



Raymond Graf



by Donna Rand

As a boy, Raymond Graf used to enjoy pouring hot lead into molds with his brother.

Graf never thought his fascination with melted metals would turn into a lucrative and rewarding career. Forty years later, his works are sprouting up all over Kentucky. The public is taking note of his extraordinary bronze sculptures that look as if they will come to life at any moment.

The sculptor, who now lives in Louisville, has an uncanny ability to create stunning pieces of art from nearly anything he sees. A 1986 graduate of Murray State University, Graf's background in art includes drawing, ceramics, sculpture and stone carving. His professional career began when he worked under the tutelage of Kentucky sculptor Barney Bright. Over the past two decades he has focused his attention on cast-bronze sculptures. His first official commission for a public work was to create a Cardinal mascot in 1993 for the University of Louisville.

An extraordinary collection of his works can be seen throughout Henderson, Ky., which is the hometown of John James Audubon. Since 2002, Graf has been working on a series of bird sculptures based on the Audubon's Birds of America paintings.

The project began with eight of Graf's sculptures. Great care in selecting birds for the project was taken since only birds native to the area were considered. The osprey, ivory billed woodpecker, passenger pigeon, purple martin, pigeon hawk, hooded merganser, great blue heron and wild turkey cock were chosen. These works can be enjoyed along the Downtown Walking Tour in Henderson. Limited Edition Audubon Miniature Series bronze sculptures of the blue heron and wild turkey cock are available The Downtown Henderson Project.

In 2005, Mourning Doves was dedicated and placed by the entrance of the city's First United Methodist Church. A Pair of doves, great horned owls and a \$97,500 life-size sculpture of John James Audubon gazing at a white pelican have also been added to the growing collection of bronzes. The pelican was chosen to compliment the John James Audubon statue based on a passage in Audubon's own writings. It described how he frequently saw white pelicans on the Ohio River in the vicinity of Henderson around the





time that he first moved to Kentucky in 1807. The newest addition to Henderson's collection honored the 223rd anniversary of John James Audubon's birth on April 26th. The white-headed eagle sits perched atop a catfish appears as if he will lift into flight at the slightest provocation.

"The town wanted to create a unique way to attract tourism and show admiration to a wonderful artist," says Julie Martin, executive director of The Main Street Renaissance Program and The Downtown Henderson Project. "The sculptures are a signature trademark for the town and the bronze images create a dramatic and lasting legacy for the community"

Graf's works are so life-like and exact in appearance when compared to Audubon's prints, however, the artist does leave his own personal mark on each piece. For example, look very closely on the backside of his great blue heron sculpture and you'll see a small frog sitting among the reeds that was not part of the original print – or if it had been we just couldn't see that part. Graf jokes, "It was on the back of the print but others just didn't see it." This is a fun fact to know about Graf's works and many people enjoy searching for the "extra detail" in each piece. Some are quite subtle but it helps admirers examine the art with a more discerning eye.

In the first stage of creating a bronze sculpture, Graf makes a small clay figure, then makes a larger life-size model of styrofoam that is covered in clay to help keep the model light, yet still somewhat flexible during the creation phase. A caliper is used to attain the proper scale and size. Meticulous attention to detail is exhibited in all of Graf's works. The soft clay used never gets hard so continual modifications can be made if necessary. A rubber mold is made over the clay form. A wax figure is created from the rubber mold and then another mold of ceramic is made. The remaining wax must be completely removed from the ceramic mold in what is called the lost wax process. Before the molten bronze can be poured into the ceramic mold for casting it must be heated to a temperature of 2,100 degrees Fahrenheit. The ceramic mold must be heated to a temperature of about 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit so the bronze will completely fill the mold and not cool too quickly. As the bronze cools and the ceramic mold chills, cracks form in the ceramic and popping sounds are heard. The ceramic is chipped away and then sand-blasted. Often these bronze images are cast in pieces and must later be assembled by welding and smoothing the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. This is very delicate work and much care must be taken to eliminate any seams during the assembly process. Most projects take Graf an average of six months to complete. Pricing depends on the complexity of the project, in-

cluding size, materials and length of time to complete. While Graf's bronze sculptures are expected to last many generations, his personal guarantee is 3,000 years.

Graf's latest work is a \$150,000 project for former Indiana Gov. Frank O'Bannon, which includes limestone benches and columns portraying O'Bannon, his father and his grandfather and their service to the community of Corydon, Ind. It is scheduled for dedication this summer. Graf is also working to market a magnificent Abraham Lincoln bust. He'd also like to create a horse sculpture in the future.

Graf feels his art is an indelible mark that he can leave future generations to tell them about the world we live in today. "Much can be learned about our past from what is left behind," Graf concludes. [yall](#)

For more information:

The Downtown Henderson Project

866-524-2467

audubonsculpture.com

Where can Graf's works be seen in Kentucky?

Colonel Harland Sanders, founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken – Jewish Hospital, Shelbyville

Two identical statues of former Kentucky Gov. Bert Combs, one at each end of the Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway – Stanton and Prestonsburg

Firefighter making a dramatic rescue – Burlington (Ky.) Fire Department

U of L "Cardinal" mascot – University of Louisville

Jockey Pat Day – Churchill Downs, Louisville

Hall of Fame baseball player Pee Wee Reese – Louisville Slugger Field

Hall of Fame football player Paul Hornung – Louisville Slugger Field

Al Schneider, Louisville business leader – Galt House Hotel, Louisville

J. Graham Brown, founder, The Brown Hotel; and Tom Simmons, Louisville business leader – The Brown Hotel, Louisville