



BLAIR BUSWELL

The Composer

By Brandon Rosas

The year is 1841, and the sounds of men and animals fill the streets of what would one day become Omaha, Nebraska, as the first serious group of pioneers sets out along the Oregon Trail. From high atop a rearing horse, a wagon master calls to the party of covered wagons, urging the travelers through a dry creek bed and toward a new life out West.

This is not a scene from a new Taylor Sheridan television series; it's a six-block-long monumental installation in downtown Omaha, something Utah-based sculptor Blair Buswell has been contributing to for the past 20 years. "I'm very proud of what my partners and I came up with," he says, adding that he collaborated on the award-winning installation with fellow sculptors Ed Fraughton and Kent Ullberg, as well as the late, renowned landscape architect Jim Reeves. "Being part of this team has been a super experience."

The youngest of five children, Buswell is no stranger to working on a team. Growing up in North Ogden, Utah, he played several sports in school and enjoyed skiing and riding horses during family camping trips in the mountains. When he wasn't outdoors, he was often copying Norman Rockwell magazine covers in pencil and making his own toys out of plasteline clay that came in four colors. "This was before Play-Doh," says the 67-year-old artist. "I would mix red and yellow together to make orange for the skin color. Then I would make blue pants, a yellow shirt, and a red hat, and that's how I'd make my cowboys and Indians."

Buswell's talents were apparent in school, where he was consistently a top art student. When he learned that his junior high art teacher was



Lookout Point, 23 1/2" high by 14 1/2" wide by 12" deep, bronze

"This Plains Indian is standing at the edge of a plateau, looking over the valley below."

(Left) Showtime, 18 1/2" high by 7 1/2" wide by 10 1/2" long, bronze

"The old-time rodeo clown with painted face is ready to put on a show for the crowd."

able to earn additional income by selling paintings, he realized it was possible to make a living with art. His vision for the future became clearer when a family trip out East included a pit stop at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. "I remember being 15 years old and seeing the life-sized busts of those players, thinking, 'Somebody sculpt-

ed that; that would be a great gig someday,'" he says.

As graduation approached, it was clear that great things were on the horizon as Buswell received scholarship offers for art, athletics, and academics from a junior college in Rexburg, Idaho. Planning to work as a commercial artist until he could pursue sculpture, during his three



Risky Business, 18" high by 16" wide by 32" long, bronze

"This piece shows the moment after the clown, who has helped the bull rider to safety, realizes that the bull has turned his full attention to the him."

semesters there he took an illustration class that changed his view of his craft. "For a long time, I thought art was about copying what was in front of you," he says. "Then I realized that I could design the work any way I want, and I fell in love with the idea that I could be the composer."

After serving a two-year mission in Washington, D.C., Buswell received offers to walk onto the football teams at both Utah State and Brigham Young University (BYU). He chose to attend BYU, where he received an art scholarship and was hired by the school's booster club to sculpt trophies for its annual sports awards program. When he returned home for the summer, with help from his father, he set up

his first studio in half of his parents' garage. "We brought in some lights and stacked some apple crates, a neighbor welded a couple of sculpture stands, and I haven't looked back," he says, noting that the garage studio was where he created some of his first Western pieces.

At the awards banquet during his senior year, Buswell received a trophy in recognition of his artistic accomplishments. The evening's guest speaker was Bill Walsh, head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, who had just won his first Super Bowl. After the banquet, Walsh asked Buswell

to create a sculpture as a gift for Edward DeBartolo, owner of the 49ers. "Of course, I jumped on that,"

***"Looking back,
there was a purpose
for everything."***

he says, adding that the two men later posed for him, and he created half life-size busts flanking a plaque that read: "A World Championship Combination."

When the piece was complete, Walsh flew Buswell to DeBartolo's hometown of Youngstown, Ohio, to present it in person. Thrilled with the sculpture, DeBartolo asked Buswell what he planned to do with his talent. "I told him my dream was to work for the NFL, especially the

Pro Football Hall of Fame,” says Buswell, adding that DeBartolo immediately called the hall’s director. “So, I drove an hour to the hall, and they hired me 42 years ago. It was a dream come true.”

Freshly out of college and sculpting for the Hall of Fame gave Buswell “instant legitimacy,” he says. He was also selling his work through a gallery in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, which had added him to its roster while he was still at BYU. The early success did not stop him from developing his craft, however. He sought out mentorships with artists he admired and was taken under the wings of sculptors Fraughton, Grant Speed, and Florence Hanson, as well as painter William Whitaker.

Buswell received his first monumental commissions through his fellow artists. “When Grant Speed was asked to sculpt a Baptist preacher, he said, ‘I could do it, but I know someone who could do it better,’ and recommended me for the job,” he says, adding that Ullberg did the same for a statue of basketball legend Oscar Robertson. “It was a blessing that these good friends saw where I was going and gave me an opportunity to learn and grow.”

The Omaha project came about in 2000 when First National Bank of Omaha purchased two blocks of land to be transformed into sculpture parks to celebrate Nebraska’s wild-life and Omaha’s role in Westward expansion. Buswell and Fraughton were hired to create the wagon train portion of the project, which came to be known as *Pioneer Courage Park*, while Ullberg completed the wildlife portion, called *Spirit of Nebraska’s Wilderness*.

During the past two decades, Buswell has sculpted some 30 pieces for the project, including the wagon master and two wagons, as well as a dozen other figures and multiple animals, all 1 ¼ life-size. He is now working on the project’s final phase, which will include mountain men and a group of Native Americans. “The historical aspect is a lot of fun, and I love trying to capture the lifestyle and personalities [of my subjects],” he says “I try to bring life



Trading for Directions, life and ¼, bronze, Omaha, Nebraska

“This is a closeup image of an over-life-size sculpture in downtown Omaha, Nebraska. It depicts a chance meeting between a mountain man and two Plains Indians. His trade goods on the ground, the mountain man is getting directions from the middle Indian who is wondering, ‘What is a map?’”



Daddy Daughter Date, life and ¼, bronze – Phase I wagon, Omaha, Nebraska

“This image is a closeup of the pioneer father and daughter atop their family wagon, heading on their journey across the plains. I used myself and my daughter Jocie as models for these figures.”

to the work, and I’ve found that the feeling I’m able to evoke is what sets me apart.”

Scaled-down versions of some of Buswell’s *Pioneer Courage* pieces and his other Western works are

available through his galleries, and he also enjoys participating in museum shows. For instance, at last year’s Prix de West exhibition at the National Cowboy Museum, he received the Express Ranches Great





(Above left) *The Wagon Master*, life and ¼, bronze, Omaha Nebraska

"This image shows me working on the over-life-size clay, using my scale model as a reference. The wagon master sits atop his horse, waving to the wagons to 'come this way; we're over here.'"

(Above right) *Sentinel Bust*, 26" high by 14" wide by 12" long, bronze

"This piece was taken from the monumental sculpture I installed in my Omaha project. I tried to depict the feeling and expression of a Native American who carries himself with the confidence befitting his status within his tribe. I really like the air of pride and certainty displayed in the face and the regal nature of the headdress and necklace."



American Cowboy Award for a trio of bronzes depicting rodeo clowns, a theme he had wanted to explore for more than 50 years. "It was an honor to receive one of the top awards," he says. "The Prix de West brings together the best sculptors and paint-

(Left) *A Mother's Love*, 23" high by 8" wide by 8" long, bronze

"In this piece, I love the simple gesture, connection, and unconditional love between a mother and her baby."

ers in the country, and I'm just lucky to be recognized as one of them."

Despite earning many honors, including being elected as a fellow of the National Sculpture Society and being the first sculptor named Sport Artist of the Year, Buswell remains humble. "Coming from a team sports background, I don't look at these things as being about me," he says. "I've had a lot of help and encouragement, and I like to pay it forward by helping anyone who's willing to listen to what I can share."

When he isn't sculpting or teaching, Buswell watches sports and enjoys the beauty that surrounds

his home in Alpine, Utah. He also travels as often as possible with his wife Julie and is proud that his three grown children are all involved in the arts.

Although there is much more that he'd like to accomplish—including sculpting such iconic personalities as Clint Eastwood, Sam Elliot, and Tom Selleck—Buswell is enjoying the road he is on. "I just want to keep improving and learning from others," he says. "I love the journey."

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Brandon Rosas lives in Parnell, Iowa.