dynamic illustrator of animals and interesting situations. I bought every book I could find that he illustrated.”

Already attuned to art in museums when he visited the Bronx Zoo while attending the 1964 New York World's Fair, Matia was enthralled with the bronze animalier sculptures of bears, baboons and deer that comprise the impressive Paul J. Rainey Memorial Gateway. He made note of how its appealing, flowing lines link the different subjects silhouetted against the empty space around them. Named for a Cleveland big-game hunter, playboy and zoo benefactor, it was created in 1934 by Art Deco sculptor Paulanship (1885–1966), whose most well-known work is his iconic *Prometheus* in Rockefeller Center.

At 13, Walter joined the young naturalist's program at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, started by then Director William Scheele (1920–1998), an accomplished author and watercolor artist, reputed for his dinosaur landscapes and prehistoric seas. Scheele personally taught his students how to paint birds and animals in their habitats, between their field trips digging in muck for mastodon parts or sifting through heaps of shale slag for bits of Devonian fish fossils.

The future sculptor also began his long apprenticeship in the museum's exhibit department, learning the art of taxidermy alongside his mentor, the taxidermist and animalier sculptor Laurence Isard (1932–2009). Importantly, Isard taught him to model his early sculptures in wax rather than clay, a skill and textural expression that came to define his mature works. After graduating from college, Matia returned to work there for 18 months.

Matia handled hundreds of skins, skulls and skeletons of native fauna, ingraining the knowledge in his head and hands to recreate the shapely volume of a feathered snipe belly or appropriately shift muscle groups with the turn of a heron's head, and to judge how the slightest change in the angle of an acutely sensitive ear or wind-dried cornstalk endows the specimen with life.

Taxidermy also taught Matia's hands to cut and carve high-density polyurethane foam to form the underlying armatures for his wax models, instead of starting with a sturdier, but less correctable metal armature. Later, this practice would become vital for keeping the weight of his wax originals "reasonable" for shipping to the foundry.

Whether he knew it or not, he was also collect-

ing references for a lifetime of work as a sculptor.

Walter's original intention to study forestry at the University of New Hampshire or Maine was waylaid by a simple chance meeting. Instead, he studied biology at Williams College in Massachusetts when it was still just barely possible to get a degree based on field work, before mathematical modelling became the standard.

Simultaneously, in the rarefied atmosphere of its prestigious fine arts department—where the so-called "Williams Art Mafia" is credited with creating a generation of curators and museum directors—Walter Matia also studied art.

His brilliant teachers included French medieval art and architecture historian Whitney Stoddard (1913–2003) and "Monuments Man" S. Lane Faison (1907–2006), a member of the Army's Art Looting Investigation Unit during WWII, responsible for gathering evidence to be used against Nazi leaders in the Nuremberg trials. Faison, named Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur by the French in 1952, made it his mission at Williams to teach every student the importance of observation, learning from doing and the vocabulary to analyze and describe shape, color and form.

Matia's "field studies" in art included examining animalier sculptors Antoine-Louis Barye (1795–1875) and Rembrandt Bugatti (1884–1916). Works like Manship's long-necked shorebirds demonstrated to him the challenge of visually balancing an incongruous anatomy with the negative space surrounding it, and how different planes and surface textures throw back the light to the viewer. "The sculptor is always chasing gravity, volumes and ultimately the planal shifts which define the form. Get those things right and the surface definition will take care of itself," he explains, reminding us, "The details of the surface should lead the eye to specific points of importance."

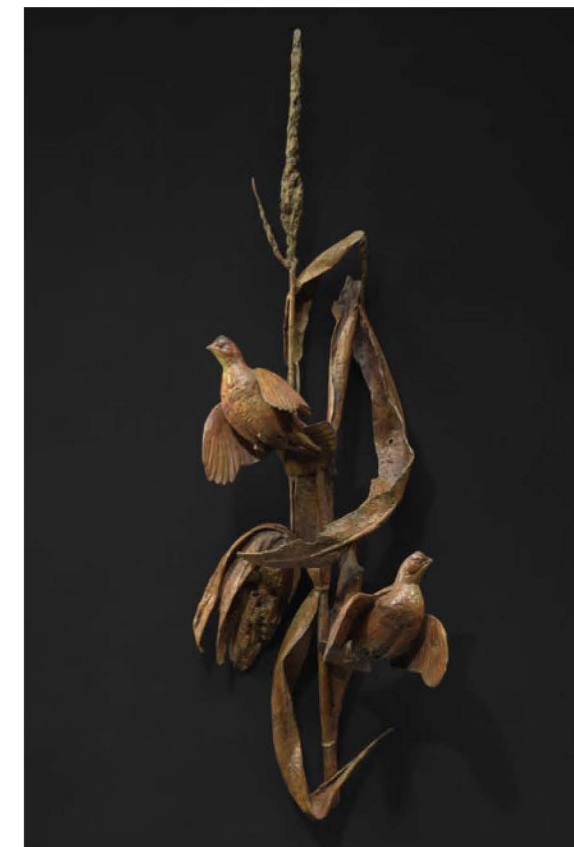
Matia feels especially influenced by Albert Laessle (1877–1954), whose studio's proximity to the Philadelphia Zoo allowed him, like Bugatti, to use live zoo animals as models. Laessle's strength is in creating a storyline or "narrative purpose" for his nearly life-size sculptures of reptiles and birds: the heron is about to swallow the fish; a tautly determined rooster readies himself to wake the neighborhood.

For more than a decade, Matia worked for the

The Old Guards



The Finalist



Quail & Corn

non-profit Nature Conservancy, becoming vice president of land management. Meanwhile, he cast his first bronze from a wax model of a curlew in 1980 and kept at it. First birds, then sporting dogs and other mammals. Then fountains and outdoor works for gardens; Blair House, the President's guest house, is home to one of them. His work also encompasses decorative arts, including fine bronze centerpieces and fireplace screens.

Today, the prestigious patrons, awards and exhibitions are too numerous to count, but include: signature member of the Society of Animal Artists; Master Wildlife Artist (2007), Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum; medals from the National Sculpture Society Annual Awards Exhibitions and the Prix de West Invitational Art Exhibition; and his 2021 one-man show at the National Sporting Art Library & Museum in Middleburg, Va.

Matia draws most of his "storytelling" from the inherent drama of wingshooting. Even if the sportsman or hunting dog is "off screen," the effect of their presence is reflected by action or rather, the reaction, of the exploding quail covey or alarmed flight of teal.

Matia confesses he loves Labradors more than fine shotguns, "Personally, any hunting that does not involve a dog is not very interesting to me. The gaunt angularity of a well-conditioned dog is almost too hard to look at." Whether portraying a client's English pointer or Brittany spaniel, or his own beaten up old Molly, "Disputes over breed preference disappear, as one thing owners all agree on: The moment when their dog's entire world is overwhelmed by the scent of a bird is ample reward for all the training, chewed furniture and vet bills."

Once an idea is sparked, Matia analyzes what the eye actually perceives of an exciting moment of sport, from his preferred viewing distance of about 20 yards—coincidentally, about the same as most gamebird encounters. "At first there is only sound and a peripheral sense of movement hidden in the confusion of vegetation." Then the shapes slow down enough to allow the eye to focus. The hunter's task is to "gather one's senses enough to edit the chaos"—and shoot.

The artist's task is also to edit the experience and then to refine its essence into lines and patterns. "As surface detail recedes in importance, silhouette, ges-

ture and an intimate knowledge of body mechanics and range of motion come to the fore," he says. Not to be overlooked are the effects of gravity on the shapes of windswept wildfowl as they maneuver to escape its pull during takeoff, or succumb to it as they land.

Matia is keenly aware of wanting to make an authentic contribution to what he calls "the canon of sporting art." He believes that "a piece of art is not an illustration of how much you know, it is a statement of what you wish to say." Thus, for the last 10 years, he has been orchestrating lyrical assemblages of game birds and waterfowl in their appropriate settings. *Mesa Vista Dawn*, designed for Boone Pickens's eponymous ranch, required a cascade of 17 flying mallards and teal.

In order to draw from a pool of various models for each individual element in such compositions, he has created models in up to a dozen different attitudes for bobwhite quail, wood ducks, flying teal, the flight stages of both climbing and tolling mallards, as well as leaf formations, pine cones, corn stalks, marshland reeds and grasses and weathered wood—all natural features from the hunting tradition that support the visual integrity and actual engineering of these complex works.

Having to entrust a number of third parties with the most vital and difficult steps in the process of producing a bronze sculpture—the molding, casting, welding and application of complicated patinas, for example, for green-winged teal or yellow-headed blackbird—to competent third parties is "part of the deal," says Matia, not to mention packing and shipping. Thus, he has collaborated with Valley Bronze Foundry in Joseph, Ore., since 1982.

Ultimately, it's the artist himself who best describes the ingredients that went into the soup that made him and his extensive oeuvre: "I am a hunter, a fisherman, a bird watcher, a book collector, a lover of natural history curiosities, an undisciplined dog trainer and, some say, a good game cook. I enjoy these passions, which have their own rewards, but they also provide the narrative of my art." ■

If you're ever in Matia's neighborhood, Brooke Chilvers recommends a stop at the Rocky Point Creamery in Tuscarora, Md. "But be warned: They're closed on Mondays."



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