

Monumental Success

Bronze sculptor Dave McGary takes home the gold.



Duane Darling

Scottsdale sculptor Dave McGary has monumental ideas, and he has finally found success to match.

An American Realist sculptor who works in bronze, McGary mostly documents late 19th and early 20th century Plains Indians. Each year, his Ruidoso, New Mexico, finishing studio ships

about 700 sculptures to collectors around the world. McGary has more than 4,000 collectors, including such celebrities as Elton John, Mickey Rourke and Burt Reynolds.

McGary came to Phoenix with his wife, Molly, in 1995 when they were anticipating the birth of their daughter.

They bought a house in Paradise Valley a year ago, and opened McGary's Expressions in Bronze, a gallery in Scottsdale. At 6 foot 5, McGary isn't overlooked in crowds, but his manner is soft spoken and generous. His handshake is warm, his blue eyes interested, his smile always at the ready.

Now 40, McGary is reaping the rewards for 21 years of work. His sculptures have won numerous gold and silver medals; he was one of just three artists, and the only American, chosen to be part of a 1994 United Nations exhibit; and two of his sculptures have been added to the permanent collection at the White House.

An artist with a particular fondness for monuments — or “big bronze footsteps,” as he likes to call them — McGary installed his third version, a 30-foot rendering of a Miniconjou Sioux chief named Touch the Clouds, at the entrance to the Houston Astrodome in February.

McGary's love of Native Americans is intensely personal. At 16, he quit school and left Wyoming to study sculpture and casting in Italy. He was 19 and work-

ing as a foundryman in Santa Fe when he was asked to support a friend at a Lakota Sun Dance ceremony. This is an honor normally reserved for family members and rarely extended to anyone outside the tribe.

“I had no idea what I was being asked to do,” McGary says. “But when I got to

Montana and got involved in the culture, it literally changed my life."

That was the beginning of a long and intimate association with the Plains Indians, one of the things that separates McGary from his peers.

"You can't learn about your subjects from books or movies or hearsay," he says. "You need to get involved in their society if your work is to breathe, if it is to have spirit."

McGary's subjects are always historical people. He says he often gets ideas for sculptures while listening to tribal elders weave stories. Those ideas evolve through intensive reading, museum research and contact with the subject's living descendants, whenever possible.

"I'm fascinated by the time he spends," Molly says. "He takes a tremendous amount of time to research each piece. Every day he wakes up thinking about the work. He thinks through what he wants to do, working in his mind what he wants to see."

"Then he makes an armature, literally a skeleton," she says. "He sculpts from the bones out, so the anatomy of the piece is unbelievably accurate. Then he goes back and sculpts the clothing. Every shield or gun is what that warrior would have used."

Bill Lucas, managing director of McGary's finishing studio, says McGary is a stickler for details and insists that every piece shipped is perfect. "Virtually no piece leaves the studio without getting worked on two or three times more once it gets to quality control," he says.

McGary is equally serious about the business of art, and his operation is a large one. In addition to the 48 artisans who work in his finishing studio, McGary's network includes 10 foundries and eight galleries.

"I'm very aggressive about my career," McGary says. "I don't want to hear 'you can't fly to the moon,' when I want to fly to the moon. I want somebody to sit down and talk with me about how we are going to build this ship."

It is a side of McGary that sometimes draws criticism from other artists. He dismisses them as being too idealistic.

"I say hogwash to that," he says. "The people who buy my work are literally the tops in their world. They got there

because they have discipline and a strong desire to achieve. They expect that same professionalism from me."

Yet in the end, what drives McGary is the art itself.

"We all have a flame that burns inside us; we all have a passion for something," McGary says. "There are times when I work in my studio for three or four days without sleep. When I'm so excited

about what I'm doing that I can't sleep, that's the passion. That's why I do what I do. That piece of clay in my studio has no value other than to me. It's a passionate, spiritual release. I do it because I couldn't live without it. That's what being a true artist is about."

PM

Freelance writer Kathy Khoury lives in Chandler.



A welder works on McGary's "Touch the Clouds" monument.

Courtesy McGary Studios