

Retired GM Designer Buchan Now Focuses on Bronze Statues

by Jim Stickford

For 38 years, Alex Buchan turned his love of art into a way to make a living as an industrial designer for GM.

Upon retirement, he put his hard-earned skills to use as a sculptor of bronze statues, specializing in the history of the auto industry.

"My father was a printer who worked two jobs most of his life," Buchan said. "As a printer, he worked a lot with artists and saw they didn't make a lot of money. So he told me that I was going to be an engineer. In those days, you did what your father told you to do."

Buchan attended Wayne State and spent the first two years as an engineering student. While he enjoyed the science classes, he decided to change majors when he wandered into an industrial design class. At first he didn't even tell his father, Alexander Buchan, of the change.

When he graduated, he had to start his military service. Buchan said his draft board gave him a choice of two years in the Army or he could join the Marine Corps Reserve, which entailed six months of active duty followed by another two-and-a-half years of reserve duty. He joined the Marines.

When he got out of the service, the Cuban Missile Crisis had just ended. He took his degree to GM and, without an appointment, got to meet Milo McNaughton, head of personnel.

"In those days, they took 12 weeks to do a security check," Buchan said. "I wasn't told anything during that time, but they kept my portfolio and I kept hearing from people that they were interested in me."

In the end, he was hired and started work in December 1962. He stayed with the company for 38 years, four months, retiring in 2001. He did a lot of clay modeling and during his tenure at the company he worked at the GM Tech Center in Warren and saw technology change. When he started, they made their own sculpting tools. When he finished, they were using computers.

"I was part of the last generation of industrial designers who

were hands-on," Buchan said. "We didn't have computers and did everything by hand. That's pretty much gone. I, along with other retired industrial designers, have been invited to see a demonstration on how things are being done now. It's scheduled for Dec. 12."

During the 1980s, Buchan was taking drawing classes at the College for Creative Studies (CCS). He saw a small bronze sculpture and asked his teacher, Todd Ericson, about doing something like it. Ericson gave him a paperback book on bronze sculpting, telling Buchan it contained all he needed to know about the art. That wasn't quite true. Buchan had to take a couple of classes on the art.

In the early 1990s, Buchan attended an art show at the Meadowbrook Concours d'Elegance featuring automotive-themed sculptures. This inspired him to show off his work, which until that time had been done as a hobby.

A friend, Bill Mahalic, was involved with the EyesOn Design show, and set aside space for Buchan's work. The bronze castings didn't come back in time and Buchan said he tried to get out of the show. Mahalic said that wasn't an option, so they displayed some of Buchan's wax sculptures. This was in the mid-1990s.

"I didn't sell anything," Buchan said. "But I generated a lot of interest in my work. It was after this that I was invited to show work at the Meadowbrook Concours d'Elegance."

"There were other artists showing their work. Some of them had

worldwide reputations. To be showing with them was humbling. I couldn't believe it. It was magical – and that was the beginning of my professional work."

Buchan has his own studio in Sterling Heights near his Warren home. He spends between 25 and 40 hours a week there, working on his sculptures.

His assistant, Yoshido is a retired mechanical engineer who was also looking for something to do upon his retirement from GM.

Buchan takes commissions from different clients. He is currently working on a piece for Bill Parfet. The sculpture will feature Parfet's five 1934 Auburn cars.

Buchan also attends auto shows across the country where his work is displayed and sold.

"One of the great things about being a part of the auto world is that auto enthusiasts are so accepting," Buchan said. "If you have a passion for cars, you will be accepted. It doesn't matter if you have five cars or 100. It's a unique social world that I'm proud to be a part of."

Buchan goes to the shows with his wife Faye. They have two daughters. One, Katherine Riley, is also an industrial designer. His other daughter Karey runs a business with her husband. He is the grandfather of five.

Thanks to his Web page www.alexjbuchan.com, Buchan is reaching a larger audience than ever.

"I have no plans to retire," Buchan said. "This keeps me young and in touch with the larger car world."



Alex Buchan talks about the bronze statues he sculpts, displays and sells at auto shows across the country. Buchan has his own studio in Sterling Heights.

UAW Local Hosts Santa

UAW Local 160, 28504 Lorna Avenue, Warren, is hosting a breakfast with Santa and Mrs. Claus on Sunday, Dec. 9. The event is being put on by the Local 160 Women's Committee.

Tickets are \$5 a person. Breakfast will be served in the conti-

mental style – donuts, bagels, cereal, muffins, fruits, coffee and juice – in three sessions. The first one runs from 10-11:30 a.m. The second is from noon to 1:30 p.m., and the third session is from 1:45 to 3 p.m.

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