

The Essence of Animals

After years in Jim Henson's Creature Shop, Peter Brooke turns his talent to fine art

By Norman Kolpas



As a 5-year-old in northeastern England, Peter Brooke clipped and stashed away the coupons his parents got at the filling station. He had his eye on a specific prize, a small paperback called *Animals Through the Eyes of an Artist*.

"It was the first art book that I ever got," says the sculptor. Filled

with exquisitely simple sketches of African wildlife by English artist Ralph Thompson, it set young Brooke's imagination ablaze. "Thompson is an absolute master. I used to sit down and copy his sketches for hours."

Today the book, its pages slightly yellowed with age, resides

in a bookcase dominating one living room wall in Brooke's home in L.A.'s San Fernando Valley. Shelf after shelf is packed with volumes on artists Brooke admires and looks to for inspiration as he begins his career as a figurative animal sculptor.

Another thing that fascinated

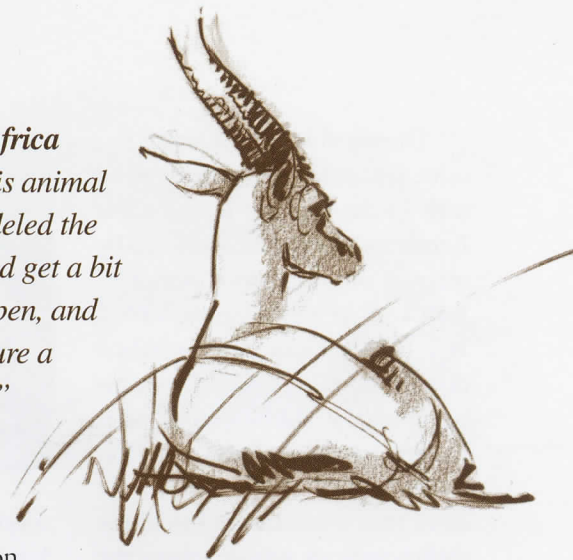
him as a child, a Russian porcelain elephant once owned by his grandparents, has also found its place, sharing the mantel with one of his own sculptures—a bronze coyote in mid-stride as it hunts, its body lean from hunger. More of his bronzes sit around the room, grabbing attention with their barely contained energy: a brown bear teetering on a rock; a Great Dane, attentive and regal; a sprinting jack rabbit. Still other works in various stages of completion, including a lioness and a trio of hippos inspired by a recent trip to Africa, fill his garage studios and a spare bedroom.

Measured in distance alone, the journey from North Yorkshire, England, to Southern California was long. But Brooke has followed an even more circuitous route to reach the point where, at 33, he has found his calling and is being recognized as a noteworthy talent.

Since those early days on the outskirts of Scarborough, Brooke has devoted most of his adult life to commercial art, becoming a leading talent in one of its most innovative fields. But he was devoted to all types of art as a child. “I always enjoyed making

everything from papier-mâché sculptures to puppets, as well as drawing cartoons and animals,” he says. After finishing school at 18, he took a one-

Thomson’s gazelle, Africa
“The morning light hit this animal in such a way that it modeled the form nicely. So I thought I’d get a bit bold, take out the brush pen, and in a few strokes capture a quiet little mood.”



year course concentrating on illustration, then earned a bachelor’s degree in television and film production design at Manchester Polytechnic.

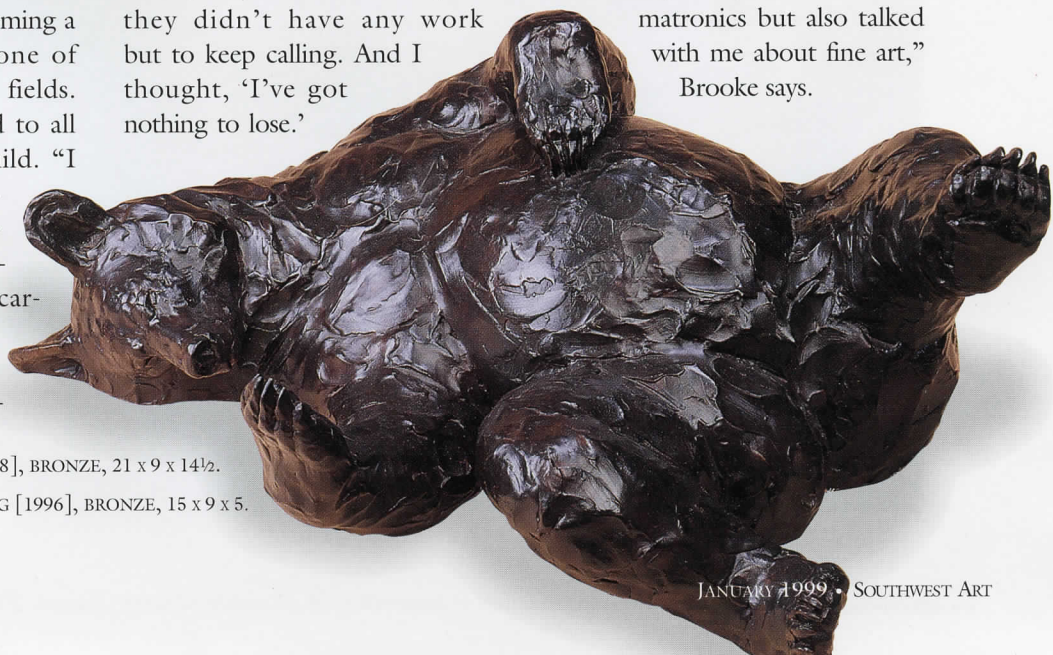
During college Brooke spent summer vacations sculpting creatures for an animation studio. After graduation the head of the studio’s sculpture department suggested Brooke contact the Creature Shop, which was established in London in 1976 by legendary Muppets creator Jim Henson, for a job. Originally set up for the Britain-based production of *The Muppet Show* and then expanded for the fantasy film *The Dark Crystal*, the shop became the birthplace of some of the most fantastical, lifelike creatures to populate large and small screens during the last two decades.

“I put some examples of my work in a portfolio and took them down,” says Brooke. “They said they didn’t have any work but to keep calling. And I thought, ‘I’ve got nothing to lose.’

So I moved down to London.” Six months later Brooke began work in Henson’s sculpture department.

It was an exhilarating time for him. “There was a wonderful feeling of energy and discovery there,” Brooke says. “Henson saw raw talent and nurtured it. He’d talk to you about the essence of a character, its personality. He’d cajole you and help you to move in the right direction. And then he’d walk away, and you’d work even harder to try to get what he wanted.”

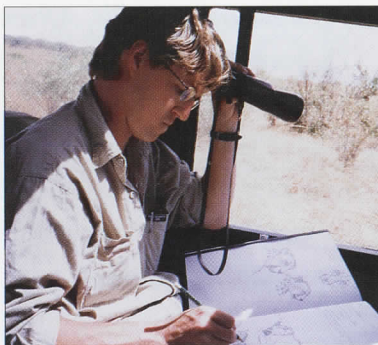
Inspiration of another sort came from his Creature Shop colleague Ron Mueck, who is also a sculptor working on London’s contemporary art scene. “Mueck not only taught me the techniques of sculpture particular to animatronics but also talked with me about fine art,” Brooke says.



RIGHT: RELAXING BEAR [1998], BRONZE, 21 x 9 x 14½.
ABOVE LEFT: COYOTE HUNTING [1996], BRONZE, 15 x 9 x 5.

During this time Brooke became enthralled with the work of turn-of-the-century Italian artist Rembrandt Bugatti, considered by many a master animal sculptor. Brooke first saw Bugatti's work at a local gallery, then tracked down a book on him. "I remember thinking, this is exactly what I want to do—something that would let me express myself a lot more than I was allowed to in the commercial art world, where the ideas come from somebody else."

Brooke also came to realize that London was not the place to pursue figurative fine-art sculpture. "The scene there was very contemporary—we're talking



LEFT: PETER BROOKE IN AFRICA.

BELOW: WALLABY [1996], BRONZE,
7 x 4¼ x 3.

BELOW RIGHT: TRUDY-YOUNG DANE
[1995], BRONZE, 23 x 20 x 6.

modern art," he says. "I don't know where the heck I would have exhibited."

A year after Henson's death in 1990, the Creature Shop sent Brooke to California, where until last autumn he worked full time as head of the sculpture and

design department at the new Burbank branch. Under his leadership such creatures as the humanoid reptilians of TV's *Dinosaurs* and some of the talking animals in the movies *George of the Jungle* and *Dr. Dolittle* came to vivid life.

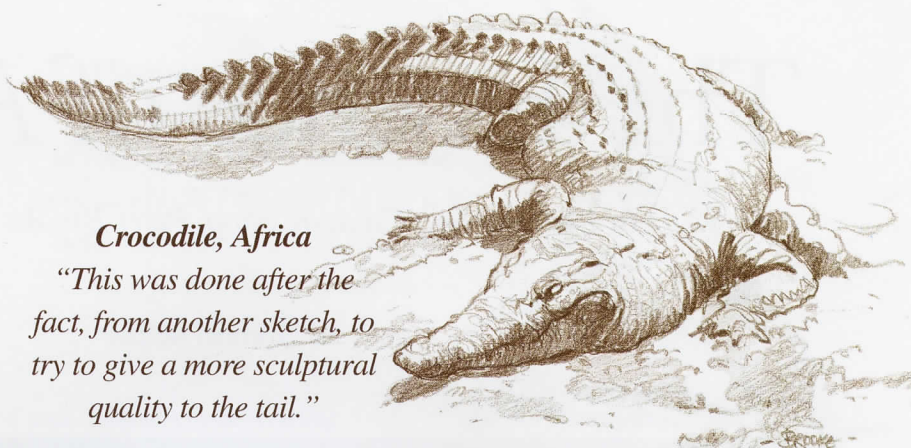
Meanwhile Brooke's own life as a fine artist at last began to blossom. "In America, it was marvelous to find that there's a thriving figurative tradition," he says.



“There were classes, galleries exhibiting figurative work, and like-minded artists and collectors.”

In 1993, having long done clay sculptures at home, on trips to the wilderness, and during weekend visits to the L.A. Zoo, he finally started producing work that could be cast in bronze. The first such pieces, a pair of mourning doves and a pronghorn buck, emerged at the end of that year. New sculptures kept coming even as Brooke put in more than 40 hours a week at the Creature Shop and worked to improve his skills through life-drawing classes and nature journeys.

Then in 1997 Brooke joined friend and fellow sculptor Bart Walter and his family for a three-week trip to Africa—a trip that provided major inspiration for many of his works to date. “Africa was like a great bottle of wine that you keep drinking, glass after glass,” says Brooke, recalling the feeling of intoxication while thumbing through the sketchbooks he filled with images of cheetahs, vultures, giraffes, crocodiles, elephants, and marabou storks. Brooke says his sketches help him “capture the gestures and work out the forms” of animals he later depicts in three dimensions. Perhaps it was the rich inspiration Brooke found in Kenya’s Masai Mara National Park, coupled with the acclaim his early bronzes were garnering, that finally led to his decision in October 1998 to devote himself full time to art while maintaining a consulting role at the Creature Shop.



Crocodile, Africa

“This was done after the fact, from another sketch, to try to give a more sculptural quality to the tail.”

Brooke’s bronzes seem to vibrate with life and personality, but he is reluctant to attribute that quality to his Henson years. “I’m not using the term in a derogatory way, but I don’t want my pieces to look ‘Disneyesque,’” he says. “I’m trying to avoid the trap of anthropomorphism. I want my pieces to get down to the truth, the essence, of the animal.”

To that end he deliberately avoids too much surface detail. “I don’t want people to say, ‘Wow, look, he’s even got eyelashes on that squirrel’ or ‘You can see every feather on that goose.’ I want people to view the object as a sculptural form and to feel the energy.”

From the reception Brooke’s works have received, it seems

he’s getting the desired effect. “Peter’s biggest strength is that he’s truly trying to express himself rather than do what everybody else is doing,” says Colorado sculptor Dan Ostermiller, one of Brooke’s first mentors in the United States. “Of all the workshops I’ve taught, he’s been the brightest star and the most gratifying person to work with because he has so much potential.”

The recipient of such high praise accepts it with all the modesty of an English schoolboy. “I love the process of sculpting,” he says. “I love pushing clay around. At the end of the day, your hands are dirty and your muscles are aching and you feel like you’ve done a good day’s work. With any luck, 10 years from now I’ll be surviving as a full-time sculptor, and I’ll know that my work has improved.”

Norman Kolpas wrote about Carol Mothner in the November issue. He has also written for Bon Appétit and Sunset magazines.



PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SHRIVER GALLERY, TAOS, NM; MERRILL GALLERY, DENVER, CO; PITZER’S OF CARMEL, CARMEL, CA; AND THE SPORTING GALLERY, MIDDLEBERG, VA.