

# UNCOMMON



# MASTERY

## The Pointing Dog Sculpture of Walter Matia

by Tom Davis  
Editor-at-Large

*My audience should not be left in doubt about what I want them to see and feel. When I decide to model the heart-stopping moment of a covey rise, the composition and gestures must make the viewer feel the desperate urgency of the quail to get away and the anxiety of the shooter to organize his shot. When I sculpt a locked-down pointer, I want the distilled details of that intense gesture to make the viewer believe there are birds just upwind. I want the taut skin over raw bone to leave the viewer with a knowing understanding that the dog is the embodiment of generations of breeding and seasons of training. If I make my audience feel the intention of those moments, then I am making an authentic effort to add to the canon of sporting art.—Walter Matia, 2021*

**T**he process of developing a bird dog is often compared to the process of creating a sculpture. You start with this gob of raw, unformed material and a vision of what it can ultimately become, and over a period of time, you mold and shape it as best you can in the hopes that this vision is realized. One of the wisest utterances ever made on the subject – one I come back to again and again – was made, not surprisingly, by Bob Wehle.

“The actual mechanics of training,” he wrote in *Wing & Shot*, “are quite simple. The difficult and important part is how the mechanics are carried out and what you have left when the job is done.”

Substitute “sculpture” for “training” and the statement is just as valid.

Gary Christensen, who trained many of Wehle’s greatest dogs (including Elhew Dancing Gypsy and Elhew Snakefoot), had a favorite saying that was equally profound – and equally applicable to sculpture.

“The most important part of training,” I heard Gary say many times, invariably while jabbing an index finger in my direction for emphasis, “is knowing what *not* to do.”

Walter Matia would be totally on board with that. (It’s pronounced muh-TIE-uh, by the way.) Working in the ancient medium of bronze, he’s established himself as the pre-eminent sculptor of birds, and of bird dogs, of our time. Ask anyone who knows about this stuff, whether he or she is a dealer, a collector, or a museum/fine art professional, and with minor variations you’ll get the same reply: “Walter’s the best there is.”

His work has won every conceivable prize, honor, and award; been juried into every art exhibition that matters; and been acquired by the most astute private collectors and the most prestigious public museums, including the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, the Bird Dog Museum and Field Trial Hall of Fame in Grand Junction, the AKC Museum of the Dog in New York City, and the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson Hole.

The National Sporting Library and Museum in Middleburg, Virginia, recently mounted a fabulous retrospective exhibition of Matia’s career, *Field Notes*, and just this March he joined the likes of Ted Turner, George Strait, Delmar Smith, and his great friend Bubba Wood (see the November/December 2021 issue) as a recipient of the T. Boone Pickens Lifetime Sportsman Award. Bestowed annually by Park Cities Quail, the Dallas-based conservation juggernaut, the award typically includes a bronze sculpture of flushing bobwhite quail for the recipient. But since Matia himself *created* that sculpture, he instructed PCQ simply to pass the one reserved for him along to next year’s honoree – some actor who’s currently starring in a TV show called *Yellowstone*, if the rumors are correct.

These PCQ dinners have become legendary for the staggering sums of money they generate. Matia’s donation of *Texas Hold ’Em*, his riveting depiction of a pointer stretched taut amid just enough prickly pear cactus to set the scene, brought a cool \$77,500 in the live auction. But because he’d previously arranged for a matching “gift,” the final total raised for quail conservation was twice that amount!

A few months before the dinner, someone from PCQ asked me if I’d be willing to cobble together a few lines about Matia’s art that they could use for “promotional purposes,” as they say. This assignment wasn’t as easy as it sounds, but after giving it a lot of thought, this is what I came up with:

When you study a Walter Matia sculpture, it dawns on you, perhaps not all at once but at some point, that you are in the presence of uncommon mastery. There is nothing accidental; everything is there for a reason...and so is everything that is not. Someone described Matia’s work as having a “labored intensity,” and I keep coming back to that. This is serious, even challenging art that is rooted in the authentic experience of the outdoors and speaks powerfully and eloquently to the sensibilities of sportsmen.

As Matia himself once observed, “A hunter knows things that a bird-watcher will never know.”

Just to stay in the Lone Star State a little longer, some of you who are reading this may have attended a Houston Texans game at NRG Stadium (formerly Reliant Stadium). Well, standing in the entrance plaza there is a monumental installation of six, larger-than-life Spanish fighting bulls cast in bronze. Called *Spirit of the Bulls*, it’s the work of, yes, Walter Matia.

Texas Hold ’Em



Matia was awarded the commission for the project in the fall of 2001, and it more-or-less consumed his life for the next two years. The logistical challenges alone were immense: Matia’s full-size wax models (from which the molds for the actual bronzes are created) had to be shipped in refrigerated trailers from his studio in Maryland to the foundry in eastern Oregon. Little wonder that even *he* finds it hard to believe, almost 20 years later, that he actually pulled it off...



Old Guard



Perpetual  
Occasions  
for Hope

**B**orn in 1953, Matia grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, an affluent suburb of Cleveland. A fascination with the natural world surfaced early on: At the age of 10, he set himself the task of learning the name of every animal on the planet. (He didn't quite get there.) The Cleveland Museum of Natural History became his home-away-from-home; at 13 he took drawing lessons from the museum's director, William Scheely, and a few years later he landed a summer job working in the Exhibits Department under a talented young taxidermist and aspiring wildlife sculptor named Larry Isard. Under Isard's wing, Matia learned how to prepare taxidermy mounts of birds and mammals – an experience that, while he couldn't know it at the time, would prove incredibly valuable down the line.

“Larry gave me a lot of practical hand skills,” Matia notes, “but what he really did was guide my eyes. He trained me to pay attention to ‘things whole,’ as opposed to focusing on any single aspect, and that’s served me very well.”

Isard became not just a mentor but a friend – although when someone introduces you to the exercise in extended frustration called grouse hunting, and you end up becoming addicted to it, it's tempting to describe that person by other, more colorful, names.

“Larry gave me a single-shot 20-gauge,” Matia recalls, explaining that there were still islands of grouse habitat in northern Ohio then. “That first year I hunted with him, I didn't shoot a box of shells. Nor did I hit a grouse – and

I hunted like crazy! But I was hooked. There's something just intoxicating about the northern woods at that time of year.”

In 1971, largely by accident, Matia found himself in northwestern Massachusetts at Williams College, a small liberal arts enclave that boasted a world-class art department. Matia's major professor in art (he took a double major in art and biology), Thomas Krens, would go on to become the Director of the Guggenheim Museum in New York City – the equivalent, in the art world, of being the CEO of a major corporation.

The funny thing is, in those days, Matia wasn't “doing” sculpture; his medium of choice, instead, was intaglio printmaking. Or, in layman's terms, etching. He didn't cast his first bronze, a curlew, until 1980 (it's no accident that his business “entity” is called Curlew Castings), and it wasn't until 1987 that he decided to make it a full-time gig. Before that, he enjoyed a rewarding 11-year career with The Nature Conservancy, a stint that ended with him in the position of national vice-president for land stewardship. Wildlife conservation continues to be a cause to which he's passionately devoted; in addition to his work with Park Cities Quail, Matia serves on the Board of Directors of the American Bird Conservancy and is also involved with the American Prairie Reserve.

**A**s a Williams freshman, Matia befriended a guy across the hall who, by sheer coincidence, also hailed from the Cleveland area. The guy's name was Leigh Perkins, although he went by “Perk,” and it just so happened that his father, Leigh Sr., had recently purchased a little manufacturer of fly rods, and purveyor of other fly fishing tackle, located an hour or so up the road in Manchester, Vermont.

Orvis, this outfit was called.

Matia began spending weekends grouse hunting in Vermont with Leigh, Perk, and Perk's younger brother Dave – and you could say that the rest is history. For many years after that, the last Saturday in September – opening day of the Vermont grouse season – was, in Matia's words, "a holy day of obligation." No matter where he was living or what he was doing, his attendance at the Perkins grouse camp was carved in stone.

It was through the Perkins clan, and Leigh in particular, that Matia's education in the ways of hunting dogs began – although to this day he maintains that an English setter named Ginger, who belonged to Dave Perkins, was the damndest grouse dog he's ever hunted over.

"She was a complete renegade," he says, laughing at the memory. "She was a huge-going dog, and we were hunting in the mountains! This was before there were beeper collars, so when we lost her bell, we'd have to sort of triangulate her location based on where we'd last heard it. It might take ten or fifteen minutes to find her, and when we did she'd be sitting down. Then, when she knew we knew where she was, she'd take off, make about a quarter-mile circle, and pin the grouse between her and us. We learned to trust her, because ultimately she'd lead us to the birds.

"Ginger totally ran the show," he adds. "The hunt wasn't over until she decided it was. I can't tell you how many grouse we shot over her during the 'Golden Hour,' when we were dead-tired and ready to quit but she wasn't. Once she was done, though, she was done. She'd stop hunting, come to heel, and walk with us all the way back to the truck."

Later, at the Perkins' Mays Pond Plantation in the Red Hills of northern Florida, Matia hunted wild quail over Leigh's pointers – dogs that struck scent with shattering suddenness, made game with electrifying intensity, and were trained to a field trial standard of mannerly performance. Matia's exposure to this spectrum – from the idiosyncratic "working dogs" like Ginger to the impeccably polished plantation quail dogs – is something else that's served him well.

"I'm not limited to depicting one type of pointing dog 'experience,'" he explains. "Instead, I have an entire range of gestures that I'm able to model."

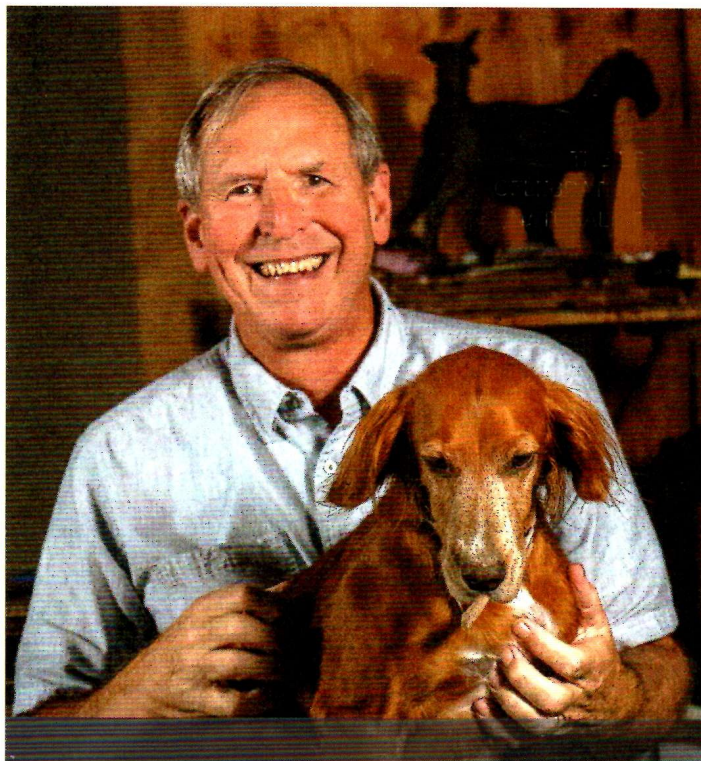
He adds, "When you set out to do a portrait in bronze of a dog, you face two very different problems. The ante in the poker game is that it has to have the gesture, form, and attitude characteristic of the individual dog the client has commissioned you to portray. At the same time, though, the dog should be representative of the entire breed. So you have to manage the problem of creating a pose, and a situation, that speaks to the breed, while not forgetting that you're also servicing a client.

"It's a weird problem," he admits. "You're a portraitist, but you're also a sporting art sculptor. Your first priority is not to get it wrong; then, it becomes 'How do I make it art?' It's a challenge, but when you get it right, it's very satisfying."

Not unlike taking a raw, wild, unformed bird dog puppy and molding him into a champion – even if no one but you recognizes the title.



For more information on Walter Matia's art, visit [matia.com](http://matia.com).



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