

Blackhawks artist sculpts history from bronze

Daily Herald - Tuesday, December 5, 2000

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The new sculpture celebrating the Chicago Blackhawks may rest in Chicago outside the United Center, but its heart lies in the Northwest Suburbs.

That's because its creator, Erik Blome, a Chicago area native, now calls Barrington home. His artistic ambition was evident early in his youth.

"I knew that I was going to grow up and be an artist, like my father," Blome said.

Blome earned a BFA from the University of Michigan, and an MFA in Sculpture from Boston University. A Rotary Scholar, he attended the Royal College of Art in London, England, and received a postgraduate diploma in sculpture and drawing. Blome's wife, Charlotte, is also a gifted artist and garden designer. Their son, Max, is the lucky recipient of the artistic genes.

Blome deftly sculpts three-dimensional portraits of his subjects, illuminating every subtle nuance in shimmering bronze. His work has been exhibited across the country, and he has received several honors and commissions. Over the last decade, Blome has created life-size busts and sculptures of such distinguished figures as George Washington Carver, Duke Ellington, Reverend Robert Johnson, James Jordan, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks and John Sturdivant.

Visit the Lake County Forest Preserve, and you'll see a stunning bronze medallion and basin. These works celebrate the intricate beauty of our local natural history. Another of Blome's works, "Olive Branch," is an emotion-stirring bronze bas-relief dedicated to the victims of the Cary Grove High School bus tragedy.

Blome's most recent unveiling took place in a media spectacle at the United Center in Chicago. Six life-size bronze figures skate atop stainless steel ice, representing 75 years of Blackhawk history. Behind the stalwart figures gleams a black marble tower engraved with the name of every Blackhawk team member. The proud Blackhawk mascot sets atop the massive monument, appropriately titled "Badge of Honor."

"It all started with a stamped envelope." Blome said of the project. In an effort to expand his repertoire, Blome sent out letters to several Chicago sports teams and organizations. The Chicago Blackhawks were very interested, and called him to discuss a piece to mark their 75th anniversary. Blome accepted the proposal and began work on several large drawings of his ideas. The selected proposal was inspired by classic war memorials, and honors the spirit of the team rather than individual players. Each of the six life-size players is adorned with a different uniform, representing a specific period of Blackhawk history.

Once the design was selected, the long process of bronze casting begun. Blome initially makes a 1/3 scale clay model based on his drawing as a guide to the finished sculpture. The first step in creating the sculpture itself is to form hollow clay molds of the figures and structures. Hot wax is poured into these molds, which will form solid wax figures. He then builds a rock-hard shell around these wax pieces through a process called investment casting. Once the shell is complete, the wax is melted out, and replaced by liquid bronze. A solid bronze form is ready in about one hour. The rough form is perfected by skillful hammering and chiseling, and finished by sandblasting.

"The Blackhawks sculpture required 55 separate sections to complete the final sculpture." Blome said.

In addition to creating the bronze portion, Blome was responsible for the selection and engraving of the marble piece. After finalizing the sculpture, he had to face the challenging logistics of transporting it to the United Center, and securing it until the presentation ceremony. The year of intense efforts was well worth it, though, as the day finally arrived to share his work with the world.

On Oct. 12, 2000, a large crowd of media and fans gathered to witness the dramatic unveiling. Several former Blackhawks, including Harold "Mush" March, Tony Esposito, Stan Mikita and Denis Savard participated in the ceremony.

"I am delighted to have my work showing in Chicago," Blome said at the unveiling.

Blome is currently working on a large piece commissioned by the Spirit of Milwaukee Neighborhood Millennium Arts Initiative. A 14- foot-long relief will depict an historic Milwaukee neighborhood, accented by four life-size bronze figures. He is also completing the design for the Wisconsin State Firefighters Memorial. The City of Waukegan has just announced that Blome has been selected to create a bronze statue of comedian, Jack Benny. The 7-foot figure of the city's hometown hero will be completed next fall.

Caption: The back of Erik Blome's Blackhawks statue lists the names of everyone who has played for the team during its 75-year history.

Edition: Fox Valley

Section: Neighbor

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Record Number: 477544

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