

Brad Rude creates bronze sculpture from his rural Walla Walla home.

Sculpting Smiles

Walla Walla's Brad Rude has made a life of bronze sculpture

written by Sheila G. Miller

IF YOU VISIT the Woodland Park Zoo, you may encounter a bronze sculpture of a scale, one side weighted with a toad, an owl, a seashell and other objects. In downtown Walla Walla, a bronze dog balances items on his nose. At Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland, Oregon, a bronze goat stands on a rock while other animals peer down from his head.

It's all the work of Walla Walla sculptor Brad Rude, who for decades has been making people stop, think and likely smile with his artwork.

Rude lives tucked away in the Blue Mountains, about 8 miles from the edge of Walla Walla. He's lived in the area since he was 10 years old, and it's where he learned his craft.

In high school, he developed an interest in pottery and set up a wheel and studio in his family's basement, first selling pots at the Walla Walla Balloon Stampede after graduating. Around the same time, he learned that the Walla Walla Foundry had just

opened and needed a new employee. After a summer of working the wheat harvest, he went to work at the foundry. For the next twelve years, with the exception of yearlong stints at both Central Washington University in Ellensburg and the Maryland Institute College of Art, he worked there.

Today, the Walla Walla Foundry is the largest foundry in the country focused on fine arts.

"The owner who founded the Walla Walla Foundry specifically wanted to cater to the types of artists you would typically see if you go to, say, the Seattle Art Museum or the Museum of

Modern Art,” Rude said. “It’s a different type of art. A lot of times it’s more abstracted, or large scale. A lot of the artists who have come through that facility do public work. It was an eye opener for me.”

While there, he learned nearly every aspect of the work. “It was a really unique place with the caliber of professional artists who were casting there,” he said. “It was a perfect opportunity to learn how to make sculpture.”

One of the areas he specialized in was patinas—that is, the green or brown tint on the surface of bronze caused by oxidation. He worked directly with the artists, picking their brains over lunch and delivering and installing the finished products.

“Basically, I learned to make sculpture, patina sculpture, assemble sculpture, install sculpture,” he said. “I learned the whole gamut.”

In the early 1990s, he left the foundry to become a full-time artist. He continued to use the facility, though, cutting costs by doing nearly all the work himself. Rude acquired representation at the Foster/White Gallery in Seattle, and his first bronze sculpture was a life-size cow with a coyote on his back. The sculpture became a mainstay on the Seattle street because it was too heavy to make it up to the second-story gallery. Today it resides in Kirkland, where community members decorate it for holidays.

He takes inspiration from the landscape, including just his own backyard, where he’s seen bear, elk and deer over the years.

Rude does private commissions as well as public pieces. His most recent public piece, at Olympic Hills Elementary in Seattle, features a rabbit, otter and coyote, perched on rocks and engaged in a conversation. It was his seventh commission through the Washington State Arts Commission. He’s currently working on two private pieces—one, a life-size bear for a Walla Walla winery; the other, a life-size dog for a Salem-based surgery center. His works usually take between six months and eighteen months to produce.

“Sometimes you need some time to let it rest and then go back and look at it, so you don’t necessarily work on it every day,” Rude said. “I’ll fiddle with the eye, and then I’ll come back in a couple days and before I finalize the eye I’ve done it fifty times.”

He documents every bit of the work he does on each sculpture. “It would make a great book, one of those flip books,” he said.

Sculpture is physical work, from creating the armature (a framework around which a sculpture is built) to the pouring and eventual assembly. Rude has kept all his molds over the years, so



“Whenever Possible” shows Rude’s propensity for stacking animals.

he can re-use past forms like rocks or apples and cut down on some of that work.

“Then you can be spontaneous in the composition,” he said. “When you use multiple forms and different forms, not worrying about scale—an apple in the antlers of the elk, the elk standing up on stilts, then a completely different kind of story evolves.”

Rude often paints his sculptures as well—details, pictures or words that add meaning.

The whimsical results are on display all over Washington and beyond. His public pieces grace the likes of college campuses, children’s hospitals and kids’ schools.

“A story evolves the minute I start putting a sculpture together,” Rude said. “If I put too many elements on then it gets a little overwhelming. It’s usually something that goes, ‘That’s cool. That works compositionally from an artistic perspective.’”