

THE SEWARD JOHNSON ATELIER SCULPTURE EXHIBITION

MOST FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Are there real clothes on the sculptures?

No. Surprisingly each sculpture is entirely bronze. The realism of the textures and details is the hallmark of Johnson's art, and this detailing is achieved with hours and hours of intense labor. Seward Johnson begins each bronze with a twelve inch tall "sketch" in clay, and then enlarges this to life scale in clay. Often delicate textures, such as the skin, can be made more real with fabrics pressed into the still-moist clay at this stage. Sometimes articles of clothing are stiffened with a resin and used in the mold process, but there is no clothing on top of, or under the bronze, in the sculpture that you see today. Other times clay clothing is sculpted onto the figure by the artist using fine-edged wooden and metal tools. As the figures are sawed into many parts for the casting process, there are dozens of roughly welded areas when the parts are reassembled in bronze. At this stage, the artist must replace many of the fine textures; a corduroy, a tweed, a cable knit sweater pattern, with an electric tool that is much like a fine dentist's drill. This is the most time consuming part of creating these bronzes. It takes up to one year to create a new sculpture.

Who does the artist used as models?

When Seward Johnson is ready to enlarge a piece from the small gesture sketch into the life size version, he will seek out just the perfect face and body type for the story of the sculpture. When he was creating a gardener, he went and talked with gardeners and landscape companies. He wanted a weathered face with sun wrinkles, and the working hands of a gardener. He used a real police officer for his work "Time's Up," which depicts an officer writing a ticket.

Are the models given commemorative sketches or other memorabilia?

Mr. Johnson does not use sketches so there are not those types of items available. I do know that he has, in the past, signed books and given them to models, become friendly with them and gone out to supper. He is a very convivial friendly person by nature.

How does he get the unusual colors?

Seward Johnson has been developing unique chemistry for the colors of his sculptures for years. In an effort to better fool the eye, and allow the pieces to blend successfully into our colorful world, he began to add colors about ten years ago. In his first change, the skin on the pieces remained the tone of a traditional bronze

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patina, and the “non-organic” aspects such as clothing were painted with opaque colors using the same type of advanced technical pigments that are used on airplanes. They are quite resistant to climate conditions, and each sculpture is also coated with a thin film of acrylic and a final coating of wax for added protection. Seward Johnson has recently begun creating unique “realistic skin” on his sculptures making use of new pigments and many layers. You can see this effectively used in the Marilyn Monroe sculpture and others.

Why are a few of the sculptures flesh-tone painted while the others remain bronze? Is there a year or timeframe that the artist was painting the skin or just one here or there?

Seward Johnson began to add colors about ten years ago, and approximately five years ago he began experimenting with realistically painted skin and faces. He feels that some works really lend themselves to this look - for instance the woman with shopping bags Holding Out. She really comes alive with the realistic skin tones. Others are better without. Mr. Johnson makes a determination on a piece by piece basis as to how to do the finishing for the Man on the Street series. The Beyond the Frame series - inspired by Impressionist paintings - feature painterly faces and skin tones in homage to the oil on canvas works.

Haven't I seen these somewhere before?

If you are a frequent traveler, it is likely that you have seen Johnson's work in other places. New York City has several very publicly sited works, as does Washington DC, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Osaka, and even Istanbul. Cities will often arrange an exhibition of Johnson's bronzes to bring levity to a downtown area, and museums frequently host exhibits on their grounds and parklands. You may also have seen photos of the sculptures in Architectural Digest, The New Yorker Magazine, The New York Times, The Boston Globe, Life Magazine, and others. Johnson has also appeared on the Tonight Show with several of his pieces. Public Television, CBS, CNN and NPR have also created several interesting stories on the artist.

What's Seward Johnson like?

Seward Johnson is 88 this year, and has been married for over 40 years to his wife, a novelist. The Johnson's have two grown children and live in Princeton, New Jersey and on the island of Nantucket. Seward Johnson had the unusual experience of growing up as the heir to one of America's largest fortunes as the grandson of the founder of Johnson & Johnson. As someone who could have spent a life of leisure, Johnson is quite actively involved in both his art and an array of other interests. He is the President of a large oceanographic research institution in Florida, the publisher of a science magazine, and the founder of an off-Broadway theater in New York. Most recently, Johnson has created, designed and established a 35 acre sculpture park in Hamilton, New Jersey which showcases living artists from around the world.

Personally, Seward Johnson is a charming and philosophical man, with a tendency toward irreverent wit. He loves to anonymously loiter around his public sculptures and make negative remarks to fellow viewers of the art to see what the real response to his work is! He loves to get into the position of having the stranger unwittingly defend the sculpture to this “hostile” art critic.

Are these one of a kind, or does the artist make several castings?

Seward Johnson will make up to seven castings of a design, and only as ordered. Therefore, although there are now many sold out editions, some works will only be made once. When the full seven are purchased by collectors, the artist invites all seven owners to the foundry to celebrate the ceremonial destruction of the mold.

Is there a book on this artist?

There is a monograph on Seward Johnson’s work titled “A Life in Public Art” as well as numerous exhibition catalogues. If you have difficulty locating copies, you can call the curatorial office in Santa Monica, CA and order them. The phone number and address are noted below.

For additional information:

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