



Peter Brooke and the Bronze that Won the Gold

by Molly Siple

Peter Brooke with his winning work,
Michael-Standing
Bronze, 17" × 28" × 8"
Gold Medal for Best Sculpture

WINNING THE GOLD MEDAL for Sculpture in the 94th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition of the California Art Club last October came as a complete surprise to sculptor Peter Brooke. "I was bowled over," Brooke says with amazement. "When I submitted *Michael—Standing*, being awarded the prize was the furthest thing from my mind." In fact, the evening of the gala reception at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, the site for the exhibit, was already special enough for this accomplished artist because he was also hosting his parents who had travelled from England and were seeing their son's work in a museum setting for the first time.

"The Pasadena Museum of California Art is the real deal," says Mr. Brooke enthusiastically, "and the California Art Club did such a good job of displaying all the sculpture in the exhibit. I'm very glad the CAC has embraced sculpture as much as it has. There are very few

venues to display figurative sculpture in Los Angeles. My hat's off to the CAC for gathering together such an accomplished group of sculptors and keeping the quality of the sculpture as high as that of the painting that's on display." And he continues, "These exhibits

give me a chance to show new work and find out how people react to it." Obviously enough fellow artists were touched by *Michael—Standing*, as their votes for the piece garnered Mr. Brooke a gold medal.

Mr. Brooke is an English transplant in southern California, having been born and raised in the harbour town of Scarborough in North Yorkshire, England. He recalls his father traipsing over field upon field, with young Peter in tow, to show his son the works of Rodin, Henry Moore and Jacob Epstein, on display outdoors in Ayrshire, Scotland. "I was privileged to be aware of sculpture of that high calibre at a young age." And he adds with a smile, "My father and I do have certain artistic differences to this day but my parents have always been supportive of my pursuing a career in art."

In 1987 Mr. Brooke earned a B.A. in Communication Media at Manchester Polytechnic, focusing on film production design, and upon graduation in 1987 was immediately

hired by Jim Henson's (of Muppets fame) production company in London. In 1991 Mr. Brooke was assigned to Hollywood to work in the company's California-based Creature Shop, which produces movies, television shows and other forms of entertainment. Los Angeles became his new home and today Mr. Brooke is Creative Supervisor of the Hollywood facilities. He describes his current tasks on the job as "conceptualizing figures and sculpting them. I mostly work in just pen, pencil, paper and clay. When I'm done I turn these characters over to other team members for scanning so the figures can come to life digitally." (Such a succinct and modest description of his professional achievement is typical of Mr. Brooke who charmingly felt it necessary to frequently add to our conversation, "I hope what I just said didn't sound too pretentious.") Mr. Brooke has the distinction of having designed the apes in Disney's 1997 film, *George of the Jungle*, as well as all the animal characters in Twentieth Century Fox's *Dr. Doolittle*, which starred Eddie Murphy.

Mr. Brooke first tried his hand at sculpting early in his career while working in London. He recalls sculpting about forty or fifty pieces before casting the first one, and soon he began selling these works, developing a noteworthy reputation. When he moved to California, along



with his commercial work, Mr. Brooke continued sculpting on the side and focused on animal subject matter. He sculpted someone's pet pot-bellied pig and coyotes which are native to his hilly Los Angeles neighbourhood.

Sales were good enough to give him the option of quitting his commercial work. But although he had long worried that having a regular job could be a hindrance to his progress as a fine artist, Mr. Brooke decided to stay with his day job, taking direction from the writings of Matisse. This innovative master of Fauve painting wrote, "Today, everything is expensive for the painter—colours, materials, life itself. If I were a young painter, I should take a job with a salary, and then I would be independent and paint freely." Mr. Brooke took this advice to heart. "My television work takes a great deal of time, but it also provides income so it's allowed me to make explorations into sculpting without having to worry if a piece will sell. And it helps pay for casting bronzes which is a fairly expensive endeavour!"

Combining commercial and fine art in one career can present a creative challenge, Mr. Brooke will tell you. "Working as a commercial artist, you're always being asked to mimic a certain look or adapt your work to some preconceived notion. Unfortunately, a lot of that facility can creep into your own personal artwork. But I'm not alone in this. I hear lots of artists who combine these careers complain about this. You have to constantly fight to keep from resolving problems in your fine art by resorting to design solutions you've learned in your commercial work." And he continues, "I'm always trying to find my own voice. There's no mistaking the look of a Van Gogh or the sound of Charlie Parker. (Peter Brooke is an avid jazz fan and himself a musician. He began playing flute at age eleven and now plays



Walking Lion

Bronze 42" × 22" × 12", edition of 6



Bull of Bordeaux

Bronze 27" × 17" × 18", edition of 6

an alto sax in the **Pasadena City College Big Band**, performing in their jazz concerts.)

Mr. Brooke's animal sculptures have been included in prestigious exhibits such as **Loveland Sculpture in the Park** in Loveland, Colorado and several **California Art Club Gold Medal** exhibitions, as well as

at venues such as **Walt Disney World** in Orlando, Florida, the **Smithsonian Institution's Conservation and Research Centre** in Front Royal, Virginia, and the **Cleveland Museum of Natural History**. In 1998 Mr. Brooke received the Award of Excellence at the **Society of Animal Artists**

Annual Exhibition.

As an animal sculptor, at one point Mr. Brooke set out for Africa in search of fresh subject matter, spending four weeks camping in Masai territory in Kenya in order to sketch wildlife. While the resulting sculptures sold well, this experience brought him to a crossroads in his artistic explorations. "I felt totally inauthentic," he recalls. The work was anatomically correct but it became very clear that I didn't want to just illustrate the A to Z of the world's wildlife and become a sort of National Geographic bronze sculptor. I also wanted my sculpture to say something." Inspired by the writings of **Joseph Campbell** and **James Joyce** he began to look for ways to incorporate symbolism in his subject matter and to portray the universal in the specific. His *Bull of Bordeaux*, also included in this year's CAC Gold Medal Exhibition, is an outgrowth of this desire to create works of substance.

Soon this shift in perspective quite naturally led Mr. Brooke to turn his attention to the human form with all its potential for expressing emotions and meaning. He set himself a schedule of working from a live model every Saturday for five hours, sculpting the figure in clay. "I virtually put myself back through college," he recalls. "I took a few classes with CAC Out-of-State Artist Member **George Carlson** and **Floyd DeWitt**, and also made a point of looking at the art of great sculptors such as **Alberto Giacometti**, **Marino Marini**, and **Giacomo Manzù**." He also recommends the special room at the **Victoria & Albert Museum** in London which houses eighteenth century plaster casts of **Michelangelo** masterpieces.

Drawing the figure was also part of the regimen, especially studies with CAC Signature Artist Member **Steve Huston** who Mr. Brooke describes as "someone who is always really pushing himself artis-

tically and blessed with amazing technique." For Mr. Brooke, the ability to draw is fundamental to producing quality sculpture. "I've always seen a real connection between drawing and sculpture. All really good sculptors, such as **Francisco Zuniga (1912-1998)**, **Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)** and **George Carlson (1940-)**, have also produced masterful drawings." Mr. Brooke also draws inspiration from **Edgar Degas (1834-1917)** who was also a sculptor. And he adds, "I'd love to have a show and exhibit both my drawings and sculpture."

Speaking of his development as a figurative sculptor, Mr. Brooke says, "Once I reached the stage where I thought I could sculpt a figure to look like a figure, my goal then became to create figures that went beyond mere representation. A peak into his studio reveals how far he's come in this quest. One table holds a series of male figures, positioned deliberately off-balance, reflecting a recent unsettled time in the artist's life. On the far counter are various plaster cases of reclining nude female figures, rooted to the sculpted floor where they lie. Mr. Brooke is thinking of displaying these dreaming figures hung vertically on the wall, suggesting bas-relief. And then there are his standing female figures that explore the goddess theme, detailed hand sculptures and portraits. One especially touching portrait, in the artist's private collection, shows **Jim Henson** holding **Kermit the Frog** who is looking intently and ever so fondly at his creator, a piece Mr. Brooke sculpted in tribute to Henson who had just passed away.

And as for his *Michael—Standing* Mr. Brooke explains, "I wanted to say, 'It's Mike, a real person, a good soul.' A figurative sculpture should give some idea of the soul of a person." In this sculpture he also set himself a special artistic challenge, in part inspired by Rodin's *Balzac*,

on view at the **Los Angeles Country Museum of Art**, which Mr. Brooke sometimes visits to study and sketch. "There's tremendous power in that sculpture," he comments. "We all know those sculptures that show a figure in obvious motion, dancing or striding, but I decided to try to impart a sense of life force into a figure shown standing still. I thought if I could do that," he laughs, "in an inert medium like bronze that would be a job well done!" No problem there, for *this* Gold Medal winner. ■

*Study of a
Robed Figure*
Bronze
24" high,
edition of 6

