

MADE IN THE SOUTH

## Bronze Menagerie

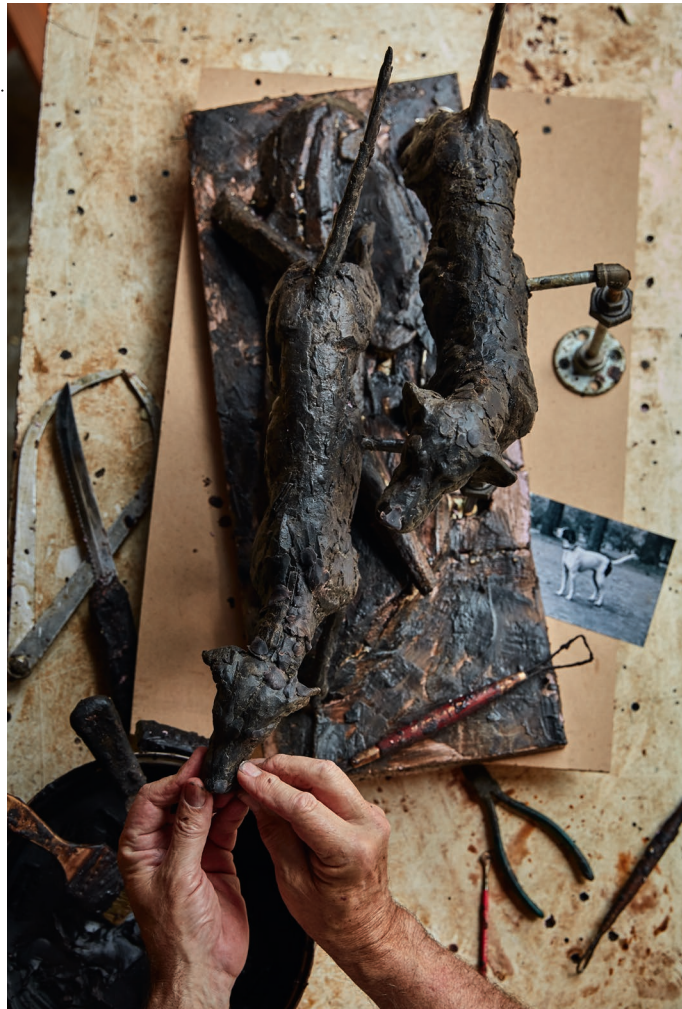
A MARYLAND ARTIST  
BRINGS A LIFE IN THE FIELD TO  
HIS STRIKING SCULPTURES

By Steve Russell



**W**orking in his one-man studio in Ijamsville, Maryland, the acclaimed sporting sculptor Walter Matia is surrounded by putty knives, loop cutters, and other tools of his trade. Nooks brim with maquettes (scale models) of shorebirds, foxes, and raccoons. What's missing? Any view of the actual great outdoors.

Amid the clutter there are elements of the natural world to which Matia sometimes refers, from dried cattails to a freezer containing specimens of bobwhite quail and pintail ducks. And should he desire a muse while fashioning the life-size form of a gundog that



currently occupies his worktable, he can turn an eye to Pip or Tink, the red setter and black Lab that shadow him each day from his nearby home. Not that they're particularly reliable models—that would require them to stay still for more than a few seconds.

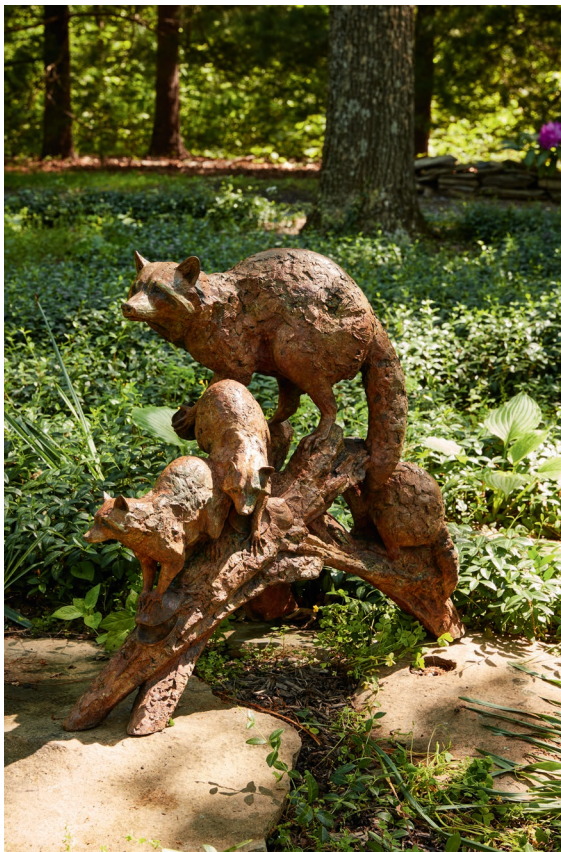
The truth is that after nearly forty years in his field—and in countless literal fields as a hunter and conservationist—Matia possesses a storehouse of inspiration to draw upon. “I take all the experiences of my life,” he says, “and edit them down to something that says something about me, and hopefully about the viewer.”

Upon first glimpse of a Matia, whether it be a centerpiece covey of quail rising from prickly pear cactus or a pair of full-size gray wolves, one is struck by an uncanny realism, expressed in the animal's posture and, often, elements of habitat. Get up close, though, and you might notice that fur, feather, and fang have been rendered in varying degrees of detail. “Surface is interesting, but form does all the work,” he explains. “Break up the surface with too much detail and the form gets destroyed.”

Crucial knowledge of animal anatomy came early, as an interest in taxidermy sparked by *Boys' Life* magazine led to a teenage apprenticeship at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. After Matia earned degrees in art design and biology, his dreams of becoming an artist temporarily ended when he hitchhiked

*From left: Walter Matia with his red setter, Pip; the artist at work.*

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to Washington, D.C., for a research job at the Nature Conservancy. It was a good fit. Eventually he was put in charge of land management, which entailed traveling to beautiful properties across the country and meeting landowners. He also hunted, the untold hours spent in a blind helping him to bag more than just his limit. “When you sit there motionless, the patterns of nature become very important,” he says. “That is conducive to hunting *and* art.”

Matia tried his hand at capturing the wonders he witnessed as bronze sculptures, a form that capitalized on his old taxidermy training. After eleven years, he quit the job he loved to become a full-time artist. Early benefactors he’d met through the Conservancy helped, as did a few splashy commissions such as the huge trio of rampaging bulls that greet fans at the entrance to Houston’s NRG Stadium. But it was his focus on naturalistic sporting dogs and birds, from flaring wood ducks to majestically perched eagles, that made him a favorite of collectors of sporting art. When the Texas oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens wanted to adorn a towering stone fireplace at his Pampa, Texas, ranch house with a flock of waterfowl in flight, he turned to Matia.

Unlike many other sculptors who use clay, Matia works with his own formulation of black casting wax



From left: A raccoon family by Matia; a work titled Legend of the Fall; black casting wax in Matia’s studio.



(which picks up light better) applied over a carved foam core. The model is then strategically sawed into pieces and shipped to a foundry in Oregon that makes rubber molds and then wax copies of the original and fires ceramic shells to fill with molten bronze.

Even after the foundry welds the pieces together, Matia isn’t necessarily finished, often accompanying large sculptures to their final destination to supervise installation. Such was the case at the countryside estate of Barbara Fried near Charlottesville, Virginia, where she and her late husband, Mark, gathered about thirty (frankly, she’s lost track) of Matia’s works both inside and outside the residence. Deer seem to bound from the woods toward the long driveway. A wild turkey proudly displays its tail fan near the front door. A great blue heron stretches its long neck from swaying grasses behind the house. But it’s a sculpture of a dog, less dramatically situated on the patio, that is Barbara’s favorite. The work depicts Terra, a beloved rat terrier that the Frieds commissioned Matia to immortalize not long before the dog died. The sculptor rendered Terra alert, muzzle lifted, face bearing an expression of anticipation. It’s clear she is in the presence of her master—a hunk of inert bronze animated enough to make a dog lover shed a tear.

This sense of connection permeates Matia’s pieces, from the adoration in a setter’s eyes to the wary pose of a fox with one paw lifted. “The frame of my sculptures encompasses things that aren’t even visible,” he says. “All of my work must convey that somebody or something else is present. I’m past just trying to get everything in the right place—now I’m more interested in finding the soul.”

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