



1876: Gall—Sitting Bull—Crazy Horse

"This sculpture depicts who are considered to be some of the most important principals involved in the battle of Little Bighorn. Gall led some of the early charges, and it is said that Crazy Horse led the decisive charge that killed Custer. Although Sitting Bull did not participate in the battle, it was his dream of a great victory during a vision quest that brought the Indians together at Little Bighorn.

"I was told by my guide at the memorial site of the many advantages the Indians had over the cavalry. Most notable, I think, were the repeating Winchesters possessed by the Indians, like the one Crazy Horse is holding, as opposed to the cavalry's single-shot rifles. In contrast to that, it is said that Gall carried only his axe into battle, as a way, perhaps, of avenging the death of his family, who were killed by the cavalry at an earlier date."

MYTHOLOGY AS A METAPHOR

By Mary Nelson

The marble sculpture, *The Rape of Proserpina* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, captured John Coleman's imagination and later inspired him in his own work. Actually, what really stirred his muse was the way Pluto's hand leaves an indentation on the leg of Proserpina.

"It's photographed a lot, because the pressing of the flesh is so beautiful," Coleman says. Inspired by that sculpture, Coleman sought to evoke a similar expression in his bronzes when he began his art career in 1993. Although the result fell somewhat short of his vision, he turned the experience into a valuable lesson.

"My first pieces of bronze were

void of texture," says the Arizona artist. "I was mimicking that polished marble. The part I didn't understand was that marble is translucent and mimics flesh, whereas bronze is more akin to a chrome bumper."

Coleman is a quick study, always has been. So, rather than lament failed efforts, he analyzed them, figured out what had gone awry, and turned it to his advantage. "[I realized] that, with sculpting bronze, getting the effect you want is about the way light reflects off of texture," he says. "Ironically, when you add texture, which you think would make something rough, it breaks up the light and softens it to the eye. Then

the bronze becomes a little bit like a charcoal drawing; it can kind of go in and out of focus. You can create hard edges and soft edges, and then it can get painterly and a lot of fun."

Coleman always knew he would be an artist. As a teen growing up in California, he was already on that path. At age 16, he was commissioned to illustrate a monthly syndicated column for George Masters, renowned hair stylist to Marilyn Monroe, Mia Farrow, and other celebrities. Although that job was a bit of a fluke, he believed he was headed in the right direction.

But Coleman married in his teens, and his art career was derailed. He

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quit school and traded his art ambitions for a career in construction and land development. He and his wife Sue moved their family to Prescott, Arizona, in 1972, where they raised their two daughters while working side by side to start and grow their land development business. In 1993, when he turned 42 and his daughters, Hilary and Heather, were grown, Coleman walked away from it all. His muse began to clamor for his attention.

Because he could no longer silence the artist within—nor did he want to—Coleman again turned his ambitions to art. Sue was right there with him. "When I decided to go into art full time, we were already working together," he says. "She keeps everything organized and works out all the details. She's also the person who makes sure nothing leaves the studio unless it looks right. She's the eyes of the outfit." During their 40 years of marriage, Coleman has relied on Sue's constant and unflagging support, saying he can't imagine having made it this far without her.

Coleman will be the first to tell you that, relatively speaking, he's had a charmed career. Although he didn't have much formal art education, his innate talent was always just under the surface, waiting for the right time. By the time he'd raised his family, had some money in the bank, and made his mark in real estate development, he was ready to make a change. The confidence of success in business served him well in art. "[My career] happened overnight really," he says. "I began from a secure place. By the time I got started, the only challenge I really had was to find my place."

Coleman took classes at the Scottsdale Artist School, studying under Sandy Scott, Quang Ho, Lincoln Fox, and others to get his artistic groove going. Choosing to sculpt rather than paint was a tough decision; it was just a matter of

Winds of Change, bronze, 25" high

"Changes, like the wind at our backs, we can resist and stand firm or harness this energy and move forward."





The Game of Arrows, bronze, 60 1/2" high

"This sculpture depicts a Mandan archer engaged in 'the game of arrows,' an event witnessed by George Catlin in about 1833. He reported that the most distinguished archers gathered on the prairie, each one having paid an entrance fee such as a shield, robe, or pipe. In turn, they shot their arrows into the air to see who could get the greatest number flying at one time, the winner taking as his prize everything that was brought by the other archers for entrance fees. It was written that the winner of this particular gathering achieved eight arrows in flight before the first one struck the ground."

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analyzing his options and finding the one that would be the best vehicle for him to tell the stories he wanted to tell. From a mechanical and technical standpoint, he'll tell you it's as easy for him to paint as it is to sculpt.

"Painting and [sculpting] are kind of the same thing in my mind," he says. "You still have to solve the same problems." He harkens back to *The Rape of Proserpina* and the impact it had on him. What stands out for him, Coleman says, is the tale Bernini's sculpture tells and the emotions it brought forth in him. In the end, sculpture was the best medium to "tell stories in my work, using metaphors that help explain who we are and from where we came," he says. But Coleman also will tell you that he still paints and, "if I live long enough, I'm hoping I can have a career as a painter, as well."

Coleman's foray into his medium began as bas relief cast in resin. The Native American culture seemed a natural subject based on his interest in history. Maybe if he'd been born in Europe, his art would have focused on Arthurian legend; if he lived in Greece, it might have been the Romans. But, as an American, he's taken the rich lore of the American Indian and sculpted tangible stories of their legends and spirituality.

"Using mythology as a metaphor has been a common theme in my sculptures," he says. "I'm portraying historical ideas as metaphors."

To explain, Coleman describes one of his earliest sculptures of a young Indian girl going through a ceremony to celebrate her coming of age, her puberty rights. The girl is being blessed with corn pollen and appears with all the accoutrements of her ceremony. Coleman designed the elements of the ceremony to trigger an understanding that would allow the layers of historical memory to begin to unfold for viewers.

"It's not a sculpture about this little girl who is going through this ceremony," he explains. "It's representing the whole concept of the



Bringing the Buds to Life, bronze, 20" high

"Many of the pueblos share in the same types of ceremonies. The summer corn dance beings in the privacy of the kiva, where the super naturals bestow promises. When the time is right, the dance moves outside to the plaza.

"Taking the dance into the light of day, the promises made in the kiva for the germination and growth of the crops are made known to the world through the song and gesture of the dancer. Here a Santa Clara child through her rhythm and movement is 'bringing the buds to life.'"



*Wahktageli, Big Soldier, Explorer Artists,
Bodmer/Catlin Series, bronze, 24" high*

"Wahktageli, also known as Big Soldier, was a Yankton (Nakota) Sioux Chief, who was over 6 1/2 feet tall. In 1833, Big Soldier was approximately 60 years old when Bodmer documented his clothing and headdress in a painting. I was inspired by this painting because of the early headdress Big Soldier was wearing. Made from the long feathers of birds of prey, they were tied to his hair and presented an image very different from the more contemporary fashion that was popular after the 1870s."

"The key to creating a great piece of art is to leave room for the viewer to participate in it,"

respect that goes into this transformation the person is going through, which can be moving and exciting."

At the same time, these depictions of mythology and ritual can touch off memories that spark an emotional or introspective response from viewers. When that happens, Coleman gets excited. "I want them to relate to their own story," he says. "I want them to see their story in my story. Most of my work reflects something that's happened to me in my life. When I have something to celebrate in my life, a lot of times I'll put it into one of my sculptures."

At the same time, Coleman is adamant that his sculptures are historically accurate. He says that knowing historical facts and understanding the ceremonies and rituals are key elements that spark responses from viewers. In order to have that kind of command over the history and the understanding of the ceremony, Coleman says he becomes a pseudo expert by researching everything he can find about his subject. Abstract design is as important to his art as the history. Without that, sculpture becomes merely a craft that, he hastily points out, is fine. But craft is not art; it's technical and has a place, but art is so much more.

"The key to creating a great piece of art is to leave room for the viewer to participate in it," he says. Coleman accomplishes that by editing, leaving out certain things, and suggesting others so viewers can use their own experiences to fill in the missing parts.

Coleman proudly explains that, even though his sculptures draw forth memories and stories that people have locked away inside themselves, he's not making up these stories. "I don't do fantasy; it's real," he says. "That gives me a nice cross-over audience, because there are history buffs and parts of my work appeals to them from an historical standpoint."



Iron Sharpens Iron, bronze, 17" high

"In the culture of the Plains Indians some 150 years ago, a boy would be introduced to the bow and arrow very early in his life. Helping him to understand the rudimentary process of correctly fitting the arrow to the bow, a father kneels over his young son, and the scene is that of bonding and affection between the two. As my sculpture depicts this event, it also lends itself to an even bigger story. The deeper side is that the bow and arrow represent food and protection for the whole tribe. For these early Indians, the process of mentoring related directly to the survival and prosperity of the people. Together, this very young boy and his father create equilibrium where the skill and knowledge of the boy not only will impact the teacher but the rest of the tribe, as well. In this sculpture, the boy represents the future, his father and mentor the present. Here they are equals: iron sharpens iron."



Glories Past, bronze, 19" high

"An old warrior, holding a coup stick from the days of his prime, reflects on his youth and his many exploits of 'glories past.'"



Although, as a general rule, Coleman doesn't do strictly historical depictions, he's made an exception. For the past six years, he's worked on 10 sculptures based on paintings by Swedish artist Karl Bodmer and American painter George Catlin, who specialized in art of the American West. These pieces are a departure from Coleman's usual sculptures, but he greatly admires the two artists' work and decided to celebrate their contributions to history. The final two sculptures will be released in March. "They are pure history, a tribute to those two artists," he says. "The sculptures are literally fleshing out the original portraits."

Much of the work Coleman creates each year is included into the Cowboy Artists of America Show. A member of that prestigious

organization since 2001, Coleman has started throwing a charcoal drawing into the show each year, he says, "just to get people used to seeing my flat work." That way, he adds, no one will be surprised if he does another about-face and leaves sculpture to take up a paint brush.

Having chosen Native American history as his subject, there is enough subject matter that Coleman believes he'll never lack for inspiration. So, when he says, "I feel like my best work will still come in 20 years," you can be pretty sure he's right. *AW*

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