

THE HEAT IS ON: KALISPELL ART CASTING

Jack Muir's foundry has grown over the last three decades to service artists large and small

Written by Brian Schott, Photography by Heidi Long



Above: Foundry owner and sculptor, Jack Muir in the gallery at his foundry **Right:** The molten bronze is carefully poured into the molds in the sand trough.

Jack Muir is a cool man in a fiery business, providing the service of bronze casting to a mix of clientele ranging from famous artists to walk-ins off the street. While 2,400-degree molten bronze is being poured into molds that have gone through multiple steps to ensure that the intricate details from an artist's clay sculptures are replicated, Muir calmly passes through the various chambers of his large production studio, joking with his 35-person staff as he traces the process of creating beautiful and expensive bronze castings.

Muir, 61, has had a lifelong interest in art and "messed around with a few occupations" before wandering into a Kalispell, Mont., foundry where he was hired, beginning his career. Within a few months he was managing it with his now co-owner Jon Olson and over the course of four years, Muir learned the intricate processes of the art and developed a clientele.

When the foundry was closed in 1979 due to personal issues with the owner, Muir purchased the equipment, along with Olson, to begin his life as an artist entrepreneur. Kalispell Art Casting began as a family business with





his wife and sister on the payroll, adding employees as needed and moving to larger locations three times in a smooth transition of steady growth.

As he signs paychecks on a cluttered desk at the Ash Road location they purchased in 1990, Muir reflects on the ups and downs of his business, dictated by the national economy, as well as wildly fluctuating prices for bronze (\$1.50 to \$4.50 per pound).

“We produce anything from small statuary bronze to large monumental pieces. One year ago, we were two to three times as busy, but we couldn’t keep up. We’re now at a more comfortable level, with a fairly steady diet of large projects. It’s amazing to stay this busy.”

That level of business has brought Muir to a certain pinnacle. His company has been contracted by the Calgary Stampede to produce 15 horses at life-and-a-quarter size installed on the Stampede grounds. Canadian artists Rich Roenisch and Bob Spaith are the sculptors.

Not only is Muir a savvy business owner, growing his company without incurring debt to more than \$2 million in gross annual receipts, he is an artist in his own right with sculptures represented in galleries across the West. Every year he produces a number of new Western-themed pieces, and eventually hopes that he can transition from earning a living from his casting business to retiring with the income from his art.

Although he experiments with some free-form sculpture, Western themes of

Left: Mike Zattosky is the metal chaser on D. Copenhaver Fellow sculpture of a cowgirl.

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cowboys and horses, Native American scenes, and wildlife are what sell.

"I enjoy the discipline of making something look real," he says. "The sculpture needs to represent something and be close to life. I think this attention to detail and reality is what makes it justifiable for customers to spend money on it."

Models in oil-based clay or wax arrive at the studio and are broken down into moldable pieces. After a mold is taken in clay, the pieces move to the wax room where layers of hot wax are poured inside. A ceramic shell is then built up around the wax by dipping it into a thick slurry batter and coating it with increas-

Clockwise from bottom: Greta Toehunter applies patina to a horse sculpture by Fred Fellows • Ryan Hansen metal chasing a sculpture by Bob Stayton • Dave Barrett welds the sculptures after casting.



The process, from start to finish, is incredibly complex, but Muir walks through it looking comfortable in the chaos. He even joins in.

ingly coarse layers of sand. These "invested pieces" are then inserted into a 1,200-degree furnace, which melts the wax and leaves the hollow space that molten bronze is poured into.

Sand blasters later remove the errant ceramic left on the hardened metal, pins are pulled, and holes and seams are welded as the various pieces are tracked and put back together. Air-driven rotary files bring out the fine details and copper wire fabrications add touches to represent rope and other accessories. Chemical applications in various combinations — an art form in itself — are applied with brushes and blowtorches for the finished patina. Finally, the piece is sealed with a thin layer of wax or lacquer to prevent further oxidation. Artists can participate in any or all of the casting process.

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"When I'm not signing paychecks and running the business, I like to work on some of the larger pieces, applying the clay," he says. "I'd rather be doing the art, and I have a very good management team now that can run the business without me. I never imagined we'd get where we are today."

While Kalispell Art Casting continues to take on work from an increasingly prestigious clientele, Muir knows that it is artists of all breeds that make his business flourish.

"We've always honored the little guys," Muir reflects while standing next to a life sized horse model. "You never can tell when you take someone off the street — they might look amateurish, but soon they turn into a success. People sometimes ask me why we take on work from so many unknown artists. Unknown artists started us — and that's why we're here." **BSJ**



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