

THE ARTS

THE BRONZEWORSHIP OF  
CELEBRATED SCULPTOR AND  
NATURALIST WALTER MATIA

# *The Art of Animals*

WORDS BY CATHERINE MALONE | PHOTOS BY R. L. JOHNSON

**H**umans' relationship to the world of fauna is, at its best, one of observation, speculation and unequal interaction. It's not even that humans and other animals speak in different languages; we have entirely different modes of communication, of vision and of experience. In American art, the depiction of the natural world has long included the wonders of species not found elsewhere, such as the bison, the turkey and the beaver. To render the experience of animals in art is to enter into a process of deliberation that is an ever-shifting balance of intuition and scientific knowledge translated into representation. Sculptor Walter Matia has been achieving that balance throughout his career, earning prestigious recognition in his field, including the T. Boone Pickens Lifetime Sportsman Award and being named a Master Artist by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum.

Growing up in Ohio, Matia says, was like "living out the fantasy of 'Boy's Life.' I was trapping animals and skinning them in the basement." When his mother discovered the extent of his basement taxidermy, she phoned the Cleveland Museum of Natural History to see if her son's efforts could be directed there instead of in her home. He went to work for the museum's preparator, which was where, in addition to anatomy and animal gesture, he began to learn how to sculpt. Matia was particularly drawn to the





museum's collection of five or six works by the early twentieth century Sculptor Albert Laessle. Laessle was an "animalier," a term that originally had a pejorative connotation when coined in nineteenth-century France to describe an artist who exclusively depicts animals.

After graduating from Williams College in Massachusetts with degrees in biology and art design, Matia returned to his work at the museum for a year and a half. "But it was time to get out of the house," he remarks, so he took a job with The Nature Conservancy, working for years in land management. The draw to devote himself to sculpture full-time became more and more intense and, "there wasn't any risk in quitting," Matia says, commenting that he was unmarried and didn't yet have children.

Fortuitously, Matia met his dear friends and future collectors Mark and Barbara Fried through his work at The Nature Conservancy. The Frieds began their collection of Matia's work with the purchase of a sculpture of a toucan and, ultimately, built their home

in Albemarle County around their extensive collection of Matia's work, both indoors and out.

Walking down one of the entrances to the garden from the house on one of summer's hottest days, Barbara comments, "One day you wake up and realize you have to create a sculpture garden." When they and Landscape Designer David Phipps embarked on the project, they wanted the sculpture garden to be in conversation with the landscape beyond, as well as with their house, which sits right next to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Barbara showed how the design created an opportunity for an indoor sculpture of wolves to look out at an outdoor sculpture of the same animal. Her husband and Phipps planned for the sculptures' placements amongst the grounds, with Matia's sculpture of a trio of ducks emerging from a setting of rudbeckia, and a pair of bronze hounds set in the lawn as if on the scent. Fortunately for art enthusiasts, the garden will be featured on the Historic Garden Week tour in the spring of 2022 hosted by the Garden Club of Virginia.



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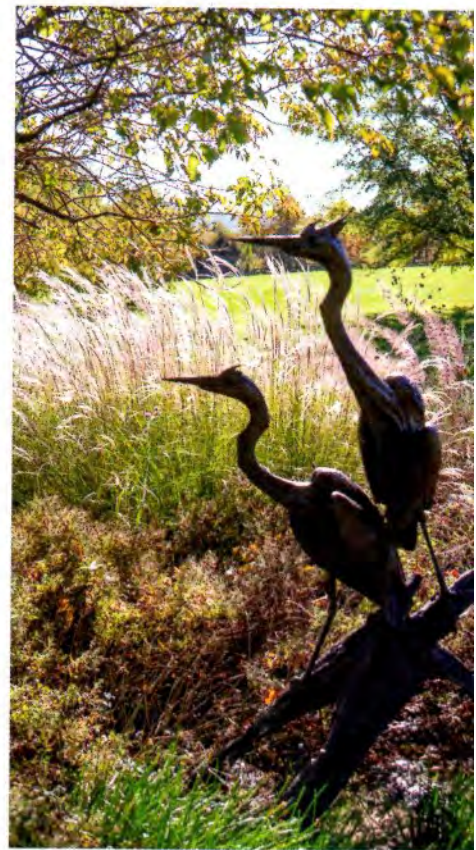
*“It goes **BEYOND ILLUSTRATION** ... I pick the situations that are both **DESCRIPTIVE AND ICONIC** at the same time.”*

Of the influence of the Frieds upon his work, Matia describes meeting them as “critical. Learning how to sculpt is not like learning to paint. A bad sculpture, your smallest mistake is \$1,500, and the only way you can learn is to make a lot of mistakes! Mark and Barbara commissioned dozens of pieces; they would show me spaces from their [real estate] developments, but not tell me what to do. Over a 15- to 20-year period, I got to do all kinds of stuff that I could never have done [otherwise]. I was older [when I started sculpting], so I didn’t have quite as much time to screw around with it.”

Looking at Matia’s work, there certainly isn’t the sense of screwing around. It’s easy for animal sculpture to be cheesy or overly sentimental, but that’s not what Matia does. His animals are full of what he describes as “intent.” “I knew pretty early on, that if you do a dog and it looks like a dog, all you’ve got is two dogs. The dog has to be about something. I’ve got a really good sense of what it is about any animal or situation that’s

the reason to bother making it in bronze... I know both what [the animals] are supposed to look like but also what it is to say about them that makes other people know what they look like. It goes beyond illustration; I get to the soul of these things, and I pick the situations that are both descriptive and iconic at the same time.”

Although Matia has sculpted different animals, including two horses and a life-sized commission called “Spirit of the Bull” for Houston’s NRG stadium (a maquette of this is featured in the Frieds’ garden), he describes himself as primarily a sculptor of birds. Barbara, who owns sculptures by Matia of geese, ducks, cranes, quail, blackbirds and other avian subjects, agrees: “Birds are his real love.” Matia says, “I kid with people now; I do birds because truthfully nobody really knows what they look like, so your ability to push them around visually and gesturally is so much greater. Dogs, in contrast, are more literal. Horses, dogs and the nude—those are three things you can’t screw with. You



really have to have it down right. Birds, you don't have to do that; you just have to come up with a great gesture and a great storyline."

As for Matia's own storyline, its trajectory is determined by art. "I don't do anything that isn't art. When I travel, I go to museums or I'm outside looking at stuff... There really isn't anything I do that isn't art." His home, which he describes as "filled with works of art made by friends," is just down the road from the industrial warehouse where he sculpts and deals with the intense logistics of his career—shows, foundry conversations, shipping arrangements, etc.

Lately, while traveling between home and work, Matia has found himself thinking about the next steps in his artistic process. "Everyone goes through, in some ways, the same evolution. You go through one stage where you simply have to log hours, you're so desperate to get it right... You're just trying so damn hard. Once your hands know what to do, then it's completely a head game. It's not a matter of can you get it right, it's is it worth getting right? What's the intent of the piece? And this has only been in the last 10 years! I'm so much harder on myself about what is worth doing... I've

always been more interested in the design of it rather than portraiture, and the new stuff looks like I'm using animals to create beautiful designs."

Matia's current show *Field Notes* at the National Sporting Library & Museum in Middleburg shows how these contemplations elevate his works, pulling in viewers to engage in that ultimately unknowable experience of his subjects. As Barbara, who lives among Matia's work and has probably spent more time with his sculptures than anyone else, remarks, "There's a category of animal sculptures and paintings that don't match the animal—a non-naturalist approach. Looking at Walt's work, you can see that his is a discerning eye. The sculpture speaks for itself." ~

*Field Notes: Walter Matia is on exhibition at the National Sporting Library & Museum in Middleburg through January 9, 2022. Also, visitors of the Albemarle County – Brown's Cove tour of the Garden Club of Virginia's Historic Garden Week will have the exceptional opportunity to visit the Frieds' sculpture garden at Turkey Ridge Farm that features dozens of Walter Matia's outstanding work on Sunday, April 24, 2022.*