

OTT JONES

A Moment of Movement

By Joe Tougas



River Bottom Sanctuary, bronze, 20" by 14"

"In spring, I always enjoy watching colorful rooster pheasants on our property and hearing their unmistakable crowing calls as they gather their hens for breeding season. The abstract pyramid shape design creates a subtle, yet strong, composition."

For three summers in the 1980s, Ott Jones worked as a fishing guide at the Rainbow King Lodge in Lake Iliamna on the Alaskan Peninsula. He led fishing excursions

during the days and worked on his art at night. "If I was stationed at the lodge I'd sculpt at the lodge; if I was living in the bush I'd sculpt at camp by candlelight," he says. It was one of the last jobs he had before becoming a full-time artist.

During those three years, Jones lived in Castle Rock, Colorado, where he was under the artistic mentorship of accomplished Colorado artist, Veryl Goodnight, who was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 2016. "I learned the whole aspect of sculpting and the business end—marketing, doing shows," Jones says. "And I also

learned about the production side and how bronzes are produced in the foundry."

In both Alaska and Colorado, he worked tirelessly on his art and began to get attention for his work, even before turning to art on a full-time basis. He got some great exposure in Alaska. "My boss and his wife were wonderful people and allowed me to display my works of Alaskan wildlife at the lodge," Jones says. "That's how I got a following to begin with."

One of the guests, who purchased a sculpture of a bald eagle in flight, was singer-songwriter John

(Left) Working the Seam, bronze, 15" by 11.5"

"While fishing, I'm constantly observing water currents and insect activity. In this sculpture, I created a pleasing composition by positioning the trout parallel to one another and going up. The sticks are arranged upwards in various abstract triangles. These triangles and angled lines lead the viewer's eyes to the surface of the water where the fish are feeding."



Riverside Rendezvous, bronze, 8" by 13"

"Some of my fondest outdoor memories are the times I spent fishing with our four Labs during the past 37 years. Needless to say, this sculpture was inspired through my passion of fly fishing and my love of Labs. Nothing is better than releasing a trout with your best friend at your side. It's always a rendezvous!"



Northern Tranquility, bronze, 13" by 6"

"During my summers guiding in Alaska, I would often see families of common loons on remote lakes and rivers. It's amazing to see both parents caring for their chicks and giving them piggyback rides to keep them safe and warm."

Denver. "He was a great guy and would perform for the crew and the guests at the lodge every night," Jones says.

Denver wasn't the only celebrity who was taken with Jones' work. In Colorado, while studying with Goodnight, he started to exhibit his works in Fothergill's, a fly shop in Aspen. His sculptures there caught the eyes of Hollywood couple Robert Wagner and Jill St. John. They not only began collecting Jones' sculptures, they later provided a private exhibit of his work at their home in Bel Air, California. The three remain friends today.

After his third year as a fishing guide, Jones was selling enough work to dive into sculpting full-time and to marry Montana native Joan Tabaracci. The couple moved to Bozeman after his former roommate, Mitch Billis, started a foundry in town. They have been there ever since, raising their four children while Jones pursues his art.

Jones continues to focus on wildlife and the outdoors, two of his loves as he was growing up in Spokane, Washington. Jones' parents had the greatest influence on his life and art career. His mother Elita, a talented painter, taught him to appreciate art and nature, while his father Ott, Sr. taught him how to hunt and fish. In the process, they instilled in him an endless fascination for wildlife that is reflected in his art.

Jones began sculpting in wax when he was in elementary school and continued that pursuit during high school. Following his graduation, he accepted a tennis scholarship and enrolled at Washington State University (WSU). His original intent was to become a doctor or dentist, but he majored in physical education instead because of his love of teaching tennis. His curriculum included the sciences and classes in anatomy, which served him well later, when he was sculpting animal and human figures. After earning his degree in 1982, he left for Alaska and became a fishing guide and a welder's helper on the Alaskan pipeline in Prudhoe Bay.

During the past 40 years, Jones'



Stormy Sky Sprig, bronze, 27" by 22.5"

"Growing up, Dad and I spent countless mornings in a duck blind. Eventually, I could identify every species of waterfowl in flight. One of my favorite ducks is the sleek and handsome pintail drake, also called a bull sprig. The shape and lines of the cattails blowing in the wind and the positioning of the ducks create a powerful composition."

bronze sculptures have been displayed in some high-profile public areas. One of his favorites, a life-size fly fisherman and Labrador retriever titled *Stream Side Companions*, is displayed near the entry of the Bozeman/Yellowstone International Airport. Another piece, *Jim Bridger—King of the Mountain Men*, was installed outside the Bozeman Chamber of Commerce. Jones also donated a sculpture, titled *Spirit of the Wilderness*, which is on per-

manent display at the Anchorage Airport. He recently completed a monumental sculpture of WSU long-distance runner, Henry Rono, and is currently working on one of baseball legend, John Olerud. Those two monuments will be installed on the Washington State University campus, in Pullman, Washington.

Jones is a member of Allied Artists of America, the National Sculpture Society, and the Society of Animal Artists. He participates in many



of the country's finest shows, including the Coors Western Art Exhibit; the Mountain Oyster Club Show; Small Works, Great Wonders at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and Western Visions at the National Museum of Wildlife Art.

Jones' sculptures have won many awards, including the People's Choice Award at Montana Trails Gallery Holiday Small Works Show in January and the coveted Gold Medal of Honor at Allied Artists of America in 2022 for his river otter monument, *River Rascals*. Another honor came his way, when Queen Elizabeth acquired one of his pieces, *Birth of the Labrador*, and it was displayed at the United Kingdom Kennel Club Art Gallery Show in London as part of The Queen's Collection.

Over the years, Jones' sculpting process has remained unchanged. He works in a studio outside his home near Bozeman and starts each piece with a thumbnail sketch. "Once that's done, I create a small clay maquette—basically a rough draft, no detail, but it gives me my composition and design," he says. Once his original clay sculpture is completed, it goes to one of the foundries in Montana or Utah, where a mold is made and the bronze is poured.

Jones' subjects have also remained unchanged as he continues to focus on wildlife and the human figure, an action-packed combination that drives him and his art. "I never get bored watching wildlife; I love it," he says. "We have five acres, and we butt up against a big ranch. There's wildlife around every day. I've seen some pretty amazing



Topsy-Turvy, bronze, 13" by 9.5"

"During my outdoor adventures in Western conifer forests, I usually see red-breasted nuthatches. This piece depicts these energetic, fidgety, little song birds as they effortlessly and precariously dangle from tree trunks and branches."

things."

The seeds for Jones' sculptures all come from his real-life experiences. Some are the result of giving careful thought to what he wants to create; others might be inspired by a flashing moment. "I might be fishing on a river or walking our dog, and something inspires me," he says. "Or it can take years to germi-

nate. A lifetime of outdoor adventure and field work has not only provided me with endless inspiration, it's also given me firsthand knowledge of my subjects' personality and behaviors."

Jones' goal with most of his sculptures is to capture a moment of movement, and he goes to great lengths as he does his research.



Prairie Winds, bronze, 10.5" by 16.5"

"Over the years, I have visited Yellowstone Park many times, gathering research on various species, including bison. These magnificent animals have always intrigued me with their strength, power, and resilience, thus the inspiration for this sculpture."

That includes photography, live models, and zoo visits.

He also has a roadkill freezer, where he keeps animals and birds to study in his studio.

"It sounds morbid but it's a great way to obtain valuable research material," he says. "There are certain things I can get from a specimen—details like hooves, a bird's beak or legs—that I can't get from observing these animals in the wild."

Jones is fortunate to travel the world with Joan, gathering research

and inspiration for his work. "Africa's game reserves, Alaska's wilderness,

Belize's atolls, Italy's sculpture masterpieces, Switzerland's mountains, and the Great Pyramids are some of my favorite places and things that have inspired me over the years," he says.

When finishing a clay original, Jones is less concerned with the surface details and, in fact, will go out of his way to blur the edges. "In creating sculpture, I strive to capture the beauty of my subject's anatomy and personality while incorporating

these qualities into a strong composition," he says. "Elements such as line, shape, mass, negative space, and movement are crucial in my work. My objective is not to duplicate nature but rather interpret it through blending realism and artistic merit.

"I want my fingerprints and tool marks to be visible on my sculptures. I'm not interested in sculpting every feather, hair, or scale. I want the viewer to enjoy the composition and the moment of movement of my subject and not get caught up in unnecessary detail."

Joe Tougas lives in North Mankato, Minnesota.