

Grainger McKoy

True to Form



Grainger McKoy was proven to be a successful artist a long time ago, but nothing stands still for him. He is still learning, still trying new things. His inspiration has always been nature; it's his way of looking at nature that evolves.

Text: Caroline Foster. Photography: Ted Borg.

At his workshop and studio in Stateburg, Grainger McKoy sits on the low porch, legs crossed out in front, hands propped behind. Motionless, dressed in khaki drab, he watches the ground at his feet as my tires grind the sand and gravel drive on this darkening afternoon, thunder rolling in the distance.

I gather my things, emerge from the car, and still he sits quietly, looking down. He's expecting me, and as I take a few steps toward him, he finally rises, smiling, and the greeting I have rehearsed fades away.

He has orchestrated this reunion in his own way, removing the need for superficial glossing. Instead, what might have been hard was easy as my eyes follow his downward glance to the yellow and black ball of fuzz at his feet. Palm-sized, with flightless wings lifted and webbed feet scurrying, a duckling is pressing toward Grainger's pants legs.

Instead of a handshake, he offers me the baby wood duck. His words of greeting: "two days out of the egg." Standing before the rustic wooden building, bird in hand, Grainger fits the setting. It reminds me of the place in which

I first knew this man, when I was a child in the 1970s and his workshop was an old store building on Wadmalaw Island.

There, enveloped by fields of hot, dusty tomatoes, farm implements and family, Grainger McKoy came into his own as one of the country's foremost sculptors, carving with disarming realism subjects from the natural world around him. He found inspiration in the Lowcountry's woods and waters: game birds, shore birds, birds of prey.... And for the past thirty years, as I grew up and moved away and he followed a process of discovery in his own life, I have imagined him there on the back steps of that old store.

During those years, Grainger carved to prove himself as an artist, and I read about his growing notoriety in the catalogs published for his greatest exhibitions. His work met with incomparable success: after his first big exhibit at NY's Museum of Natural History, he exhibited at prestigious Hammer and Coe Kerr art galleries in New York, the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Brandywine Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania - where the works of N.C. Wyeth and Andrew Wyeth reside - and many other venues. Most recently an exhibit of his borrowed-back pieces from private

Above: Mallard Feather Pin.

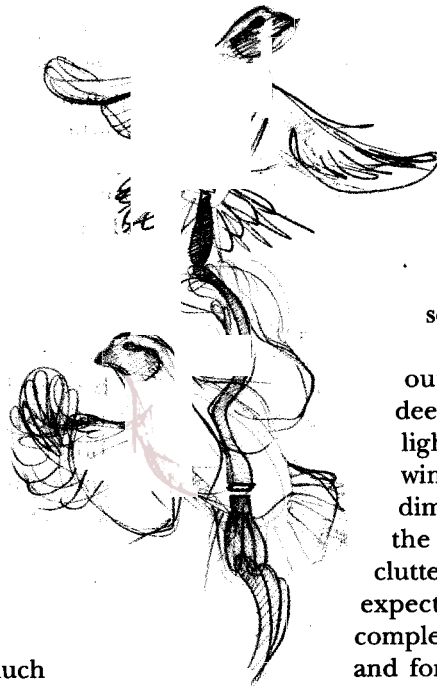
Left: Recovery Stroke was created for the lobby of the Hollings Cancer Center at the Medical University of South Carolina.

*“It’s easy to have a relationship with wood,” he says
And he never gets far from it.*

collections stood alongside the work of Anna Hyatt Huntington at Brookgreen Gardens.

The catalogs, written by author James Kilgo, a friend of Grainger’s with clear insight into the man and his work, provided more than art criticism. They brought the artist before the world, and they introduced the stories behind the sculptures that made the work even more desirable to collectors. The stories revealed Grainger’s relentless pursuit of truth: early on it was for realism, being true to the bird under the guidance of his mentor, the late artist Gilbert Maggioni. That mountain fell easily. That’s when he began reaching for a transcendent truth, every day carving away at life, removing the clutter, the unnecessary elements that separate us from God...walking up a much higher mountain. In the meantime, commissions kept coming, and Grainger kept carving, presenting the world with a body of work pointing so clearly to the natural world that some people mistook it for taxidermy.

So after the passage of nearly three decades, I came to Stateburg to renew an old acquaintance, to see his current work and to write about it. Grainger generously shared the journey that had taken him from under the wing of an artist and oysterman in Beaufort, to a farm on Wadmalaw, through the art galleries and museums of the Northeast, and finally to a new way of looking at things. He told me he’s been walking down a backward funnel, moving toward



a world of new possibilities he just can’t stop talking about, the latest one waiting inside the studio.

Inside, the familiar smell of sawdust rises from the wood floor. Grainger leads through the dim entry space toward an interior doorway, lit from within, on a path winding through darkened power tools and boxes. I follow with a building sense of anticipation.

Dusty picture windows reveal a storm outside. The trees sway and the grey sky deepens; the rain falls hard, punctuated by lightning flashes and thunder booms. Bird wings and feet, wood and feathers, three-dimensional models, sketches, and tools adorn the small workshop. Inside this pleasantly cluttered space, I discover the current work: I had expected to be amazed, but the piece so completely distracted me that I lost a minute or so and forgot my immediate purpose there. Feather tips so delicate they seem to flip up in a breeze, layered on a wing with a perfect curve, lightly twisted in the shape ornithologists call a recovery stroke. Inches away from where I sit knee to knee on metal stools talking with Grainger, the wing rises from a wooden pedestal at the center of the room, more than six feet tall, still naked wood. Just the shape of the thing is magnificent, and even with little detail work in place, the sculpture already completely commands its surroundings. The thunderstorm fades as I take it in.

On its base, Grainger has scribbled with a black marker the title, Recovery Stroke, and a Bible verse—the concept he’s built the wing upon: “My grace is sufficient for you, and my

Left: *Sanderlings.*

Above: *A preliminary sketch for Covey Rise.*

strength is made perfect through weakness.”

That’s part of the story behind this, he tells me quickly—everything has a story if you scratch around long enough. It’s clear that time has not quelled his enthusiasm for the possibilities of wood, and he seems pleased to reveal that the commissioned piece will stand in the lobby of the new Hollings Cancer Center at Medical University of South Carolina. “What could be more perfect...a recovery stroke?” he says.

He moves around the wing, gently removing feathers, explaining how each has been specially carved to be cast in bronze, a medium he has claimed in the past few years. He shows me the hidden junctions where the numbered pieces come apart to be individually cast and reassembled, showing no evidence of the welds.

His first larger-than-life piece, the wing has carried him in a new direction artistically. “I’m a high-challenge person and the challenge is built in, with this. I’m putting in this rougher detail because I think it’s better for the scale of this piece. But I’m not sure. I’m still scared about whether it can be pulled off in bronze. Then, who knows what this will open up.”

Recalling McKoy’s special feel for wood, I ask, “Why bronze? Why leave wood?”



“It’s cleaner in some ways,” he explains. “People can see it is bronze and that it’s a bird. When I work in wood, people sometimes say, ‘Grainger, I can’t believe it’s wood!’ Now they mean that to be a compliment, but there are parts of me that feel almost like I’m trying to deceive them. I want it to be wood. I’d like for them to know it’s wood, to be as true to the material as I am to the subject. That’s what bronze allows you to do.”

In previous works, Grainger has often devised metal wing tips, indistinguishable from wood when painted, to hold a diving bird suspended, perhaps connected only to another wing tip or brushing against a thin suggestion of habitat to support the whole thing. He had often wondered, he said, “What would it be like to do the whole bird in metal?” It was partially curiosity about what his work would look like in bronze that eased him into the transition. And part of it, clearly, was the challenge of something new.

“It’s easy to have a relationship with wood. Bronze is more demanding, but it’s a classical medium. I mean, people think ‘wood—well you build houses with wood.’ You go to an art museum and it’s pigment, it’s stone, it’s bronze, so maybe I just needed to scratch that itch, see what my work looked like in bronze, conquer that challenge.”

Meeting that challenge brought unexpected barriers. Searching the country for a foundry that could cast his wood originals in bronze, he found none who could do it. Most bronzes were originally clay sculpture, and often the original works were destroyed during the casting process. He wasn’t happy with the way he saw birds in flight represented in bronze. Then, in Colorado, he met a mold-maker with experience in casting jewelry and it clicked. The casting process used to get the details needed in fine jewelry and dental work could produce the results he wanted.

“Something changes in appreciation in the way people view these pieces as they get closer,” he says. People appreciate art in many different ways.

*Above: A preliminary sketch for Covey Rise.
Right: Gamecock.*

He pulls a gem out of his pocketful of metaphors in describing the way his bronzes are made, aware that technical explanations can bore people who just want the final products. "People understand the process with wood—you take a block of wood and scrape away everything that isn't a bird and you have it. It's harder to understand the steps that go into making a bronze sculpture because it's adding on—and that's part of this whole search for truth," he adds, "not only shedding the clutter but adding to that, building on it."

The casting technique he shows me is called the lost wax process because a wax positive must carry the shape and details of the original wood in a multi-step process from rubber to plaster before melting out and leaving the detailed negative space in the plaster that can hold the molten metal.

Even in his excitement over the bronzes, Grainger never gets far away from wood, the base of the whole process, his base. This is a different kind of carving. Each piece must be carved in a certain order to fit into the one before. "The challenge is to keep a feel of spontaneity in something that's systematic, 'cause you can work something to death," he tells me. "But I've never abandoned wood."

As though in confirmation of that, the six-foot wing stands at the room's center, and in its shadow four birds take off from a wooden base, just blocks of wood roughed out into the shapes of mallards pitching and turning on the wing. This piece, in an early stage of the carving process, will never be bronze, he says. At this point, it's wood in the process of becoming birds. "It has to come from the inside out," says Grainger, with a nod to his mentor, who called a good paint job on a poorly carved bird, "cream on crap."

In Grainger's studio, next door to the workshop,

hundreds of birds in wood and bronze and silver line the walls. Some I recognize as having been cast from wood sculptures I've seen in the catalogs. He shows me a small wooden model of one of his signature pieces, a covey rise of 13 birds now in a private collection in North Carolina. I see the way ideas can proliferate here. People who couldn't afford the six-figure price tags of the wood originals started asking to buy the models of them, made in the preliminary

stages of a major piece. "Those are what my children will inherit, but I've begun casting some of these models," he says, "so this is a bronze casting of that covey rise. People can buy these bronzed models, and they are more affordable."



In every corner, at every point along the walls, there are birds alone and in groups, and as I scan the room, my eyes fall on something unexpected, and wonderful. Grainger's large Carolina Parakeets sculpture, completed in 1992, stands against a grey-blue backdrop near the far wall. My timing is good. He's holding it for the owner for a short period.

I move slowly from one side of the room to the other, staying back, taking in the motion achieved by the skillful positioning of individual birds, the overall effect of them together. Then, I move closer, compelled by the life-like wings and feet and beaks to reach out and touch, to see if they feel like they look— soft

"Art dies when you quit exploring," he says. "But you must be careful; you always have to measure against the truth."

*Above: A preliminary full sketch for Covey Rise.
Right: Covey Rise (Eastern Bobwhite Quail).*

and alive—though I know it's not so. It occurs to me that Grainger's ability to captivate me with this flurry of color and form is remarkable—I have no background in art and I know little about birds.

“Something changes in appreciation, in the way people view these pieces from the time they see it back here to the time they see it here,” he says, moving closer to the parakeets. And people appreciate the work for different reasons, he explains. “Let's say this is ducks. You might be a plantation manager and you know nothing about art—you just know ducks, and you like it for that reason. You see it and move on up. Then you might have someone who's an ornithologist, doesn't shoot ducks but likes to watch them. He knows the scientific name of this duck and looks at the piece through a different lens. He knows the anatomy. He's counting the actuary feathers...Then you have someone

come in here who knows nothing about ducks but who's an art lover. He looks at the piece in a highly different way. I love to engage as many people as I can for different reasons.”

“There's something about pursuing the truth that engages people's minds,” he says.

Back on our metal stools in the workshop, he absentmindedly fingers some tiny shapes buried in a blanket of sawdust on his workbench. Without words, I hold out my palm and he places on it three small, perfectly detailed birds...ducks, I think, and a wood cock reminiscent of Grainger's 1996 woodcock sculpture, now available in bronze. He's been doodling in two dimensions, thinking about adding pieces to the jewelry line he started with one piece designed and cast for his wife, Floride, some years ago. This is clearly the part he enjoys...putting ideas out



Left: Mourning Doves.

Above: Grainger's old boots hang in his workshop.

there. His stage grows larger as we continue to talk—first wooden sculpture then bronze and silver, then jewelry, tabletop designs for napkin rings, place card holders and wine coasters, and baby cups with feathers for handles. Time, it seems, is the only limiting factor. Then Grainger's challenge emerges clearly: How does one meet so frequently with the enthusiastic applause this man has received and remain so unassuming?

"It's just all kinds of possibilities. I need to keep it fresh and young and exciting, still drawing on what I know," he says. "Art dies when you quit exploring. But you gotta be careful. You always have to measure against the truth."

No matter the medium, he continues to reach for that transcendent quality that comes from the inside of the sculpture out. It's nothing he imposes on the piece, but something that goes beyond superficial perfection to what the piece represents, to what it honors. "I'm not the creator," he says. "I just honor the



creator with imitations.' Perhaps his sculptures could more appropriately be called honest tributes to the forms he sees: each feather, a gift; each bird, a miracle.

This afternoon in a world of wings and words, I've been profoundly affected by what I've seen and heard. Truly the deeply spiritual artist I've known in the catalogs, Grainger seems to straddle the material and spiritual worlds: He has one foot in a place where acquiring art elevates the mind and spirit, and one foot in a place where divesting oneself of such worldly clutter frees the soul.

Regardless of where any one of us stands on that continuum, people who admire this work pay homage to God the creator. Whether they know it or mean it is not really Grainger's concern.

Our meeting leaves me, as a true work of art will, with much to think about...with an image of a great artist looking for admiration not for a work of his own making, but for a tiny wood duck in his gently cupped palms. †

Left: *Carolina Parakeets.*
Above: *American Kestrel.*