

Capturing Nature in BRONZE

By *Melissa V. Pinard*



*Trio of Herons Fountain,
Town Center of Virginia Beach*

PHOTO COURTESY OF TURNER SCULPTURE

If you walk into the studio

of wildlife sculptor David Turner '83, you may not know where to look first. There are clay maquettes — small-scale, 3-D models of sculptures, ranging from 3 inches to over a foot tall — not to mention numerous images of animals from around the world and a few mounted animal heads. Turner considers himself a naturalist, and it is in this room that he brings ideas to life that might have been milling around in his head since he was a child.

“My work is a combination of all the observations I have made over the years,” he says. “I don’t just reference one image and then sculpt it.”

His styles and interests have evolved over the years. He now experiments with using less realistic forms, such as his three stylized herons at the Town Center of Virginia Beach, which have a slightly more modern flair.

“You can get caught up in the details that don’t really add to the sculpture,” says Turner. “Now I am striving to capture the essence of the piece.”

Although he creates many bird sculptures, he says he has had a fascination with river otters over the past couple of years and also has been working on a quail pair; another animal that harkens from his youth. “I had a pet quail for seven years,” he says.

Turner also just completed a project for Jamestown: a group of sails that are in front of the Jamestown Settlement’s main exhibition building. There were more than 100 pieces cast separately for that project, which took over a year to complete — including three months to make the models, a month to make the molds and four months to cast, pour and assemble the bronze. More than 3,000 pounds of bronze were used. The sculpture was dedicated at a ceremony on May 15 and named *A Fair Wind*.

Creating a sculpture is a multi-step process. The Turner Sculpture gallery and foundry on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, which David co-founded with his father, William, in 1983, currently employs 11 people. “These are local people whom we train as artisans in specific aspects of the lost wax process of bronze casting,” says Turner. “Most of them have worked for us for 15 to 20 years.”

Each person becomes an expert in a certain area that’s an essential part of the whole process. The first step is making the molds around the clay model, which Turner creates, to capture the details. The next step is pouring the 225-degree molten wax into the mold to create a pattern. The wax is then shaped and corrected by hand with tools. The next step is called spruing, which involves attaching wax bars to allow for future metal to flow through and for gases to escape. Then the wax figure is dipped anywhere from six to 12 times in a ceramic liquid, depending on the size of the piece, to form a mold around it. The wax melts out in the 1,500-degree kiln as the mold hardens. Later, 2,000-degree molten bronze is poured into the hollow ceramic mold. After the metal cools, the ceramic mold is hammered off to reveal the bronze castings, which are joined together in the welding room. Finally, a patina is applied to create the effect that Turner desires for that particular piece.

Growing up on the Eastern Shore, Turner remembers poring over nature books well before he could read. Today, his bronze sculpture creations are an amalgamation of images he has seen, either in person or print. His father, a University of Virginia grad, began sculpting in the mid-1950s, mentored by renowned sculptor Robert Rockwell, while his main livelihood at the time was dentistry. William Turner



Top: David Turner '83 stands in front of his sculpture *Bald Eagles* in the College's Sadler Center. Other Turner sculptures on campus include *Canada Geese* that graces the Alumni House side garden and *Great Blue Heron* and *Marsh Wren* in Crim Dell. **Middle:** Turner is currently working on a pair of quail, which appear amidst other clay models in his studio. **Bottom:** Jamestown Settlement commissioned *A Fair Wind*, which was dedicated this May. The three stylized sails evoke the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed* and *Discovery*.





Left: *Taking Flight* earned Turner Best in Show for Sculpture at the 40th Anniversary Ward World Championship Show in 2010. Right: David (left) and his father, William, sit in front of Turner Sculpture gallery and foundry on Route 13 near Onley, Va.



took his sons hunting and fishing and exposed them to the great outdoors at an early age. David began creating clay images of the natural world at the age of 6.

Today, David and his wife, Pamela, split their time between Arlington, Va., and a home on the Eastern Shore, which they call the “Misty House” because it was the house that was used for exteriors in the film *Misty*, based on the book *Misty of Chincoteague* by Marguerite Henry. The couple, who is expecting a child this fall, enjoy taking their boat out to the serene barrier islands. “I learned to drive a boat before a car,” says Turner. “I enjoy the islands now even more than I did when I was a kid.” Turner also has three grown children: Jason, 26, Rachel, 22, and Rebecca, 19.

During his high school days, he played football and was on the 1978 Onancock High School team that made it to the state championship for the first time in the school’s history. A recruiter from William and Mary under head coach Jim Root encouraged him to play at the College. After a year, he switched from football to the College’s rifle team.

During college, Turner majored in biology and minored in studio art. “I took as many whole organism and field biology courses as I could,” he says. “I also took Carl Roseberg’s sculpture courses several times.”

While most of his classmates were interested in pursuing medical degrees, he was interested in animals and nature. For two months one summer, Turner had an internship on an island in the Chesapeake Bay, where he studied and released six young peregrine falcons into the wild. “I lived a Tom Sawyer kind of life,” he says. “It was the buggiest place I have ever been.”

Following graduation, after six months of working at the Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., he knew he had enough of the sterile lab

environment. Up to this point, sculpting had been a hobby for Turner, but he decided to return to the Eastern Shore and pursue his art as a career.

Although Turner Sculpture is located on a rural stretch of Highway 13 in Onley, Va., next to Tammy and Johnny’s famous chicken restaurant, the Turners attract a lot of customers who just happen to be driving by. Around 25 percent of the Turners’ business comes from walk-ins to the gallery, with the rest of their sales coming from the newsletter they send out, art shows and commissioned pieces.

Customized pieces can cost anywhere from \$20,000 to \$250,000. Considering bronze currently costs \$4 a pound and a sculpture like *A Fair Wind* at Jamestown is composed of nearly 3,000 pounds of bronze, it is understandable that the materials and labor alone could be a hefty sum.

Turner has designed over 300 pieces in his career and has sculpted over 50 public commissions, from the *Bald Eagles* in the College’s Sadler Center to *Spadefish* in front of three North Carolina aquariums. Turner’s art can be seen in many places, from Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., to the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago.

“I used to focus on one piece at a time,” he says. “Now it could be up to three or four.”

Another of his sculptures will be displayed at William and Mary sometime in the fall — a stylized dove to mark the College of William and Mary Memorial Grove.

Whether an eagle with a wingspan of 13 feet or a small penguin that can fit in your hand, of the many creations he has made over the years Turner says, “My favorite piece is usually the one I am working on. I sculpt because it is a way I can express my passion and love of nature.” ■

For more information or to see more of Turner’s works, visit www.turnersculpture.com.



Left: *Spring Break*. Left Center: *Otter Curiosity*. Right Center: *Osprey and Trout*. Right: *Stalking Fox*.

TOP LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF THE WARD MUSEUM; OTHER PHOTOS COURTESY OF TURNER SCULPTURE