

Beauty and Soul Cast in Bronze

Kearney Artist Martha Pettigrew's sculptures are a study in the beauty and texture of ordinary lives.

By LINDA READ DEEDS Photography by BOBBI AND STEVE OLSON



Martha and Delmar Pettigrew

"First Born" by
Martha Pettigrew
of Kearney

CENTERED IN THE MOMENT, the brown-skinned woman's eyes are closed, her expression serene. She holds a baby wrapped snugly in a blanket. Texture and detail are exquisite, the lines graceful and clean as the desert landscape that inspired them. Nothing about the sculpture hints at the history behind it.

The bronze sculpture, "First Born," is the creation of Kearney artist Martha Pettigrew. Now internationally known, she began sculpting just 15 years ago after a business failure took everything she and her husband, Delmar, had. Overnight, they went from raising race horses to a race to survive.

"We had \$37 and an old pickup truck," Martha told me. "And Del said, 'Let's get into bronze.' That's the most expensive art work you can get into." She laughed. "We were just naive enough to say, 'Okay, we'll do it.'"

"In retrospect, I should have had her do oil paintings; they aren't so heavy," Del joked.

Oil paintings from other artists cover the walls of the Pettigrews' home, mingling with sculptures. Over tea at a table they bought during travels in Mexico, they told about forging success in the art world with talent, determination and hard work.

Martha Pettigrew earned a fine arts degree from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln in 1972, and was an illustrator at the University of Nebraska State Museum until the couple married.

Together they continued his raw fur business, buying pelts from trappers and dealers all over Nebraska. About 1980, they began raising thoroughbred race horses.

"We bought a small farm - it had nothing on it," Martha said. "We moved the house on it, built all the fences and the barn."

The movement against wearing furs caught them off guard. "An Italian client had ordered \$150,000 worth of raccoon skins," Martha said. "He was sitting in our office when a phone call came in from his office in Milan. Someone had just dumped 50 gallon drums of pig blood over his floor and splashed it all over his garments. He cancelled his order. That was the beginning of the end."

"We were doing business in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Canada and New York," Del said. "One by one, our clients either quit or filed bankruptcy. The Italians were the last to quit. They were bankrupt, too, but they didn't keep





Both Martha and Del are sculptors. "We had \$37 and an old pickup," Martha said, "And Del said, 'Let's get into bronze.' We were just naïve enough to say, 'Okay, we'll do it.'" Right, Martha at an art show in Kearney.



good enough books to know it. When they went under, they took us with them."

The couple started over, determined to succeed, this time in sculpture. Martha had not sculpted since college, but she knew horses. Her first saleable piece was a little race horse and rider, pulling up after a race. They drove the old pickup to a foundry in Loveland, Colo., and had the casting done.

"They gave us 30 days billing, thank God," Martha said. "Usually foundries want some money ahead. It takes a couple of months to get through the whole process of casting-out. When it was finished, Del took it to show some people in Omaha in the racing business."

"He called me on the phone - we were still on the farm - and I was sitting at the kitchen table eating a peanut butter sandwich, because we were definitely broke," she said, laughing. "He said, 'Martha, I sold three of these horses and I got you a commission to do a portrait bust.' He said there was a long silence before I said, 'But I don't know how to do a portrait bust.' He said, 'That's okay, I got a down payment and some money in the bank and I'll have someone show you how.'"

The portrait bust was of Jack Van Berg, a Kentucky Derby-winning horse trainer originally from Nebraska. "Your husband has a lot of faith in you," I told her. "Yes," she said. "When somebody says, 'Can Martha do...,' he says, 'Sure she can.'"

A Chinese artist from the Kansas City area was doing local demonstrations. He agreed to work with Martha. "He did very impressionistic work, but it really looked like the person he was doing. That gave us a head start," Martha said.

"We were very naïve to think we could make a living at it," Del said. "We did the whole first year with about \$15,000 in sales and about \$8,000 in expenses. In order to keep going, we did salvage. We went out and bought used batteries from farms and shipped about a semi-load of batteries once every week or two. We'd make about a thousand dollars a load."

A semi-load of batteries? "We had to pick up every battery and throw them on the truck," Martha said.

"And we both have bad joints to prove it," Del added. But when Pettigrew came away from her first all-sculpture show in Colorado as the top-selling artist, they knew art was their niche.

"Ten years later, the first show we did was over 10 times our first year's gross," Del said. "But since 2001, the market has been very unkind to people who are not producing good work. Often my advice to people who ask how to become a professional artist is to make sure you have no other source of income."

"It's too easy to put it off," Martha said. "If you have no other choice of income, your work either gets good or you get out." Her own work evolved early. She did her first stylized figure in 1993. It sat in her studio for six weeks. "Lack of confidence," she said.

"It sold very, very quickly - it was the genesis of that style," Del said. "Martha is known for her textures and beautiful faces."

Pettigrew is also known for her sympathetic portrayal of the beauty and soul of the ordinary life of indigenous women, based on the couple's travels to the Southwestern United States and Mexico. "It's partly their shape, it's partly the everyday activities



Martha created a bronze of poet and University of Nebraska at Kearney professor Don Welch. "That looks more like me ... than me." Welch said when he saw it. Martha is best known for her sympathetic portrayal of indigenous women, as at right.

that women do, whether it's basketry or pottery or sweeping," she said. "I have a piece of a woman with a basket of chickens on her head. It's called 'Al Mercado' - 'To the Market.' The whole world turns on the backbone of women, the raising of kids, the work and passing of culture that women do."

The Marketplace Series depicts the warmth and dignity of women in the world of trade. Pettigrew's *Water Song Series* features Native American women holding a cultural item - a water jar, a coiled basket - caught in a moment in time.

Her sculptures have won some 20 major juried awards, and purchase awards and commissions, including a sculpture of long-time University of Nebraska at Kearney professor and poet Don Welch. "When it was finished, Don stood back and looked at it, and said, 'That looks more like me...than me!'" Martha said.

She still does horses; they include a life-size head and neck of a Clydesdale draft horse for Anheuser-Busch distributors. But as the technique becomes easier with

practice, in some ways it gets harder, she said. "It's very challenging because you don't want to get into a rut. You want to continue to grow, to do imaginative work. I have a series of things that I'm doing just for me because I like the shapes. It's very abstract, based on bones - skulls and bones."

About seven years ago, Del began sculpting animal and bird figures. He is also an important part of the early process of Martha's work. He builds all her armatures - the pipes and wires that hold the clay together - and helps with the initial application of clay.



"There's a lot of physical work, just taking the hot clay out of the heater and putting it on the armatures to get your form before you actually start carving away," Martha said.

Del's eye for composition, also beneficial to Martha's work, led to his own. His first piece came from a glimpse of two crows on opposite ends of a fallen branch along the Platte River. One was looking one way, one the other. He called it "Not Speaking." The edition quickly sold out.

His current piece, "Grackle-mania," came when he was removing a lilac bush. Down to the last three branches, he found the composition beautiful and couldn't cut them. He sketched and sculpted them, adding grackles, which are common in Mexico. "It's a piece about the sort of Zen feeling of the branches. The birds are the reason to do the branches - to complete the idea of a composition. And I like grackles," he said.

He does three or four pieces a year; one is of bears. Martha sets a goal of about 10 new pieces each year - a large, life-size piece, two or three medium pieces and several smaller pieces, with multiple editions of each. "I have different ideas that fit different pieces," she said.

The Pettigrews' art studio is a two-story garage attached to the house. "It's not a large studio - I wish it were, but I can handle big pieces in there because we raised the ceiling to 14 feet and put skylights in," Martha said. "Frankly, I did some of my best work when I first started on the kitchen table in the farm house. You never know."

Casting in bronze is a laborious process, with many chances for error. The Loveland foundry is vital to their work. "These pieces go through about 12 different hands and they all have to know what they are doing because it can be messed up at any time. The texture is put back just as it was in the original clay. The color is put on by the patina person, with a hot torch and different chemicals. I figure out what patina I want for each piece and tell them how I want the colors. They are very good at it. They don't make many

mistakes," Martha said. She applies the final color herself.

The whole process has to be repeated for each copy. "They can't really be mass-produced," Martha said. "Each one is cast individually, the welding is done individually, the chasing is done individually - that is why bronze is so expensive."

Martha Pettigrew's works appear effortless, as natural as earth and rain. But some of them are over six feet high and weigh hundreds of pounds. At 5' 6", she is not a big woman. "I have a bumper sticker

that says 'Art ain't for sissies,' " she said, laughing.

"We do a lot of tipping and sliding. When I ship a bunch of these, I use North American Van Lines. But when we have just a few pieces, we get friends to help. Be very careful not to befriend a sculptor," Martha joked.

Her sculptures have spread into collections in the Americas, Europe, Japan, India, and the Philippines. Her clients may live all over the world, but she meets them in the West. "Some people with more than one home have 30 or 40 pieces of my work," Martha said. "We're very good friends."

One of her larger works came from a client's request. "I did a little rough study of two gals talking at the fence, called 'Comadreado' - 'Gossip,' and a client said, 'If you could make that large, I'd like it for my back yard,' and Del said, 'Of course, she can.'"

The couple moved from Lincoln to Kearney nine years ago, after a late-night epiphany. On their trips home from Loveland, "we'd get to Kearney at about 11 o'clock and we'd be really tired," Martha said. "Del said to me, 'You know, if we lived here, we'd be home now.'"

They bought a large historic home known as the Henry house, built by a well-known Kearney doctor - a perfect background for art. And they are back into horse breeding. They have "a very exciting horse" racing in Martha's name which recently won his maiden race in Kentucky. Martha speaks and reads novels in Spanish and she named the horse "El Zarco," from a classic piece of Mexican literature.

"If you could sum up the art life, what would you say?" I asked Martha. Her eyebrows flew up in surprise, but she paused only briefly. "It's a lot of work!" she exclaimed, and then laughed at herself.

But she was serious.

"We work seven days a week," she said. "I don't go to the studio at 8 and leave at 5, but we're working all the time, not only making art, but marketing. You can have the best work in the world, but nobody's going to come knocking on your door to buy; you've got to get out and show and sell. We work very hard, both of us."

Del manages and sells both Martha's work and his own. "Martha is... I don't want to say 'introverted'... understated," he said. They both laughed.

"I think artists work harder than anyone, at least the good ones," Martha said. Looking around the room at the evidence on the walls and tables, I had to agree. 🐾

About the author - Linda Read Deeds lives in North Platte. She wrote about pioneer aviator Jack Knight in the March/April 2005 issue.