

George Foster

Insect Bronzes

For most of my working life I have been casting bronze for sculptors by molding from their originals and developed some special casting techniques. I was raised in Ontario and built my first small foundry/studio there. At the age of 30 I moved to rural Quebec (Eastern Townships) and built a much larger foundry. I tried my hand at making my own sculptures in addition to the casting I did for others and that was mostly figurative work some of which were sold through galleries.

Most foundries use the lost wax method (*cire perdue*) but one can also “burn out” organic materials such as insects and dead June bugs and other insects were my first candidates to make into bronze or even silver to make pendants and other jewelry. Some of these were shown at a gallery in Montreal along with my other work. It went over well and the gallery owner decided to wear an aluminum water bug on a leather thong apparently for the rest of his life. One of the visitors said “it’s too bad you can’t make them much bigger” and that sparked me into a research project to do just that. Remember this is before computer 3-D printing so I was confined to analog processes such as pantography along with many hours of sculpting details in wax models while peering through a stereo microscope focused on absolutely complete specimens.

I was impressed by the insect collection at The Canadian Museum of Nature and I set about buying or borrowing similar exotic specimens to enlarge and cast into bronze. The Insectarium of Montreal at that time was still an unrealized dream of the notary and insect collector Georges Brossard.

Philosophical ideas and questions emerge concerning the bronze sculptures of insects given that they are a kind of “objects trouvés” or “found art” and not really my creations. However they are framed as “fine art” and they are the most difficult and time consuming bronzes to do. Since the 1980’s the passion to do them and to keep seeking out new ones has consumed much of my life. I’m sure there would have been more socially relevant and certainly more lucrative pursuits for me but there is my collection of big metal insects to see, crazy or not.

As a child my favorite books were about wildlife even studying out the wonderful drawings of vertebrate anatomy in old text books. My father bought me science stuff like a big chemistry set or tools to make things and the world of physics opened up on the horizon. Now it was wonderful machines and devices in old text books bought at a Salvation Army Store. I studied science at Mc Master University but really wanted to be an engineer making machines and devices. (This morning I found a metallic green tiger beetle. Beetles are wonderful looking machines and they can usually unfold wings and fly when they want --like little airplanes!)

The local media have called me “The Bug Man” but many people are called “bug men”, usually entomologists or insect collectors. A well known portrait photographer living near me captioned his print of me (among other portraits displayed) holding a bronze beetle and a welding torch, “George Foster, Mad Scientist”. This title grows less worrisome to me with time.

My parents were market gardeners and artists when they had time. I also alternate my art with gardening. I do many experiments growing unusual even tropical food plants on my farm and in the large mostly solar powered greenhouse in cool Québec. What a dream it would be to have some leaf or stick insects hanging out in the greenhouse! (Maybe one day).

My current project is to finish my last three bronzes and replace some that have been sold to have an intact collection. *Cyclomatus imperitor* has very long mandibles for its body length while the other two “tigers” *Amblycheila cylindriformis* and *Manticora latipennis* as suggested by biologist and writer Robert Wrigley finish are all I need to do.

My bronze collection has been shown in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Sherbrooke, Vancouver, Colorado, and Washington. The largest show was local for me in Coaticook, Quebec and a film was made of it and the studio/foundry. The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) purchased and borrowed some of my larger pieces. My favorite may be one they borrowed but declined to purchase. It was instead purchased by a political writer and friend. It was collected by a famous Canadian entomologist, Henry Howden. I told Henry and his wife I found the tiny specimen he lent me to be “visually symphonic”. The bronze of this (*Glyphoderus centralis* from Argentina) is 17 inches long.

So what am I and what have I done making this collection? If I could speak for these wonderful creatures I would say “Hey look at me. I’m not just a functional bug. I’m nature’s work of art. *Look* at how I move. Rejoice at my fantastic colors and iridescences and go to the insect sculptors of the world to be in awe of my form.”