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K E N T



Capturing the Spirit of Nature

BY PAULA HALL

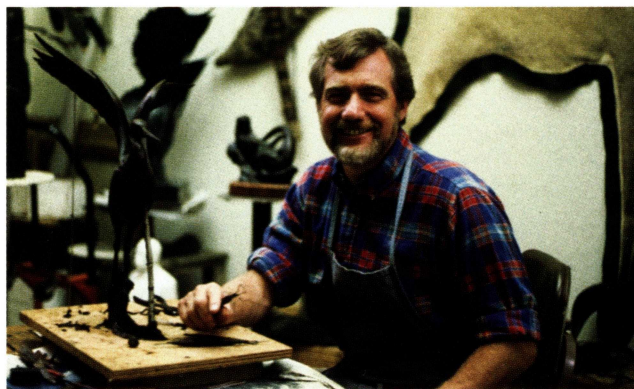
MANEUVERING HIS BOAT

CLOSER, without disrupting the tranquil scene, Kent Ullberg points to a blue heron poised on one leg near the shoreline.

"Look at that old fellow. Isn't that plumage wonderful," Ullberg explains in an excited whisper. Taking an even closer look through a pair of binoculars which lie close at hand, Ullberg inches the boat nearer his subject.

"That's why I do all my work from direct observation. I believe it's the only way to get authenticity and

RENDEZVOUS SCULPTOR



KENT ULLBERG, NA

COVER: Kent Ullberg, *Eagle Rock*, 6 feet 3 inches, bronze

LEFT: Kent Ullberg, *Bighorns*, 16 by 13 by 6 inches, bronze





Left, Kent Ullberg, *Curlews*, 10 by 7½ by 5 inches, bronze

Top left, Kent Ullberg, *Sentinel Rock*, 16 by 11 by 9 inches, bronze

Above, Kent Ullberg, *Deinonychus – Dinosaurs*, 22 by 16 by 10 inches, bronze

honesty into the work,” Ullberg later explains. “I see a great blue heron one day standing on one leg, with one wing out preening itself and it triggers something inside me. I see a beautiful sculpture shape created naturally, instantly.”

Communicating his love of nature through small and monumental sculptures in bronze and stainless steel, has earned Ullberg a well-deserved international reputation as a wildlife sculptor. The graceful flow of forms and energetic movement of his animal subjects have become the trademarks of this Swedish-born sculptor who moved to the United States in 1974.

“I’m inspired by direct observation. I can capture more than just the likeness of the animal by actually seeing it in nature. I want to communicate the spirit as well,” Ullberg says.

His strict rule of never sculpting

an animal species without having first observed it in the wild, has led Ullberg from his home in Sweden, through Europe and Africa and to his current home on Padre Island, near Corpus Christi, Texas.

Ullberg’s love and empathy for nature began at a very early age. He grew up on the craggy, rocky coast of western Sweden, spending the majority of his childhood in the seafaring town of Gothenburg and on a small island off the coast.

His father, a landscape painter, musician and sometimes seaman, would take his young son along on painting expeditions near their home. He hoped to interest his son in landscape painting. But, instead, young Ullberg spent most of his time watching and studying animals in the Swedish countryside and coastal regions while his father painted. The closeness to nature that Ullberg experienced during those early years of his life has remained a major influence throughout his career.

Ullberg was also “fascinated” by the works of Ernest Hemingway he read while growing up. An avid reader, he dreamed of seeing firsthand the Paris and Africa that the famed author described in his books. “If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a movable feast,” wrote Ernest Hemingway in *A Movable Feast*.

This description, along with many others by Hemingway, enticed Ullberg to travel and experience the world outside his Swedish home. After high school, the lure of the sea called him to join the merchant marine, sailing to such places as South America. He returned to Sweden to study sculpture at the Swedish State School of Art in

Stockholm.

To finance his education, he worked as a taxidermist at the Swedish Museum of Natural History in Stockholm, while attending art classes at night. He credits his experience in taxidermy, scraping skeletons and reconstructing animal figures “from the inside out,” for his broad understanding of animal anatomy.

Upon graduating from art school, he traveled to Germany where he studied and was employed sculpting animal models for a large manufacturer of school teaching aids during this time. While in Germany he also received an associates degree for museum exhibition planning and design.

Finally, armed with Hemingway’s pre-World War II images of the Parisian literary and art world, Ullberg descended on Paris in 1967, and found a different city.

“Of course I was disappointed because what Hemingway described was no longer a part of Paris,” Ullberg says. “I have often felt that I was born too late and that has always seemed to follow me.”

Ullberg found solace in studying and observing the “enormous mass of work by the great sculptors of Europe.” He particularly admired and studied the work of French sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), whom he credits as the greatest figure sculptor of all time.

“I like the enormous spirit of his work — the power of expression. His work is like an erupting volcano,” Ullberg says. “There has never been a sculptor in modern times that has been able to express the emotion of the human figure as Rodin.”

Although he does not sculpt human imagery often, Ullberg says Rodin's work stands as a milestone to which he can judge his own development in all work.

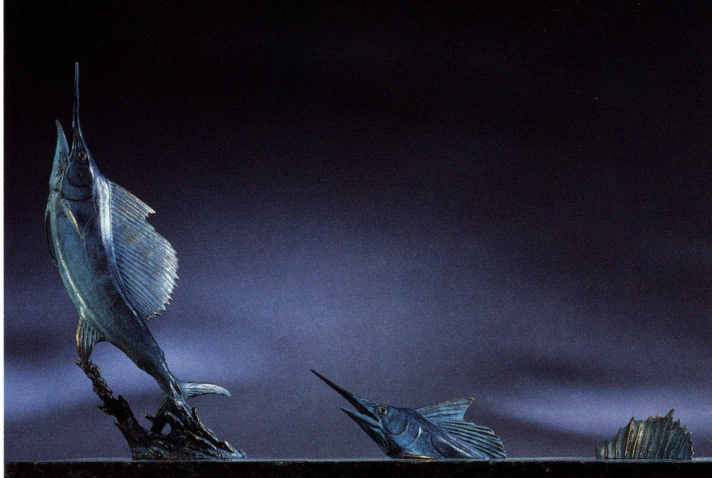
"Rodin's great work remains the constant. As a sculptor, I can view his work over the years and gauge how my sensibilities are evolving," Ullberg explains.

Describing the development of his style, Ullberg recalls his confusion during his early training in Stockholm when pop-art was the driving force in the art world. A self-described romantic, Ullberg says he had a difficult time with the modern, stark, artistic language so popular during the 1960s.

"I have always been a naturalist and realist in my work and I was forced to deal with the contemporary language of art in school," Ullberg explains. "Once again, I felt I was born much too late, because I related more to the classical works. I was often frowned on by my teachers of contemporary art because my work contained too much realism and representationalism."

However, Ullberg did grasp the contemporary artistic language popular of his day and applied certain aspects of the style to his individual work as a sculptor. Today, Ullberg says he thinks strongly in terms of abstract design, even though his work is most often "extremely realistic."

During his early twenties, romantic images continued to draw Ullberg to pursue his dream of observing different species of

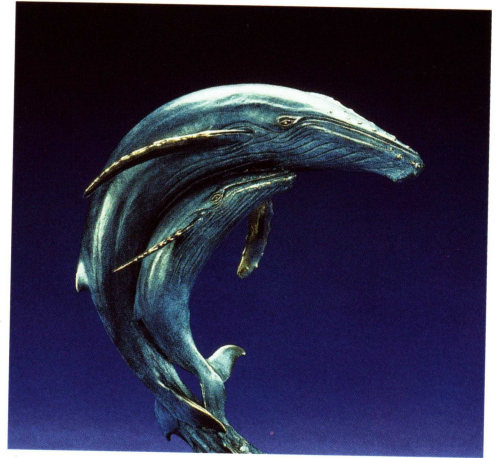


Kent Ullberg, Free Jumping, 72 by 30 by 15 inches, bronze

Top, Kent Ullberg, Sailfish in Three Stages of Ascending, 13 by 20 by 8½ inches, bronze



Kent Ullberg, Making Waves, 17 by 10 by 6 inches, bronze



Kent Ullberg, Whale Song, 13½ by 5 by 9 inches, bronze

animals in the wilds of Africa. He wrote letters espousing his virtues to every African-based company for which he could find the address. After his short stay in Paris, he eventually signed on with a safari company as a taxidermist for a year in Africa, an agreement he made in exchange for payment of his ticket from London.

"On arriving in Nairobi, I knew from the paved roads and big city this was not the romantic Africa Hemingway had written about, with snowcapped mountains towering over fields of wild game," Ullberg laughingly explains. "I eventually went to Botswana which had just received its independence from Britain and was still very primitive. It was a totally different kind of Africa than I had read about, but it had its own charm."

He lived and worked in Africa for seven years. His experience in arranging exhibitions proved

helpful in acquiring a position as curator at the Botswana National Museum. His more adventurous duties with the museum included accompanying research expeditions into the Kalahari Desert and areas "untouched by civilization." While in Africa he sculpted native Bushmen, as well as the wildlife that surrounded him.

"I always continued sculpting through all the years of working and traveling. With each new animal species I encounter, forms consume my mind and I sculpt," Ullberg says. "I do a few human figures, but animals take up my whole consciousness. They are where I concentrate my work. My experiences in Africa were tremendous and I still travel there to renew those images."

It was during an expedition trip for the Botswana National Museum that he met staff members from the Denver Museum of Natural History. He was invited to visit Denver by the staff in return for his hospitality.

In 1972, Ullberg made his first trip to the United States and decided immediately he wanted to return. Ullberg returned to Denver in 1974 when he was employed by the Denver museum and shortly after married his wife, Veerle, a Belgian native.

The following year a bronze sculpture of a leopard he had completed while in Africa earned him an award from the National Academy of Design and his first national recognition as a wildlife sculptor. A growing list of commissions followed and Ullberg was prompted to leave his job at the Denver Museum of Natural History to pursue his career as a sculptor full time.

As the images of African wildlife began to be replaced with those of North American animals, Ullberg began to travel the United States in

search of fertile observation grounds.

"The first North American animal that really impressed me was the bison. They are like walking sculptures," Ullberg explains. He cast a series on the North American bison after watching a herd located outside Denver.

His attraction for the ocean led him to move his family to the Gulf coast of Texas where he could view daily some of his favorite subjects, marine life. He and his wife, Veerle, have lived on Padre Island for 13 years, and his son, who now attends college in the East, grew up there.



Kent Ullberg, Surveyor, 23 by 23 by 13 inches, bronze

"I love the sea and wanted to be near the things that I grew up with as a child. I wanted my children to experience it also," Ullberg said.

His home and studio are located on a canal which allows Ullberg direct access to his boat, docked just outside his back door. The canal leads to the shallow, warm waters of Corpus Christi Bay, which teems with shoreline birds and fish of all varieties. From there he takes his boat on out to the waters of the Gulf of Mexico where he can view firsthand all types of marine life.

Ullberg also maintains a large studio in Loveland, Colorado, where he creates monumental works. The studio is located near the casting foundries for sculptures which he says are not available near his Texas home. And he still finds time to take an occasional excursion to see the bugling elk or bighorn sheep of the region.

"I'll never stop studying wildlife. It's my passion and I love it," Ullberg says.

Keeping a journal of his outdoor excursions, Ullberg takes notes and sketches various animals' anatomy, such as a wing or bill shape. He also takes photographs of his subjects to use as reference. Instead of making detailed pencil sketches of the subject, however, Ullberg first begins with a small thumbnail of the animal in clay.

"I can work quicker in clay or wax, than I can on a flat plane," Ullberg explains. "It also helps me determine the design in a three-dimensional format. Sculpture is a medium in the round and I cannot design on a flat piece of paper."

Ullberg is a staunch believer that sculpture "must have some interest from all sides to be successful."

Making certain his large monuments have that interest from all angles takes a great deal of plan-



Kent Ullberg, *Sailfish (Monument Study)*, 20½ by 9¾ by 4 inches, stainless steel

Ullberg often models several small clay sculptures before making a final decision on design for a large monument. A sculpture commissioned by the Corpus Christi Caller-Times to commemorate its 100th anniversary was to be placed in the center of a major traffic circle in the city. Ullberg decided a spiraling design would best suit the site and set about working on a design.

"I decided to express that spiraling movement in the beautiful supple forms of sailfish. This first clay concept was an abstract study focusing entirely on the spiral movement. The

viewer can see the sailfish through purely abstract shapes," Ullberg says.

For the completed monument, Ullberg broadened the appeal through a very realistic execution of the sailfish. Ullberg would like to complete more of his work in abstract shapes and has plans to do so in the future.

"But my main work will always remain representational of nature," he says. "By combining the abstract with realism, my art communicates on more levels."



Kent Ullberg, *Mountain Calls*, 13½ by 11 by 7 inches, bronze

ning and work with architects and building contractors on the site where the sculpture will eventually stand.

Examples of his dedication to provide an interesting sculpture “in the round” can be seen in all his work. From the 25-foot high bronze *Deinonychus* — *Dinosaur*, or Terrible Claw, that stalks Philadelphia’s Logan Square, to the 14-foot high stainless steel pair of whooping cranes that grace the grounds of the National Wildlife Federation’s

Washington, D.C., headquarters, Ullberg’s work is distinctively captivating from any direction.

As one of the first sculptors to work in stainless steel for large monuments, Ullberg likes to “bridge the gap between realism and contemporary buildings by using modern materials.”

Ullberg worked with owners and architects of Lincoln Center in Dallas, Texas, to create a sculpture that could “provide warmth to the center which was very high tech in

design.” Knowing the sculpture could be seen by passing motorists on a nearby freeway, Ullberg proposed a 10-foot tall stylized eagle with closed wings to be placed on a 14-foot high black granite column.

“They wanted a subject that people could relate to and understand and that’s why I suggested the eagle. But I produced it in polished stainless steel to complement the modern surroundings,” Ullberg explains. “Warmth of the environment is reflected in the

eagle, as the stainless steel mirrors the golden colors at sunrise or sunset and the darkness of an overcast sky."

Researching his subjects always takes Ullberg beyond firsthand observation. He is a naturalist who studies the habits and environment of each species. Book titles that line the shelves of his Padre Island studio indicate his passion for learning about the subjects he sculpts.

Before beginning the whooping crane monument for the NWF's headquarters in Washington, Ullberg read and studied about the crane's natural history, habitat and population dynamics. He also spent weeks making sketches of them in their habitat and eventually decided on a design of two cranes performing a mating dance.

Starting with his small thumbnail in clay, Ullberg often goes through many phases of a design creating several small clay models before ultimately deciding on the final sculpture. He then models the final monument design to scale.

Pointing to many small clay sculptures in various stages of progress around him, Ullberg says many are cast as small pieces. Calling them "studio debris," Ullberg says he may return to an unfinished version several years later and complete it for casting.

"I usually have two or three at some stage of progress at the same time. But while I'm up in Colorado working on the large monument pieces, most of my time is devoted to that particular project," Ullberg says.

In Autumn Season, Ullberg captures the different personalities of two white-tail deer, a buck and a doe during courtship season.

"The buck, all alert, twitching muscles and sinews, standing possessively as closely as possible to his conquest, looks over his shoulder for rivals and danger. The doe on the other hand, is relaxed, feigning and totally disinterested," Ullberg says.

Kent Ullberg, Autumn Season, 13 by 11½ by 5 inches, bronze





From a small-scaled model, Ullberg and his assistants erect a metal skeleton to full size. They then cover it with a polyurethane form and then lots of clay for sculpting the details. Once the large clay model is complete, a mold is made, from which the bronze or stainless steel sculpture is cast. The size of the monuments demand long and grueling hours of work. Most monuments will take Ullberg two years to complete.

Ullberg is working on one of his most extensive projects and the largest cast bronze composition attempted in modern times, *Sailfish in Three Stages of Ascending*. Currently being molded and cast in his Colorado studio, the 36-foot high and 120-foot long bronze sculpture and fountain will eventually stand as an integral part of a major convention center in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. When completed later this year, Ullberg will have spent three years on the project.

"They wanted something that communicated marine environment so I suggested a composition that includes three levels," Ullberg explains. "At the very top is a series of a sailfish ascending from the water in three phases, with the largest being 30-feet-tall. Then below are groups of life-size dolphins, a school of bait fish and sea turtles."

In a curious way, the stop-action design of the ascending sailfish brings Ullberg full circle to his early days of studying and struggling with the pop art of the 1960s.

"I think of it as an homage to pop artist Claus Oldenburg who was Swedish born and became very famous in the U.S. and Europe,"

Kent Ullberg, *Meeting of the Mountain Lords*, 39 by 20 by 18 inches, bronze

Kent Ullberg, *Running Pronghorn*, 14½ by 18 by 8½ inches, bronze



Kent Ullberg, Old Fiddler, 23 by 25 by 11 inches, bronze



Kent Ullberg, Falcon, 17½ by 8 by 6½ inches, bronze



*Kent Ullberg, Nightwatch, 19½
by 9 by 8 inches, bronze*



*Kent Ullberg, Victory Eagle Monument, 9 feet
6 inches by 14 feet by 10 feet, bronze*

Ullberg says. "In the early 70s, he did a piece in California of a cowboy hat in three stages of descending. Although my design is very naturalistic, I utilized that same concept in creating the sailfish."

At 46-years-old, Ullberg feels he is finally "in tune" with the time in which he lives.

"Artists reflect the concerns of their time and culture and I'm dealing with very contemporary issues of today. The deep concern about nature is a global issue and I am expressing those environmental issues through my work," Ullberg says.

He points to the fact that historically, animals were seldom subjects for public art. But with the renewed conservation interest, Ullberg's wildlife images depicting "the preciousness of our environment" are in great demand.

"The monumental sculpture gives me a bigger voice to speak passionately about nature and conservation. All my life, I have tried to teach and remind people of the beauty of nature. I have not changed the direction of my work. The times have simply changed and my work symbolizes the concerns that are most evident now," Ullberg says.

Ullberg's work has been shown around the world including Sweden, France, Africa, China, England and across the United States. He has completed 27 monumental sculptures worldwide and hundreds of smaller sculptures.

Recognition of his work has earned Ullberg a variety of awards from juried shows by the National Academy of Design, the Allied Artists of America, the National Arts Club, the National Sculpture Society and the Society of Animal Artists, Inc. He has received the gold medal for sculpture in 1981, 1982, 1988 and 1990 from the National Academy of Western Art.

In 1990, Ullberg was elected a full

academician, NA, by the National Academy of Design, New York City, one of the highest professional recognitions bestowed on visual artists in America.

Despite the international recognition of his work, Ullberg is mindful of his past and earlier struggles, and takes what seems to many as expeditious success in stride.

A very sensitive man, Ullberg savors mementos recalling those individuals who have helped to shape his career. In one corner of his Padre Island studio hang what at first appears an eclectic group of pictures.

"That's my wall of heroes, I guess you might say," Ullberg laughingly admits. "That one is, of course, Rodin and that one is from Anders Zorn, a brilliant figurative painter I admire. And that's John Wayne. It probably sounds rather silly, but he has always symbolized something special for me. I'm a staunch individualist and believe our individual qualities are all that we have to contribute to this world. America is, I feel, built on individuality and as a child John Wayne symbolized that self-reliance."

Growing up in a socialistic environment, Ullberg treasures the freedom and individuality that America affords its citizens. He recalls the struggles and sacrifices that his parents made as artists in Sweden. His father, who eventually gained recognition as a landscape painter, had a difficult time "making a living while we were growing up." Ullberg's mother once studied sculpting, but later turned to textiles and operated a commercial weaving studio to help with the family income.

"When I was very young, maybe one- or two-years-old, she would take me with her to sculpting class. I still have a sculpture she did of my left hand when I was one-year-old. I didn't realize until I was an adult the sacrifices she made in her art to



Kent Ullberg, *Requiem for Prince William Sound*, 26½ by 8 by 8 inches, bronze

help make a living," Ullberg says.

Ullberg's sensitivity is not only reflected through his childhood recollections, but most evidently through his work. His greatest hope is that his sculptures will help advance the cause of conservation.

"I try to communicate the beauty I see in nature," he says. "If I can make people see the beauty and how protecting it is tied to our own survival, then I will be successful." ◻

RENDEZVOUS SCULPTOR

Works for Sale

Autumn Season, 13 by 11½ by 5 inches, bronze
Bighorns, 16 by 13 by 6 inches, bronze
Bluewater Hunters, 24 by 25½ by 6 inches, bronze
Burst of Blue, 25 by 14 by 7½ inches, bronze
Curlews, 10 by 7½ by 5 inches, bronze
Deinonychus — Dinosaurs, 22 by 16 by 10 inches, bronze
Eagle Monument Study, 24½ by 9½ by 9 inches, bronze
Eagle's Point, 24½ by 16 by 10½ inches, bronze
Eagle Rock Monument, 94 by 45 by 45 inches, bronze
Equipoise, 14½ by 10 by 5 inches, bronze
Falcon, 17½ by 8 by 6½ inches, bronze
For Fear We Shall Perish, 24¼ by 16 by 9½ inches, bronze
Free Jumping, 72 by 30 by 15 inches, bronze
Greater Kudu II, 14 by 12½ by 5 inches, bronze
Great Blue Heron, 75 by 30 by 20 inches, bronze
Laid Back, 9 by 10 by 5 inches, bronze
Making Waves, 17 by 10 by 6 inches, bronze
Mountain Calls, 13½ by 11 by 7 inches, bronze
Newborn Giraffe, 5 by 9 by 6 inches, bronze
Nightwatch, 19½ by 9 by 8 inches, bronze
Old Salts, 18 by 11½ by 7 inches, bronze
Pintails, 17¾ by 15 by 7 inches, bronze
Requiem for Prince William Sound, 26½ by 8 by 8 inches, bronze
Rhapsody in Gold, 17 by 6½ by 6 inches, bronze
Ring of Bright Water II, 41 by 14½ by 24 inches, bronze
Rites of Spring, 27 by 21 by 12½ inches, stainless steel
Riverbank, 10 by 10 by 4 inches, bronze
Rivermates, 12 by 7½ by 8 inches, bronze
Royal Portrait, 28 by 18 by 9 inches, bronze
Sailfish in Three Stages of Ascending, 13 by 20 by 8½ inches, bronze
Sentinel Rock, 16 by 11 by 9 inches, bronze
Silverking II, 33 by 18 by 11 inches, stainless steel
Spring Blizzard, 10½ by 9 by 5½ inches, bronze
Spring Plumage, 17½ by 8 by 6½ inches, stainless steel
Standing Tall, 12 by 14 by 7 inches, bronze
Striped Marlin, 18 by 22 by 6 inches, stainless steel
Sundown, 34½ by 17 by 13 inches, bronze
Surveyor, 23 by 23 by 13 inches, bronze
Tidal Dance, 24 by 15½ by 13, bronze
Victory Eagle, 30 by 30 by 10 inches, bronze
Victory Eagle Monument, 9½ by 14 by 10 feet, bronze
Waterplay, 39 by 28 by 12 inches, bronze
Whale Song, 13½ by 5 by 9 inches, bronze
Windborne, 13½ by 6 by 5 inches, bronze

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Kent Ullberg, *Ring of Bright Water II*, 41 by 14½ by 24 inches, bronze

Retrospective Sculptures

Lent By The Artist Unless Indicated

Blacksmith, 22¼ by 7 by 5½ inches, bronze
Cougar by the Stream II, 22 by 23½ by 14 inches, bronze
 lent by Mr. and Mrs. David Guthery
Desert Elephant, 9½ by 15½ by 6 inches, bronze
Herdmaster, 23 by 24 by 14 inches, bronze
Meeting of the Mountain Lords, 39 by 20 by 18 inches, bronze
Necking Giraffe, 18½ by 14½ by 9 inches, bronze
Ocean Dream, 22½ by 9 by 6 inches, bronze
Old Fiddler, 23 by 25 by 11 inches, bronze
Pula — Raindream, 16 by 8 by 7½ inches, bronze
Running Pronghorn, 14½ by 18 by 8¼ inches, bronze
Sailfish (Monument Study), 20½ by 9¼ by 4 inches, stainless steel
Whale Courtship, 20 by 31 by 21 inches, bronze
Wind in the Sails, 36 by 26½ by 13 inches, bronze