

REFLECTING TWO CULTURES

Native northeast meets southwest in the bronze and stone sculpture of Tim Nicola.

By Gussie Fauntleroy



"The Life Givers," bronze fountain, edition of 12, 54" high

I'm sitting in McLarry Fine Art with sculptor Tim Nicola when a burst of mirthful laughter erupts from the main gallery. A peek around the corner reveals a small group of visitors standing in front of a Nicola bronze depicting three rounded, blanketed Indians with oversized hands, sitting side-by-side. The middle figure stares

straight ahead while his finger points to his friend to the right, a gesture echoed in the sculpture's title: "He Did It."

This kind of moment is what makes his job worthwhile, Nicola observes with a smile: when viewers are moved to laugh, or even cry, as they experience his work. Whether the response is to the artist's

humorous pieces, his expressive figurative works, or his signature flowing style with its exquisitely curved forms, it is a satisfying reflection of the love and attention he puts into each piece, he explains.

Nicola is a Penobscot Indian who grew up on Indian Island, his tribe's water-bounded reservation in the middle of the



"He Did It," bronze, edition of 30

"Barefoot with Baskets," back view



"Ancient Song," bronze, edition of 50



"Barefoot with Baskets," bronze, edition of 25



"Ballerita," bronze, edition of 30

Penobscot River in Maine. Paddling a canoe, watching the rain, or crossing water to reach the mainland, his early life was defined by water. It still is, though now in the opposite sense. Living in the southwest since 1980 and formerly married to a Navajo artist, he has gained a deep understanding of the preciousness of water in the high desert. Today his home and studio are in central New Mexico.

This strong connection with water's essential role was central to the design and creation of Nicola's award-winning monumental bronze, "The Life Givers." The piece, which features two native women helping each other gather water in large pots, earned the sculptor "a drawer full of ribbons," as he puts it, from Santa Fe Indian Market a few years ago. Among them was Best of Division and a fellowship designed to assist him in pursuing his passion for carving. While Nicola no longer takes part in Indian Market, he describes its recognition of his talent as a much appreciated "springboard" for his career.

A much earlier springboard, the nurturing provided by a creative environment at home and in his tribal community, helped prepare him for a life in art—and also underscored another connection with the southwest, though he didn't know it at the time. His father, grandfather, and grandmother all were basketmakers, an age-old Penobscot tradition.

"They were always creating or building something, so I had access to a workshop," the artist remembers. Like many in his community, he carved in wood as a boy, yet even then he knew neither wood nor basket making had as much of a pull on him as other forms of art. "My father thought I was an odd kid; I'd lock myself in for a week and do my art," which at the time was drawing and painting, he recalls with a smile.

When he came to New Mexico in 1980 to attend the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe—after a stint in the army and a few years working construction—Nicola initially enrolled in a painting course, believing that was the direction he wanted to pursue. Fate intervened. He discovered he was not highly compatible with his painting instructor, and soon switched to three-dimensional art—a fortuitous move, as it turns out.

His first sculpture teacher was Doug Coffin, now a renowned sculptor, who help open the creative floodgates by giving Nicola a key to his studio. Many nights saw the student alone there, fervently carving well into the night. Then he'd sleep a few hours in his parked car, and walk back into the studio with the rest of the students in the morning, ruffled but happy.

*"Companions"
black belgian marble, 22" tall*



"Sweet Dreams", alabaster, 19" tall

"The Flute Players", alabaster, 31" tall

Award-winning native sculptor Doug Hyde assisted Nicola in obtaining his own first studio, and "took me under his wing," the artist explains. And with his marriage to painter Mary Yazzie, he became immersed in Navajo life. (The couple divorced two years ago but remain friends and partners in their art.)

Today, the two cultures that are central to his life are reflected in Nicola's work in

alabaster, marble, and bronze. Graceful, stylized female figures holding baskets or vessels, in particular, connect him with the Penobscot traditional way of life. Yet beyond all these, he believes, is the importance of beauty.

"Mine is not the kind of art you have to look at for a long time to understand," Nicola muses, adding that he personally enjoys all types of art. "In my work, compo-

sition, balance, line, rhythm, harmony, movement—all these come into play. Creating these pieces is a love affair—it really is."

Tim Nicola's sculpture is represented by McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. (505) 988-1161, 1-877-983-2123; www.mclarryfineart.com.