



Rustic & Refined

The Sculpture of Ron Adamson

BY JOCELYN WHITFIELD-BABCOCK

Nestled adjacent to the shores of the Kootenai River, wood shavings softly fall to the deck floor. They too will serve a purpose. “Waste not, want not,” advises artist Ron Adamson, who uses these scraps of wood in the fireplace or the barbecue. “Walnut is great for barbecuing and Douglas fir, tamarack, and larch are better for the fireplace.” He keeps sawdust particles for adding to epoxy, as an aid to filling wood defects.

Carving into wood or stone, he creates a majority of his art outdoors, year round. With sweeping forest views and visits from wildlife as inspiration, his deck features a permanent platform to hold his work in progress.

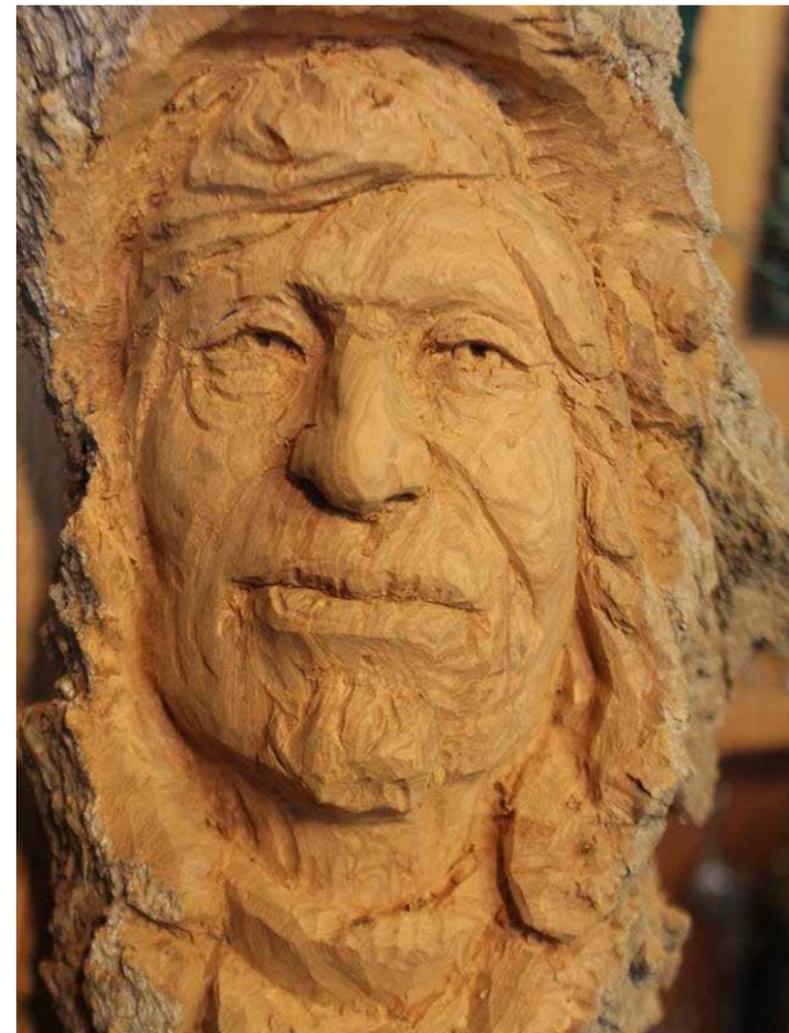
When Adamson is not dusting snow off his workspace, he uses a converted garage as a shop, where he keeps at least one of every kind of saw. “Some say that the difference between a man and a boy is the price of his toys. I can’t take credit for it, but I can tell you it’s true.”

The most common tools used to chisel the images in his head are: seven chainsaws; ten hand held grinders—each with a different disc, ten Makita grinders, and hand carving tools. He has his electrical tools at the ready to increase efficiency. “When I’m on a job, I don’t have time to change bits.”

Adamson has had a busy career as an artist. With art pieces on almost every continent, Antarctica the exception, over 10,000 people have commissioned or purchased one of his wood sculptures. This includes President George W. Bush, who received a gift presented by Montana Governor Judy Martz. Adamson’s experience ranges from hand carved wood and chainsaw carvings to stone, bronze, clay, and even ice. However, he began as a painter.

Growing up in Montana, Adamson had the desire to be an artist. As a young teen, his supplies were limited to sketching on notebook paper, advancing to acrylic painting by the age of 17. He worked at a lumber mill that produced planer boards in the early 1970s. “Getting a job was the way of things.”

He had a one-hour lunch, but driving elsewhere was counterproductive. As a non-smoker, he avoided the break room and opted to walk along the riverbank where he found unique pieces of wood. “You don’t want to use driftwood. It is risky, takes a long time to dry, and always has sand in it.” Cottonwood was the easiest to access in Montana, and, according to Adamson, makes a fine hand carved piece, since the bark remains on the wood. Adamson completed his first carving by age 19.



Though his first work sold was a painting, the artistic talent to sculpt wood from images in his mind overshadows other mediums. Adamson occasionally uses a photograph as a tool, but consistently he cuts into the wood without referencing an image. “A photo is important if you don’t know what the subject looks like.” His method is less restrictive and allows for him to be more expressive when he is not tied to a photograph.

Denying a photographic mind, “I guess I’m just a three-dimensional person,” says Adamson, “I see images in the wood.” It is impossible to outline a sketch on the wood, because once the etching begins, the drawing comes off. “I take pieces of wood away until it looks the way it is supposed to.” Adamson cautions, “You can take wood off, but you can’t put it back.” That rings true regardless of the material he carves. This knowledge does not slow his production. It used to take a week to create an artistic piece. Now, Adamson can hand carve one to two art pieces daily.

Art from memory requires an understanding of composition and design. His subjects are often American Indian faces or wildlife. Each piece has accurate symmetry, proportion, and balance. Without formal training, one must assume this is a naturally ingrained skill. Adamson graduated with honors in 2016, and now holds an Associate of Fine Arts Degree and continues to express himself in multiple formats: painting, drawing, and sculpting.

Harboring a preference for using live models, Adamson needed to see the inside of a beak for a bronze piece of a gander defending the nest. “And that’s how we ended up raising pheasants.” For a time, Adamson raised pheasants, ducks, and geese to aid in his art. His lakefront home makes a natural habitat.

Adamson posts pictures of his work in progress almost daily on Facebook. The backdrop of the Kootenai River and all the animals attracted to it are also featured. Utilizing the internet is how this man from a lumber mill, producing art during his lunch hour, has become a household name in bronze and wood sculpture. “I was on the internet when no one was using it.”



Those surfing the web contacted Adamson for large projects. In July 1997, Adamson was commissioned to create a life-sized man with a guitar from The Eagles’ song “Take it Easy.” The sculpture, placed at the corner of Kinsey and Second in Winslow, AZ, stands 6’2”, is 250 pounds and took two years to complete. The attraction to that sculpture piqued the interest of Filipstad, Sweden, where the town leaders commissioned Adamson to produce a life-sized guitar player as a gift to the king of Sweden and promote their annual music events.

The early 2000s also had Adamson designing and building bronze awards in his foundry. He crafted the *Reno Film Festival* and *George Foster Peabody* awards. For the *Reno Film Festival*, he molded clay on the airplane.

His inspiration was based on a friend of his parents, who had chalked the design

of a log-wood peeler on his basement floor and sold it to the lumber mill.

Using this family friend as inspiration, the award concept featured a bald-headed man wearing a bowtie. Rumors surfaced that comedian and director Mel Brooks thought the image resembled him.

Adamson wrote a letter to clear up the matter without receiving a response. Award-holders of Adamson’s bronze design include actor Rod Steiger (*On the Waterfront*), actor Tony Curtis (*Some Like it Hot*), actor Dean Stockwell (*Quantum Leap*) and casting director Ellie Kanner (*Friends/Sex and the City*). Backstage, Adamson met George Sidney and Pat Hitchcock.



Those holding a *Peabody Award* crafted by Adamson include Maria Shriver, Ladybird Johnson, John Stewart, and Daniel Schorr. Additionally, Adamson constructed a medal given to John Glenn.

Casting bronze is time consuming due to the number of steps involved. An original art piece must be molded first. Adamson rarely works with clay. "It is quicker to stay in a familiar medium." Instead, he carves his art in wood. "This allows for finer details in the finished product. It is stronger and holds up better, though clay has the benefit of twisting and fixing the mold." The outer mold is pulled off, usually in two pieces, and then put back together before wax is poured into it. Finally, the piece is ready for bronze casting. Adamson has only

mixed mediums once, for an unusual combination piece, creating the statue of a white bull made from both bronze and wood.

Requests for bronze slowed as companies shifted toward cheaper plastics. But, Adamson's chainsaw carving business took off around the same time. Working from scaffolding, Adamson's largest chainsaw piece is at a private estate in Colorado. A 40' tall, 6' wide tree was brought to the site where no native trees grew and was set in cement. It is not the size of the artwork that matters. "You have to figure out the twist, because you have to support the sculpture."

He claims to "figure out something new with each and every sculpture." His chainsaw art includes varied wildlife subjects. Once he completes a carving with power tools, he goes over the sculpture with his hand carving tools for greater detail. Adamson's art pieces are natural, stained, burned, or painted.

When asked if he has a favorite wood, Adamson says, "It depends on what you want to achieve. Some are more brittle than others."

He does not stain cedar, juniper, or black walnut and he almost always paints pine.

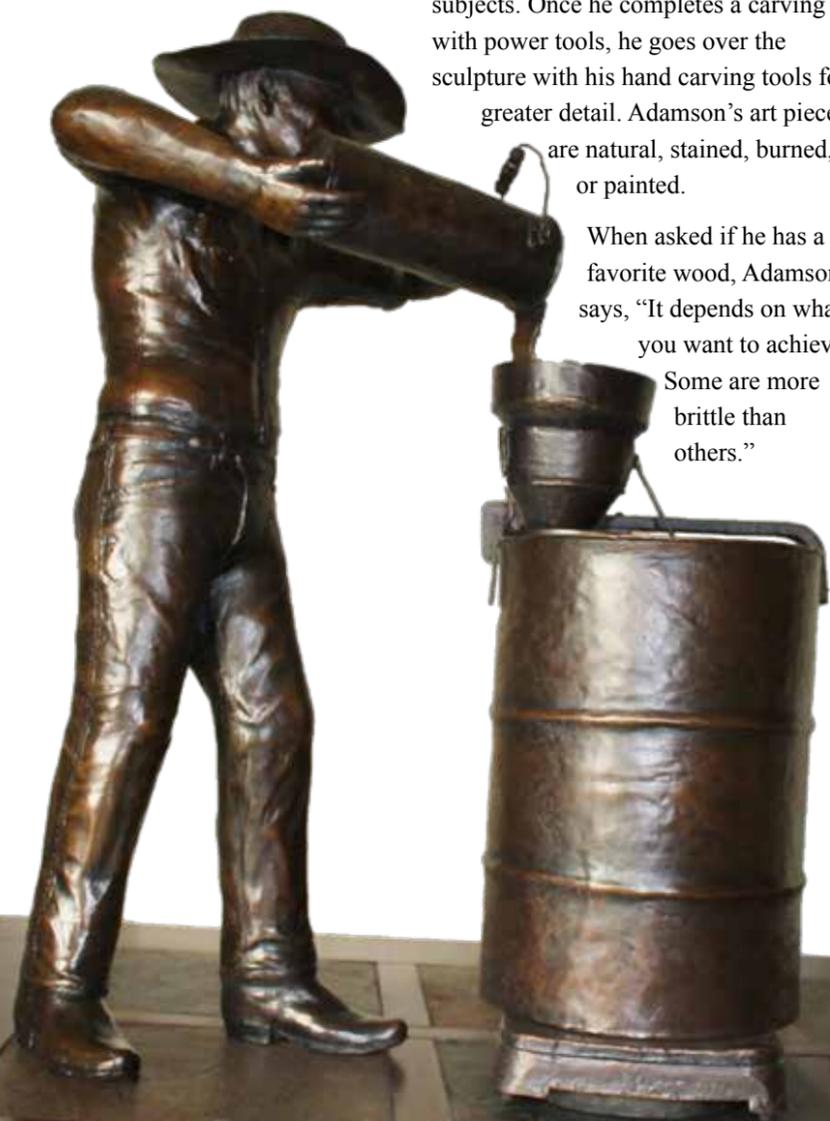
Adamson's Brazilian stone sculpture "requires different tools, but the procedures are the same." He has sculpted soapstone, alabaster and marble, and would like to try his hand at granite. Most pieces are mounted on a black walnut base, though others stand alone.

A discussion about the many materials Adamson can fashion would not be complete if we did not mention his ice sculpture, though ice is not his favorite medium. "It's cold, your hands freeze, and your art eventually melts." Using a chainsaw, Adamson has carved a 3' block of ice that was 18" deep.

You can see Ron Adamson in action at the upcoming *The Great Western Living & Design Exhibition* in Great Falls, MT March 15-18, 2018.

Adamson has a six-lesson DVD series available for sale, instructing from basic set-up to carving facial features. "Both the novice and the experienced wood carver can benefit." The series discusses carving a medicine man, carving a female face, carving a Viking, and some tricks of the trade.

You can follow Adamson's work in progress on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/ron.adamson.98> and see the natural space he calls his office or purchase your own Adamson sculpture, at www.ronadamson.com



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