# Southern Accents

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SOUTHERN SPLENDOR: ROSES IN FALL BLOOM

# Going the Distance

## From images of an American pastime to offshoots of a foreign culture, sculptor John Dreyfuss strikes a timeless balance between the past and present

by Judith Bell  Photographs by Mary Noble Ours

*For John Dreyfuss, each work evolves over a period of years. His studio, a spectacular combination of concrete, stone, and glass, occupies the ground floor of Halcyon House, an 18th-century residence that took him and wife Mary Noble Ours 17 years to restore.*

In a time when art is often made fast out of simple materials, when even videos are considered high art, Washington, D.C., sculptor John Dreyfuss clings to classical forms. Whether inspired by mythology and ancient Greek art or the inherent perfection of the natural world, Dreyfuss is committed to process and the past. "An artist's job," he says, "is to work as intensely and with as much consistency as possible and to look at art history as acutely as possible."

History has set high standards that are not lost on his art. "His sculptures are idealized in the Greek sense of the word," says Carla Hanzal, deputy director of the International Sculpture Center in Washington, D.C. Hanzal included the artist's work in "Metamorphosis: Contemporary Sculpture in the Historic Garden," a 1995 installation of works by 11 sculptors at Tudor Place, a historic house and garden in Georgetown. "He's committed, with a great deal of integrity to his own vision."

Although trained as an architect at the University of Pennsylvania, Dreyfuss devoted himself to sculpture in 1972, when he left the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. "The vocabulary there was new and provocative," he says. "I was interested in traditional materials, symmetry, and traditional methods of seeing things." He worked for sculptor Philip Grausman in Connecticut, familiarizing himself with various jobs at Tallix Foundry in upstate New York.

Searching for his own niche, Dreyfuss discovered Egyptian reliefs and pre-Columbian bird carvings. The works of American sculptors such as Paul Manship, William Zorach, John Flannagan, and Harold Hazeltine served as an inspiration for Dreyfuss. His first subjects—roosters and geese—were imbued with gesture

and emotion. "I was making objects that were exercises in learning how things fit together," he says.

In 1982, he began the maquettes for "Full Count," a series of baseball players he started to transform into life-size bronzes in 1988. "Looking at Eakins' studies of Civil War baseball players and Warhol's icons of Tom Seaver," Dreyfuss says, "I began to look at the baseball pitcher as an icon for our time in much the way the

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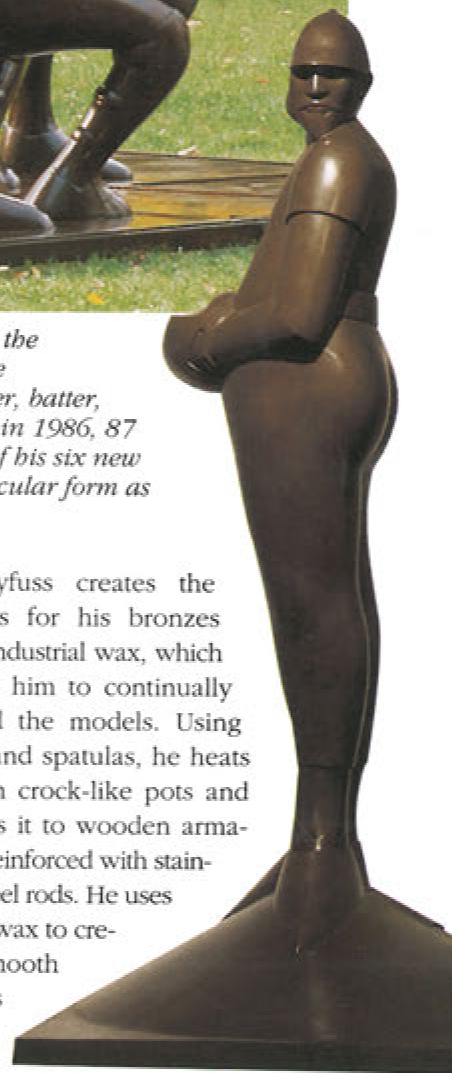
By the time Dreyfuss completed "Full Count," his work had already gained acclaim. "I have rarely seen a sculptor become accomplished in so short a time. The work is elegant, beautifully proportioned, and timeless," says Barbara Fendrick of Fendrick Gallery who also represents the artist.

Dreyfuss later turned his attention to Cycladic art, the ancient art of the Greek islands of Cyclades. He studied form: how a head sits on a neck, how an arm folds over a torso. Cycladic art led Dreyfuss to revisit the animal form, this time from a minimalist point of view. "Minimalism is about the ability to make particular choices about line and form," he says.

Dreyfuss interpreted marine forms, streamlining seals and giant rays, paring away the nonessential to arrive at the essential. Many of the sculptures are quite large, including the 22-foot-long giant ray *Ulysses*. "I like to step away from bodies of work and then see how they re-emerge and then revisit them," he says.

"There is little in John's art that doesn't relate to the next thing," says Chris Addison of Addison/Ripley Gallery in Washington D.C., who has represented Dreyfuss for the last four years. "The baseball players, his helmets, lyres, and water beings are all mythical objects." It's rare for an artist to create such convincing mythology.



*Dreyfuss used the game of baseball to explore the human figure in* Full Count, *a suite of bronze sculptures cast in 1990 that includes a catcher, batter, umpire, and pitcher. The pitcher (right), cast in 1986, 87 by 42 by 42 inches, in* Full Count *is the first of his six new sculptures of pitchers that examines this particular form as a cultural icon.*

Dreyfuss creates the models for his bronzes from industrial wax, which allows him to continually amend the models. Using tools and spatulas, he heats wax in crock-like pots and applies it to wooden armatures reinforced with stainless-steel rods. He uses liquid wax to create smooth forms

*Wax models like these (left) for* Hector, *73 by 43 by 12 inches, and two untitled works in the background, both about 74 by 45 by 10 inches, allow Dreyfuss to see his work as a continuum, with one piece leading to another. The 1990 bronze* David's Lyre, *(right) 27 by 18 by 3½ inches, with its green patina, reflects the artist's attention to texture and rich color vocabulary.*

and stiff wax to form edges.

"The lost wax process, which John prefers for most of his work, permits him to change forms and sharpen lines very late in the casting process, giving him flexibility that other casting processes would not allow," says Dick Polich, who founded the Tallix Foundry and has worked with Dreyfuss casting bronzes since 1972.

Although Dreyfuss is still inspired by Cycladic and ancient Greek art, he has begun a new series of baseball players, one that studies motion and the torso. "You can't be the same once you begin to see the whole world of sculpture," he says. I perceive a certain rightness about the path I've taken, which I hope will become a long-distance journey." ♦

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