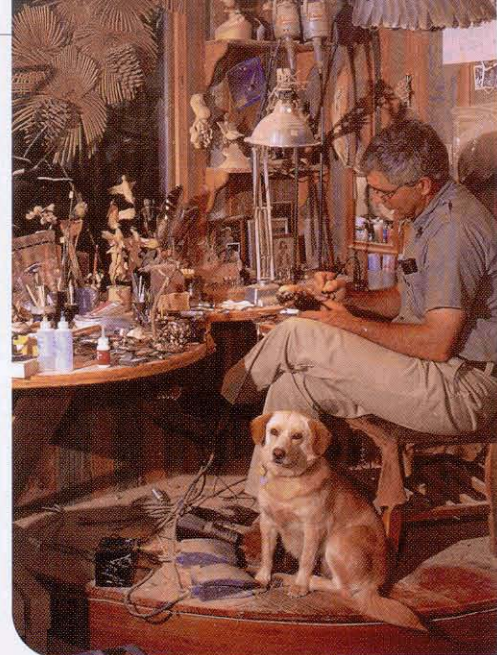


a living master

The Heart of an Artist—Making Sculpture Soar



Sumter, South Carolina is home to many treasures that only those fortunate enough to spend time here may understand or fully realize. But to art and nature lovers around the country, Sumter is home to a national treasure—one of the premier wildlife artisans alive today. His work has changed the face of carving and casting while captivating hearts from the quiet South Carolina fisherman to the New York art collector elite.

Grainger McKoy was born with a unique and intense love for the design of nature—the intricacies and detail that God puts into every living thing—especially the delicate beauty of the aves class—the bird. He has spent his early life serving this love in order to develop a craft, and the remainder of his life exceeding the boundaries of craft and fostering a true form of art.

His love affair with sculpted form began in 1960, when a fourteen-year-old Grainger, with the help of his widowed mother, Priscilla, took a saw to the family home—a primitive cypress log cabin in rural Sumter—and removed the end of one of the logs that made up the rustic roof. The detached weathered block would become *Shore Bird*, his very first carving. With elegantly simple lines and insightful use of grain, *Shore Bird* was the world's first glimpse of a talent that would change the course of wildlife sculpture. Incidentally, it would be a whittled shorebird Grainger would offer years later to Floride Owens, as the best token of love he could imagine in an effort to win her heart. It worked. They were soon married and are even more in love today.

It's tempting, when you think of hand carved birds, to imagine a pond full of duck decoys or a flat-bottomed mallard on the mantel of a mountain lodge. And granted, that is where McKoy's branch of wildlife sculpture finds its roots. But to compare any of McKoy's dynamic creations to a hunting decoy would be akin to calling the Taj Mahal a highway overpass. A Grainger McKoy work transcends the material from which it is cast or carved. It is an energetic snapshot of an intense and specific moment of life captured so realistically as to seem almost impossible.

The burgeoning genius of McKoy was noticed early in life by master carver Gilbert Maggioni. Although typically the type of man that kept to himself most of the time, Maggioni took a liking to McKoy and recognized a potential on par with his own. He encouraged McKoy to move down to Beaufort, South Carolina where he operated an oyster packing factory, and work along side him in his carving studio. And that began a grueling, labor intensive apprenticeship where McKoy says, "Gilbert made an artist of me."

Although Grainger was fresh out of Clemson University where he studied architecture and zoology, Maggioni furthered his education by taking him to visit the finest museums in Washington and New York where they studied every sort of art from watercolors to bronze. He instilled in Grainger a dedication to truth and accuracy. Maggioni insisted McKoy by "true to the bird." Grainger recalls Gilbert's insistence that "there is no use applying finishing paint to a subject that has not been given its natural gift of flight." That dedication to realism has garnered acclaim from even the most ornitholo-



Carolina Parakeets



Covey Rise



Red-shouldered Hawks and Copperhead Snake



Mourning Doves

gy minded critics. The average person may not appreciate the painstaking detail, but close inspection by the informed verifies the authenticity of each carving, from the correct number of primary feathers on each and every bird, to the four joints on the outside toe of every quail in *Covey Rise*.

But it's more than accuracy and skill that sets Grainger McKoy apart. The truly transcendental artist lives on the edge. There is more to his motivation than simply avoiding mediocrity, there is a drive to challenge the boundaries of possibility. A talented carver can reveal a recognizable bird emerging from the face of a piece of driftwood. But what about ten life-size quail, with ten individual personalities suspended in mid-reflex at various heights? There's no tell-tale block of wood, no wires, no posts, nothing except the stillness and the silence to betray the fact that they are not truly alive and fleeing the nose of a hard-working springer spaniel. From *Covey Rise* to *Red-shouldered Hawks and Copperhead Snake* to *Carolina Parakeets* and on through the extensive list of wood and brass sculptures that milestone Grainger McKoy's life, there is an amazing marriage of precision and daring which thrills and confounds all viewers. You are not only drawn in by the skill of the knife, but almost equally by the seeming suspension of physics that creates flocks of birds in frantic motion, higher and higher—the top bird often connected by no more than a pin-feather. Edward J. Sozanki of the Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine calls McKoy's sculptures "so true to life they can hardly be believed. Even if you

care nothing for sculptures or for birds, they will leave you breathless."

If it sounds like a spiritual experience, it is probably no accident. A wise person once said, "If you have the choice whether to pursue God or to pursue truth...pursue truth." The earnest pursuit of truth will inevitably lead to God. If ever the two seem at odds, it is the seeker's perception of God that is, most likely, skewed, because God is truth. When an artist dedicates their life to the revelation of truth, the creation becomes a spiritual experience for both the artist and the observer. Grainger McKoy exhibits an understanding and awe for this incarnate experience. Not just subtly in his work, but also overtly in his explanation of inspiration. Of the piece *Quail In Hand*, he says, "This sculpture came into focus when I read in Exodus about God sending quail into the camp of the Israelites, and I supposed Moses must have been the first to reach for supper." In another glimpse of McKoy's process, he says, "I read a quote of Leonardo da Vinci that struck a chord with me: 'Where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art.'"

At this stage of life, Grainger can track the cycles of his life in segments of spiritual realization. In the mid 70s, shortly following a sold-out one-man exhibit at the renowned Hammer Galleries in New York, his success—impressive by anyone's standards for an artist still short of thirty years old—began a period of introspection. "Is this all there is?" was burning in his mind. His search for answers led him to a clos-

er relationship with his wife, Floride, and with his Creator. Now a deeply spiritual man, Grainger serves others as a matter of course, through church, prison ministry, and other less than glamorous outlets, in addition to his art. To meet the humble, mild-mannered man, you would expect nothing less, regardless of his success.

McKoy's drive to expand his horizons has led him to branch out from the safety of success as a wood sculptor to the less forgiving medium of metal. He again pressed the limits of what was believed possible by perfecting a process of creating casts out of his original wood sculptures, rather than clay. "This is not an abandonment of wood," McKoy explains, "rather using it directly to bring these birds out from behind their glass cases while retaining the detail and lightness wood has allowed me over the years. Having flown from Gilbert [Maggioni]'s vortex early in my creative experience, and then spending the next twenty-five years pressed to the grindstone of making a living with my hands, I'm prepared to continue to rise to the challenges that wood and metal offer. My vision is to make these materials fly as they have never flown before."

And truly, Grainger McKoy has caused bronze to soar along with the spirits of those who witness his creations.

You can learn more about Grainger and view many of his most intriguing sculptures by visiting www.graingermckoy.com.