

**AS
SEEN
IN** **WILDLIFE ART**
M A G A Z I N E

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When he wants to, Greg Polutanovich can look the part of the Western characters that he sculpts.

He stood tall, leaning lightly against the mahogany bar, his left hand holding a shot glass, his right hand resting on his six-shooter. His long hair fell to his shoulders beneath a broad-brimmed hat, his elegant jacket reached almost to his knees while his sharply pointed boots were alongside a spittoon behind the brass foot rail. Well, that's kinda close. Greg Polutanovich was actually leaning on the kitchen table. He had the shot glass, hair, hat and jacket. In a pinch he could have rustled up the boots and maybe a revolver, but the spittoon and brass rail would have to come later. But Polutanovich was doing what he loves to do—he was doing everything he could to faithfully model one of his many Western heroes, Wild Bill Hickok, while his wife, Wendy, took photographs as resource material for his remarkably detailed Western sculptures.

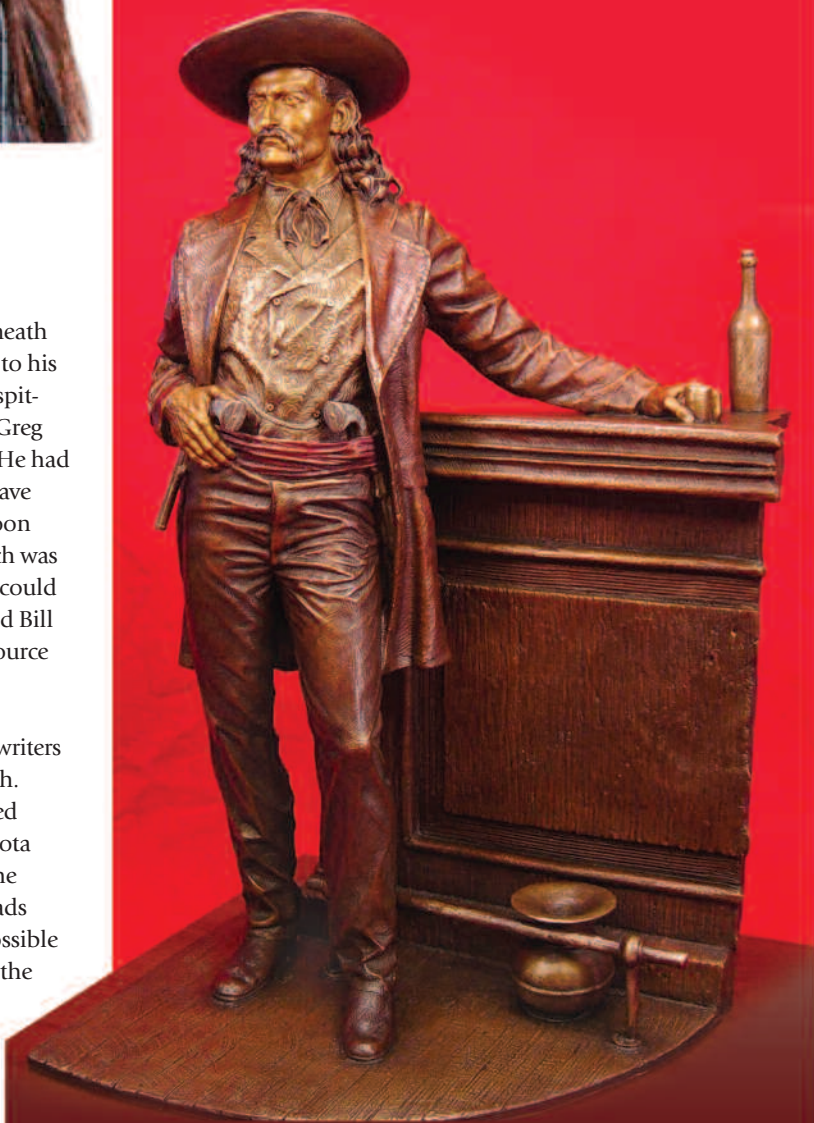
"We don't realize how much our ideas of what many Western characters looked like have been molded by the writers and artists of the old penny dreadfuls," says Polutanovich. For instance, there is only one known picture—a battered tintype—of Billy the Kid, and none of the legendary Lakota leader, Crazy Horse. Recognizing there is what he calls the "real West and Hollywood's reel West," Polutanovich reads voraciously to find as much verifiable information as possible on every character he sculpts, and Wendy, a costumer in the Hollywood film industry, shares his interest and is an invaluable resource on period clothing.

Details, and arresting facial expressions, are hallmarks of Polutanovich's work. Though he has sculpted many of the West's most famous historical figures,

UP AND COMING ARTIST

THE HISTORICAL FIGURES OF GREG POLUTANOVICH

BY PAUL SINCLAIR



Hickok (bronze, 20 x 10 x 10")

"Sometimes I like to get away from the heroic figures of the past and do ordinary soldiers from maybe the Civil War—soldiers showing fear as the battle approaches." Such a work is *Apprehension*, a bust of a soldier based on a character in the Civil War-based book, the *Red Badge of Courage*. "He's just the average guy in the trenches," says Polutanovich, "an ordinary soldier, scared and maybe feeling a little cowardly, instead of the guy who's ready to jump out and get killed."

On the other hand, his search for authenticity sometimes forces him to compromise, as in the case of famed lawman Wyatt Earp. "There has been a long and raging debate over whether Earp ever carried the long-barreled revolver (the Buntline Special) that some writings and the television series made famous. I don't think he did, but some collectors won't even look at a sculpture of Earp without a regular pistol, while others want the Buntline. What do I do? I do different sculptures with different guns." (Ned Buntline was the pen name of E.Z.C. Judson [1823-1886] who wrote many of the dime novels that brought fame to Western lawmen and gunmen. It was claimed that in 1876, he had five of the long-barreled guns made by Colt, called the Buntline Specials, and gave them to five lawmen, including Earp and Bat Masterson. But that is in dispute and Colt has no conclusive records of such guns being ordered. However, thousands were manufactured and sold during and after the TV program, which featured Hugh O'Brian as Earp.) "I just love tracking down this kind of historical stuff," says Polutanovich.

Born in Sault Ste. Marie, in Ontario, Canada, Polutanovich, who is bravely facing his 40th birthday, didn't come to sculpting until he was 21, and only got into full-time fine art sculpting two years ago.



Apprehension (bronze, 15 x 9 x 9")

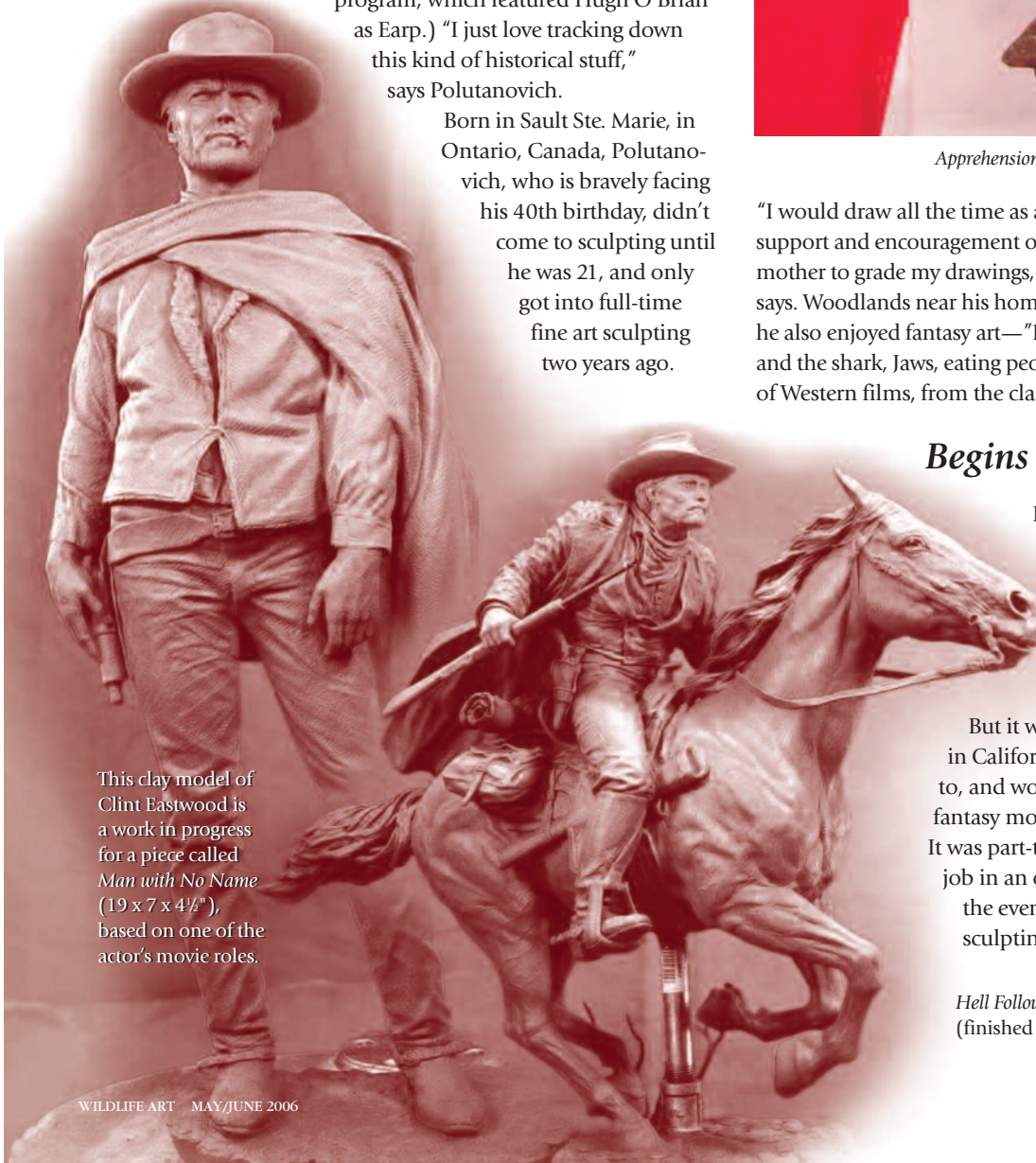
"I would draw all the time as a youngster and had the full support and encouragement of my parents. I would always ask my mother to grade my drawings, and she always gave me an A+," he says. Woodlands near his home led him to a love of wildlife art, but he also enjoyed fantasy art—"I'd draw Godzilla destroying towns and the shark, *Jaws*, eating people"—and he has had a lifelong love of Western films, from the classics to the spaghetti variety.

Begins with Monster Movies

From high school, where constant drawings and doodlings during class "kept my academic scores around the mediocre," Polutanovich moved on to a three-year community college course in commercial art.

But it was interrupted by a visit to his father in California in 1987, where he was introduced to, and worked with, a sculptor who created fantasy models for Hollywood monster movies. It was part-time work and Polutanovich got a job in an oil refinery during the day and used the evenings and weekends to work on his sculpting skills. "I quit the refinery when

Hell Followed with Him
(finished clay model, 17½ x 20 x 8")



This clay model of Clint Eastwood is a work in progress for a piece called *Man with No Name* (19 x 7 x 4½"), based on one of the actor's movie roles.



(Above) Greg Polutanovich works intently on a clay model of a sculpture of Crazy Horse.



Crazy Horse
(bronze,
17 x 20 x 9")

I got a job in a film studio as a runner. But I soon got promoted to doing some painting, so someone else took over my job of taking out the garbage and sweeping the floors." It was at the studio that he met Wendy, and they were married a year and a half later.

"I had a few basic sculpture classes at college in Canada, but I hated every minute of it—sculpting circles and squares, and I made a lot of pinch pots," says Polutanovich. So he was surprised to find that at the film studio, sculpting "came pretty easy to me. I found I had a natural talent for it." He worked on models for films, TV programs and commercials, developing a reputation in the field, but at home, he honed his growing fine art skills, "because I wanted to move on to realistic figures."

To do that, he left behind the world of fantasy and turned to his other love—cowboys and Indians, gunfighters, mountain men and Civil War soldiers. "Clint Eastwood was my hero. I had been watching his films from my school days, and I still do," says Polutanovich, who modeled his piece, *The Man with No Name*, after one of his favorite Eastwood roles. "I wanted to aim to a whole new level. I stopped pursuing jobs in the movie industry and set my sights on becoming a fine art sculptor."

It was not easy. Polutanovich found few galleries interested in

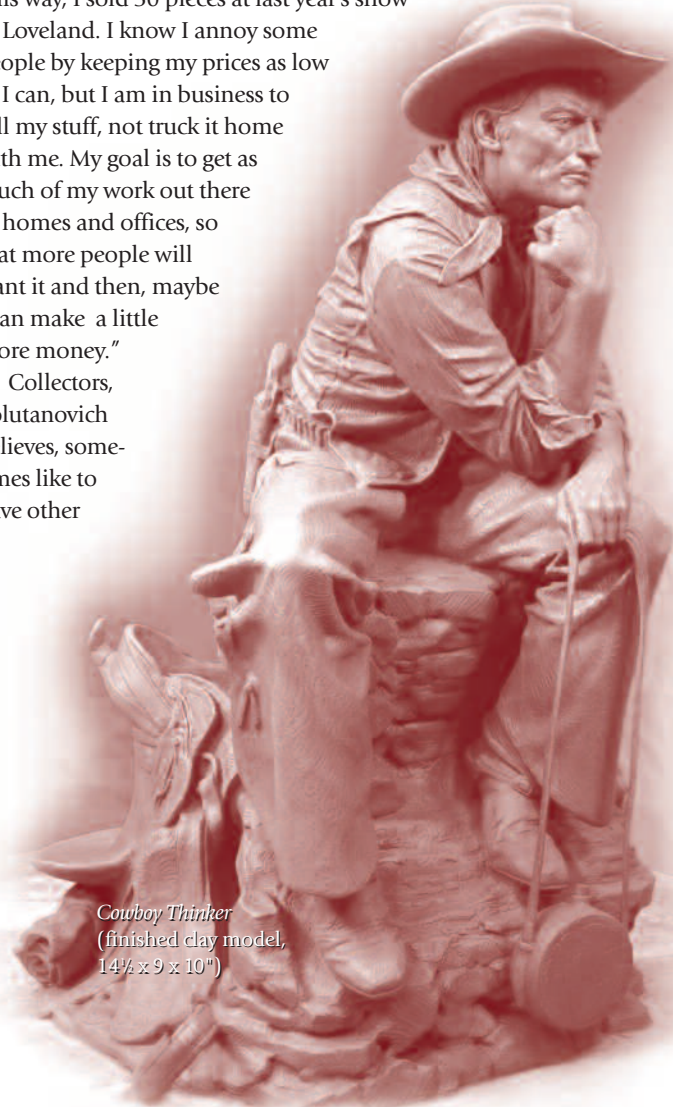
Western sculpture in Southern California, so "I decided to go to shows, but at the first two I did not sell a single piece. It was very discouraging, but Wendy would not let me be discouraged. If I talked about giving it up and getting a job, she would say NO!! And I went on to the next show. A lot of people stopped by with lots of nice compliments, but you can't take those to the bank. At one show, my tent collapsed during a thunderstorm in the middle of the night, knocking most of my stuff to the ground. When I saw it, I thought I was going to be sick. I packed up in the rain and left, very discouraged.

"Then something strange happened. At the next show I won Best of Show for my Native American piece, *The Final Arrow*, which put the wind back in my sails and my work started to sell. I sold more at my next show and even more at the next. Then my phone started to ring with people wanting to buy my sculptures."

Shows Pre-Cast Models

Recognizing that bronze sculptures can be expensive, Polutanovich uses a method of pre-cast pricing in an effort to keep the prices down. At a show, he will take pieces that are still in the modeling clay stage so that potential buyers can see how the sculptures will look when cast, and place an order in advance. "It means that the buyer might have to wait a little longer to get the piece, but it gives me a chance to control costs. This way, I sold 30 pieces at last year's show in Loveland. I know I annoy some people by keeping my prices as low as I can, but I am in business to sell my stuff, not truck it home with me. My goal is to get as much of my work out there in homes and offices, so that more people will want it and then, maybe I can make a little more money."

Collectors, Polutanovich believes, sometimes like to have other



Cowboy Thinker
(finished clay model,
14½ x 9 x 10")



The Final Arrow
(bronze,
22 x 21 x 8")

points of reference when buying a piece. Consequently, his *Cowboy Thinker* is a deliberate takeoff on the 1880 work, the *Thinker*, by the celebrated French sculptor, Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). "Most people know Rodin's *Thinker*, and my cowboy helps create a conversation piece for people; it creates a kind of link to another part of their life and feeling of appreciation—at least, I hope so."

Early influencers in Polutanovich's mind are as diverse as the Baroque Italian architect and sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680)—"I don't know much about his life, but I love his work"—and Gutzon Borglum (1867-1941), sculptor of the Mt. Rushmore presidential monuments in the Black Hills of South Dakota, which is "an awesome site," he says. Of particular interest, he says, is the truly monumental site for the memorial to Sioux leader Crazy Horse, also in South Dakota, which, if completed, will be nine stories tall and bigger than all four heads at Mr. Rushmore. "I have done my own sculpture of Crazy Horse," says Polutanovich, "and the interesting thing is that there are no known photographs or other pictures of him. That means I can depict him as I think he would have looked, based on all my reading about his life and his actions."

Looking back, Polutanovich doubts that he would be a sculptor with a growing reputation today if not for his family and Wendy. "I think back to my childhood when my mother would tell me to show visitors my latest piece of work. I would roll my eyes and go get it from my room. But it was positive reinforcement. Wendy has forcefully refused to let me quit. Even in the hardest of times, she has never even hinted that I should stop trying to be an artist and get a real job. My father has never questioned my desire to be an artist. However I don't think it was until I started working in the film business that my father stopped worrying about me, (then he added with a chuckle) now that I'm in the in the fine art business, he might have started to worry again." **WA**

Paul Sinclair is a free-lance writer living in San Diego, Calif.

Images courtesy of the artist.

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