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Lakota Sioux Warrior, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"Horse and man were one among the skilled Plains warriors. No one could match their equestrian abilities. They were a terrifying enemy when mounted."

George S. Stuart

A Man of Many Faces

By Barbara Coyner

The house lights dim, and the spotlight finds its focus. A voice, clean and measured, breaks the silence. One by one, the historical figures of the Renaissance make their entrance: Savonarola, Lucrezia Borgia, Lorenzo de' Medici, Queen Isabella, Martin Luther. As the audience watches, the visual drama accomplishes what

benign history books cannot. Never has the past seemed so present. Once again, the passionate symphony of historian, artist, and performer reaches its crescendo. George Stuart, the conductor, takes a bow and is gone.

Like his figures, which he defines as "small-scale figurative sculpture in mixed media," Stuart is himself a

mixed media figure, hard to define as merely an artist, historian, or performer. He is accomplished at all

Sioux Scout, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"The White Eyes discovered that the people of the Plains were almost magical in their ability to keep track of their enemies without being observed themselves."



COMANCHE WARRIOR
HISTORICAL FIGURE BY GEORGE STUART-1984



Sioux Warrior, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"Only the most venerable and eminent warriors had the right to wear the greatly admired trailing war bonnet. Eagle feathers were a mark of honor and were much coveted."

three pursuits. But he will tell you right up front what he is not.

"I am not a people person," he says flatly, praising telephones and answering machines as two wonderful inventions that allow him to screen his social life. Intense in his research and obsessed with accuracy and detail, the Ojai, California, creator of historical figures guards his privacy and space well. Yet it is a bit of a stretch to say that he is not a people person, for his conversation is relaxed and he easily slides into the interviewer's role, casually questioning and inviting feedback in true historian fashion. Then, too, his historical figures look so alive that one suspects that Stuart converses with them endlessly.

"My figures are very realistic," he says. "There is nothing abstract or whimsical about them."

Built on an iron wire skeleton designed to move, the quarter-scale figures aren't exactly sculpture, according to Stuart, who describes sculpture as more of a whittling-down process. In his case, he employs a building-up technique, padding the framework with papier-mâché, cotton padding, Styrofoam, and a wool felt skin. Once he has determined the posture and body composite, Stuart covers the surface with his own concoction, dubbed "plastique," to achieve a life-like skin. Details such as ceramic eyes, hair, lashes, and the like require hours of labor, after which he sews the outfits, crafts the beads, and works the leather. The time-consuming process draws Stuart into clay work, textiles, art in myriad forms. It's virtually the same technique he used in his first historical figure in 1953.

"I dreamt this thing up on my own," Stuart says. "I wasn't aware of others doing a similar thing until seven years ago, and since then I've seen some good and some not so good. There are some doing ethnic and historical portraits. My later works are fully hard body and no cloth, so they're a little different."

Just as Stuart's sculpting is a

Comanche Warrior, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"The Plains Indians made a great display of themselves when going into battle. They wore all their badges of honor and achievement. The stunning impression was not through weaponry alone."





Grant and Lee, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"Although the two men may have met during the Mexican War, their most famous encounter was at Appomattox. Lee was splendid in defeat, while Grant was dispirited and disheveled."

launched the Smithsonian into a league of its own, and Stuart notes that some of the exhibits he helped to create in the '50s are still on display. Ironically, the experimentation at the Smithsonian fueled Stuart as his Historical Figures® series began to grow.

As events pulled Stuart to the West Coast and to Santa Barbara, California, the old mistress, theater, tagged along. By then, he had per-

fectured his technique for the figures and was turning out personalities from the distant past. With some 50 to 60 figures populating his collection, Stuart snagged the attention of the Stanford University Museum at Menlo Park, which showcased his work in a six-month-long exhibition. Thousands absorbed the Stuart's creative genius, as his work garnered extensive press coverage. Yet, as the figures stayed on center

stage, Stuart couldn't resist being on stage himself. The University of California's Santa Barbara campus gave him the thespian outlet he craved.

Sculpting his own personal life, Stuart was past the rough form and heading toward the details. Yes, he could be an historian, an artist—and a performer. Launching his monologues in the early Sixties, he marketed his package under the reputable Samuel Horton Brown Agency in Beverly Hills, joining a stable that included Margaret Meade and Dr. Frank Baxter. He and his figures toured the country, bringing the Renaissance, the Patriot era, and other periods of history to the stage where people could grasp the true impacts of the past. Stuart was bringing history to life, he was acting and he was creating. His monologues were even waking up youth to an otherwise dead subject.

"I wish [young people were] more susceptible to history," he says. "I find it more interesting to talk to the young and the monologues really reach them, especially on the promotional videos. Sometimes the young people are intimidated by the presence of older people going to the live monologues."

With successful monologues revolving around several major historical periods and countless figures to act out the parts, Stuart joined forces with the Ventura County Museum of History and Art in the late Seventies to give his creations a perpetual home. The museum promised a special hall just for the figures, Stuart was named Curator for Life, and a Gallery Talk Program was developed. More recently, he has branched out into commission work and has assembled a stunning Southwest Collection, as well. These days, Stuart creates about a dozen figures per year.

"Anyone who's human wouldn't do this," he quips. "I can't remember whether it was Jung or someone else who said that the arts are just a form of neurotic expression. But I'm grateful that some people do it."

Stuart's collectors are grateful, as well, thankful that he has devoted his time and talent to an art that breathes life into history. □

Barbara Coyner is a writer living in Potlatch, Idaho.







General Fremont, mixed media, 1/4 life-size

"Famous for his opening up of the West, it is almost forgotten that Fremont was the one who appointed Grant to take Vicksburg, and subsequently turned the tide of the war against the South."

building-up approach, so is his research. He often starts with an era, admitting that there are many fascinating periods of history from which to choose. "I have people come up to me all the time and say, 'Why don't you do . . . ?' Then they fill in the blanks with what they're interested in," Stuart says. "I don't like to do living well-known personalities; they're iffy, but sometimes I take a chance. People can be highly

critical, because the figures are very realistic. When I did President Reagan, the White House office sent a variety of photos, and I talked to his tailor, because we happen to have the same one. It took god-awful forever."

Plagued with dyslexia since he was a small child, Stuart often employs a local librarian or history buff to dig up the facts and details on each personality within the chosen



era. Research can consume up to six months and, after that, Stuart must internalize the information and study the paintings and photos to capture the human look. The process is as much cerebral as tactile, which is one reason he relishes his solitude and bachelor state. "Most intense, creative people are very selfish," he says. "It's easier not to be married. I live alone and love it."

For most of his life, Stuart has opted to work in solitude. As a youngster, he painted, sculpted, assembled models, and immersed himself in architecture, generally savoring a world of his own making. Old-world buildings were a particular focus, and an intricate project of recreating the 1660 Palace of Versailles took Stuart eight years to complete. Even then, he wasn't fully done tinkering with the piece.

A call from the real world came when Stuart graduated from high school and needed to choose an occupation. With somewhat elite Eastern expectations pressing in, he pondered a future in law or perhaps the Foreign Service. Eventually, Stuart studied at Georgetown University and at American University in Washington, D. C., concentrating on foreign relations, international law, and history. He also became entangled with a sultry mistress: the theater. It was his consuming passion, his "subversive lover," as he calls it, and after graduation, he moved toward production and acting full-time.

Meanwhile, the idea of the historical figures—today trademarked as Historical Figures®—took shape, enticing him to create his own cast for the stage. In time, Stuart took a job at the Smithsonian Institute, where he served as a founding member of its first attempt at professional exhibits staffing. The group