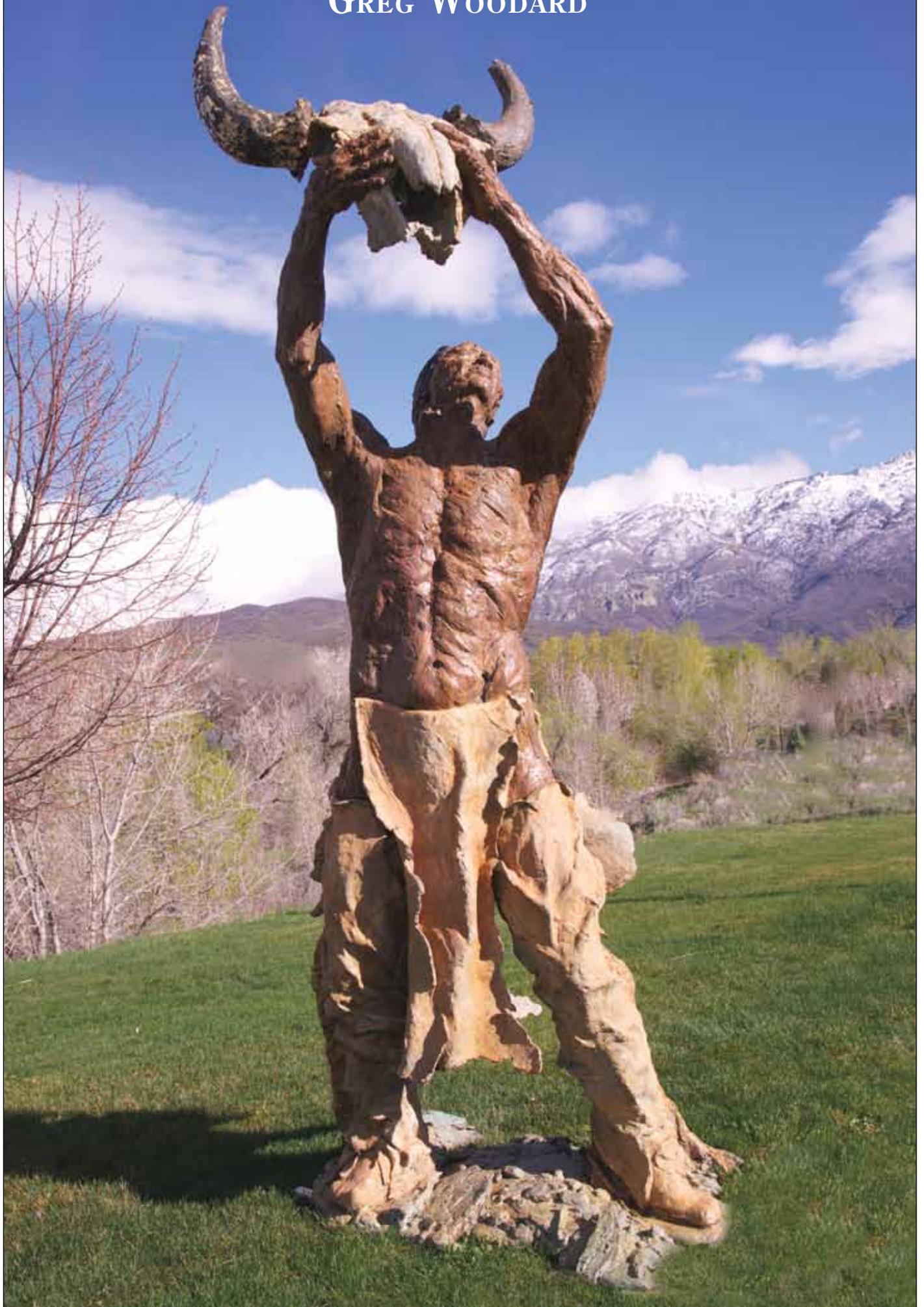


GREG WOODARD



# DOING IT HIS WAY

By Sara Gilbert Frederick



**G**reg Woodard has been known as a carver, a sculptor and a falconer. He's worked with wood, clay, bronze, and concrete. And he's created everything from eagles and buffalo to cowboys and past presidents. "I like adventure," Woodard admits. "Not many of my pieces are like the last."

One of his recent pieces is a sculpture representing President Ulysses S. Grant and the \$50 bill. It's a concrete column with Grant's head at the top and then the words on the bill depicted almost like petroglyphs below. Woodard calls it a totem, in part because it represents the importance that money has in our lives.

The concept has been so interesting to him that, at least for now, he's going to stick with currency. "I've got the next one already going," Woodard says. "It will be a collage of bills—taking multiple bills and using this approach.... I'm evolving into historical work, with powerful people who helped change history. I'm very interested in history, so this is fun for me."

But Woodard knows that something else will come up before long, as well. He recognizes that his critics like to point out that he's not known for sticking to any particular subject. "One guy said to me 'If you're going to be a cowboy

artist, stick to it, and be a cowboy artist,'" he says. "And I guess I am a Western artist—but I'm trying new things, too."

That might well be the hallmark of Woodard's career. Since establishing himself as a world champion carver in the 1980s, he has consistently found new ways to express himself as an artist. Not only has that helped him shape a successful career, but it has made it more fun as well. "It wouldn't be as interesting to me if I weren't trying new things," he says.

Woodard's artistic career began with birds. His father, an active outdoorsman, had nurtured his young son's interest by giving him bird books and spending time outdoors with him near their home in Ogden, Utah. Woodard grew to share his father's passion for birds, in part because he was fascinated by their ability to fly. Even more, however, he appreciated how fast they flew.

"It's actually about speed," he

*Above - Anasazi Anatum, bronze, 18" high*

*"Anatum peregrine falcons are a sub species of peregrine that live along the Colorado River, and I have always been fascinated by petroglyphs and pictographs (ancient art)). I think about how the Anasazi must have felt to see these peregrines dive through these huge red and yellow cliffs."*

*Opposite Page - Big Medicine, bronze, 1 1/2 life size*

*"What a dream it was to be commissioned to do this life-and-a-half-size figure. I dive into the character of my subjects the way an actor does. I feel the piece; I see the figure in my head, and I wake six months later."*



*Eagle Medicine Man. Bronze, 30" high*

*"The golden eagle is the most powerful bird in North America. Native Americans appropriately revered them. I love the interaction between the bird and the man."*



*Buffalo Nickel, bronze, 15" high*

*"This was the first idea for a break out. I admire how powerful bison are. I love to watch them and how they move. I thought the best way to show how powerful they are is to have it break out, or through, something."*



says. "I was a ski racer as a kid, which felt a little bit like flying. I just really liked things that go fast."

Woodard's father, a high school woodshop teacher, also sparked his son's love of woodworking. And he might have unwittingly set him on the path toward professional carving, when he took his then 10-year-old son to a gallery in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Woodard admired a bird carving and asked his dad if a person could make money carving birds. His dad told him that it appeared so.

By the time he was in his mid-20s, Woodard had proven that to be true. His carvings started winning awards at national and international shows and attracting collectors. He had quit his job working for the railroad and was carving full-time. But his meticulous style was slow work, and it was hard to keep up with demand. And, as would become his pattern, he was eager to try something new.

So Woodard started sculpting



with clay and casting his work—still birds, but now also buffalo and figures, including Native Americans and cowboys—in stainless steel. Eventually, he turned to bronze. As he played with paints and patinas on his new medium, he discovered that he could achieve a more distressed, antique look working with the finish on his bronzes. That fit with another passion his father had instilled in him as a child: archaeology.

“My dad worked on the old railroad beds, up near the Golden Spike National Historic Site,” Woodard says. “He would take me up there, and we would dig around and find shards of antique pots and old opium bottles that were purple. That really set the hook in me in terms of my interest in antiquities.”

Now, the best compliment Woodard can receive is when someone tells him that one of his pieces looks like it was pulled out of ancient ruins. He was delighted, when he poured his first Grant totem in October, and the sander

said it looked like it had come out of a Mayan Ruin. “I told him, ‘That’s exactly what I was going for,’” Woodard says.

To achieve that look, Woodard designs each piece, thinking about where the slurry will collect during the casting process. Then, after working with his foundry to cast the bronze sculpture, he resists sandblasting all of the ceramic shell cleanly away. Instead, he chips it away, strategically, leaving sand in the cracks and crevasses that have been intentionally placed there.

“It ends up looking like it as buried in the desert,” Woodard says. “I guess that’s just a look that I’ve always liked, so that’s what I’m interested in doing right now.” It also satisfies his desire to go out on an archaeological dig. “I don’t really do that anymore,” he says, “because I do it in my work.”

Woodard’s ability to visualize what a piece will look like, before it’s in its final form, is something he’s perfected since his early days

1869: *Looks West*, bronze, 63” long

*“Nature doesn’t have long, straight lines: track has that and a feeling of distance make interesting shapes as the eagle looks West.”*

as a carver. Back then, he was especially known for how well he painted his birds and says that his painting skills are likely what helped him win a world championship. Most carvers used acrylics, but Woodard chose oils, because they were more painterly. “I think that was a big part of my success,” he says.

During that time, he learned how to think about the way color would look on his carvings. “You have to think about the way light will hit it, the way the color will be absorbed, all of that,” he says. “With bronze, it’s a different kind of application; you have to think about how the light hits the metal and reflects.”

Concrete, Woodard’s newest medium, provides its own challenges. He’s fascinated by its



*Shooting Star, bronze, 18 ½" high*

*"I like the coins with stars and breaking off and shooting into space was irresistible."*

connection to architecture, especially to the more contemporary, clean styles that are often associated with concrete. And he likes the way it looks. "I really like to show the structure," he says. "I like to let the rebar show through. It's very interesting."

Although Woodard did a lot of drawing and painting as a kid, he rarely works in two-dimensions anymore. Almost everything he creates is three-dimensional. "I still like to paint, and I'll do a painting here and there, but I don't really have the desire to move into that now," he says. "I like the grit of what I'm doing now."

Carving, Woodard says, is a meticulous and detailed process. Sculpting, especially the way he does it, is much less so. And that's what he likes so much about it. "It's so dirty," he laughs. "I like the power and the grit. And I like that

I'm able to do a golden eagle green, if I want to, instead of worrying about every detail."

That's the other consistent element in Woodard's work: He does it his own way. Everything he's learned, he's learned on his own. He laughs as he recalls that, when he started carving, he had no idea that he could use glass eyes. "My dad had carved in college, and he made his own eyes," he says, "so I made my own eyes, too. And the same thing with bronze—I did my own thing from day one."

Even his wife Susan doesn't always understand what Woodard is working on—until it's done. But she almost always likes it in the end, Woodard says, and she makes it possible for him to get it done. "She gives me the space I need to do it and helps me where I'm the weakest—which is paperwork and keeping my head on straight," he admits. "But she doesn't comment on the process; she knows that's not a good idea!"

The Woodards live on 13 acres of land in northern Utah, not far from

where he grew up, watching birds with his father. They raised their four children, who are all now grown and on their own, there. That location, nestled in the Wasatch Mountains, has been another constant in his life and work.

So, too, is the sense of adventure he still feels about what he does. Woodard has been preparing for a big show in 2020 at the Booth Western Art Museum, where a new wing of contemporary art will feature his work. As ideas begin to rumble around in his head, he's getting more and more excited about the possibilities to create new work.

"It seems like the more strongly I feel about something, the more people seem to like it as well," he says. "That's the real satisfying part—to have people who get it, who appreciate what I do." ❧

*Sara Gilbert Frederick is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.*