

Sculpted Elegance

Loet Vanderveen, A Master of Stylized Animals
In Bronze, Is Today The True Elder of Wildlife Art

By Todd Wilkinson

Loet Vanderveen may not be a household name among sporting artists. But he is the undisputed elder of modern wildlife art and may boast the distinction of having his works in wider circulation than any other animal sculptor on the planet.

For collectors who savor sleek and stylized sculptures that range from iconic African species to creatures of the ocean, American West, and Far North, Vanderveen has won acclaim for mastering the magnetic allure of the animal form.

Even today as a nonagenarian (a man in his 90s), he still is churning out captivating compositions. The long list of famous clients owning and proudly displaying Vanderveen's work over the years has included Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the late U.S. Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford, famed conservative senator Barry Goldwater, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mary Tyler Moore, comedian Bill Cosby and racecar driver A.J. Foyt, winner of the Indianapolis 500, Daytona 500 and Le Mans.

"I began buying Vanderveens 20 years ago because they were affordable and my wife absolutely loved them," says a lifetime collector of wildlife art who has works by both deceased and living artists. "We have a home in the city that

is filled with traditional art and a retirement place in the Desert Southwest that has a more contemporary motif. Loet's animals fit in well at both."

Vanderveen's passion for nature—and his mission to celebrate and protect it—actually began during wartime in an era that now seems distant to many. In 1940, when German bombs were falling upon Rotterdam, Holland, Vanderveen's birthplace, the artist, then a late teenager, vividly remembers what happened to animals housed in the nearby city zoo.

Authorities shot all the predators such as lions, tigers and bears to ironically spare them suffering and, secondarily, to ensure they didn't escape. One of the big cats was a lion he had bottle-fed as a cub.

"As a boy, the Rotterdam zoo had been a sanctuary, my favorite place in the world. I credit its influence with giving me the dream of going on safari in Africa," Vanderveen reflects. "After the bombing raids, the zoo, like much of Rotterdam, was pretty much destroyed. Elephants and rhinos and other big animals that weren't killed or maimed by the blasts were found roaming loose inside the zoo gates. A seal had been propelled out of its water enclosure into a canal and a chimpanzee, shell-shocked, tried to find shelter in a bar. It was a sight of chaos and pain I'll never forget, but their survival and resilience also helped people heal."

It was a metaphor that has stayed with him these last 70 years. The subsequent German invasion drove Vanderveen, orphaned of his parents and half-Jewish, underground though

he was captured by the Nazis and thrown in prison. Somehow attaining a release, he joined the armed resistance, hooking up with Dutch fighters in Vichy France and then decamped to the Dutch West Indies before heading to London. There, he received a medal of valor from exiled Dutch Queen Wilhelmina.

While in England, Vanderveen enlisted in the Royal Air Force with hopes of becoming, ironically, a bomber pilot or navigator, but vision problems stopped him from being assigned to the cockpit. Following the carnage of war, he vowed to devote the rest of his life to elevating the profile of beauty.

Using his skills as a draftsman, Vanderveen landed jobs in Zurich, Switzerland, London and New York City with clothing designers. One of the biggest mistakes of his life, he said, was turning down a job offer to collaborate with a young contemporary clothing designer in Paris named Christian Dior.

Dissatisfied with the clothing industry, he would eventually head west in America, settling along the rugged Pacific Coast near Big Sur where his studio exists today. In the meantime, his talent in creating tactile objects earned him three years of mentorship from Fong Chow, the renowned curator of the Far Eastern department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The stint gave him knowledge about ancient Chinese glazing techniques for fired ceramics and, by extension, the nuances of patinas (the surface coloring) that would become his signature when he moved into creating bronze wildlife works.

In 1960, Vanderveen started producing one-of-a-kind wildlife creations in ceramic, 15 years later he moved to bronze, and has expanded to marble from the same Italian quarry used by Michelangelo.

“You see a lot of wildlife art that usually is very realistic and detailed,” Vanderveen says. “I want to achieve a totally different effect and try to convey the essence of the animal or group of animals with a minimal amount of detail.”

Vanderveen says he’s been influenced by art produced during the Han Dynasty in China 2200 years ago and more recently by some of the European animaliers like Rembrandt Bugatti and Francois Pompon.

Many high-end collectors are familiar with Vanderveen’s acclaimed series of pieces created in fine crystal for Baccarat, hence called “the Safari Collection.” His bronzes range from small portrayals that one can hold in the hand to monuments adorning the grounds of private and corporate clients.

“It’s remarkable when you think of just how prolific Loet’s wildlife sculpture is around the world,” says Ross Parker, owner of Call of Africa’s Native Visions Galleries based in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. “I know people who have dozens of Vanderveens and some who will tell you it’s the only piece of sculpture they own. One of the things he values is giving collectors a choice. Where else can you purchase a piece of sculpture that is available in a palette of colors to match the décor of your home or trophy room?”

While today there are plenty of talented stylists in wildlife art, people like Simon Gudgeon, Rosetta, Tim Cherry, and Robert Duerloo, Vanderveen was arguably the first to popularize it for a mass market.

“With the contemporary art market on fire worldwide, Loet’s appeal can only grow,” Parker says. “His work is versatile, bridging traditional and contemporary, and speaks to the wide array of tastes at SCI.”

Recalling the inspiration behind his antelope, big cats, rhinos and elephants and Cape Buffalo, Vanderveen says his most intimate encounters came at visits to private game preserves in southern Africa.

Vanderveen has been left dumbstruck by the accelerating problem of poaching decimating rhino and elephant populations in Africa. Over the years, he and Parker have worked together to earmark a percentage of the sale of pieces to conservation projects on the ground.

“This is a terrible moment in time. The wild places that have inspired us are fast becoming fragmented islands shrinking in size all around. What will be left for the young people?” Vanderveen asks.

“Society won’t act unless there is awareness, but equally as important as awareness is connection. The beliefs that come from the heart can be unstoppable motivators, and I believe strongly in the power of art to solidify our bond to nature and

each other.”

Vanderveen, who divides his time between Big Sur and Polynesia, makes few public appearances. But he is planning to deliver more new pieces to Call of Africa’s Native Visions Galleries.

“Loet is a legend,” Parker says. “Everything that he’s lived through, everything that he’s seen, coupled with all the great art he’s created as a result of personal experience. What he brings to wildlife art is authenticity and originality. Once he’s gone, there’ll be no one else like him again.”

Todd Wilkinson is author of the new critically-acclaimed book, “Last Stand: Ted Turner’s Quest to Save a Troubled Planet.”