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Bronzed

Sculptor Franco Vianello carves out an international reputation

By MARY WALLIS
Register Staff Writer

NAPA — For more than 30 years, Franco Vianello has been liberating the untamed spirits of cowboys, grizzly bears, cougars and fleshy horses of the old West.

Dressed casually in canvas shoes speckled with clay, his sleeves rolled up and a Band-aid around one finger, Vianello's working wardrobe hints at the rough methods behind the magic of his medium — mysterious, metallic bronze.

With a master's economy, Vianello captures the drama of the moment. It may be a snarling grizzly tethered by rodeo ropers, or a crouching cougar fending off advancing dogs.

In his 18-foot-high "heroic" proportioned "Tunaman Monument" in San Diego, it's the strain on the fishermen's backs as they lock into Hemingwayesque struggle with their catch.

Vianello imbues each of his works with a precise tension.

This Sunday will be a rare opportunity to see a sampling of this Napa artist's limited edition bronze sculptures in public at the St. Helena Hospital Foundation's fifth annual "Art and Heart" show and sale fundraiser at Vintage Hall in St. Helena.

Prices for Vianello's work at the benefit will range from about \$180 for smaller, desk-size figures up to \$8,000 for the cowboys, about one-third lifesize.

"The horse is the most difficult because everything shows on a horse," the sculptor explains.

He says he's fussy to move into more abstract pieces combining both the bronze and colored glass.

He wants his art to suggest rather than become the realistic, detailed commissions most buyers of his pieces insist upon. And because it's also a business, he complies, but not without the longing to do the abstract.

His newest human figures, in his back studio, have smooth, elongated limbs, almost haunting extraterrestrial-like creatures.

"If you don't do it realistically, they think you can't do it," he says.

Pointing to one of his patinated bronze stallions, he talks appreciatively of the animal's well-defined musculature and the ripple effect along the horse's rump from moving a hoof. Even its back muscles would contract, Vianello explains, still fascinated by the physical power of the horse.

He works, peerless it seems, in this "early California" period, surprisingly undiscovered by many museums and collectors of California history. His works remain mostly in private collections and commissioned by buyers in Europe, Canada, North

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DICK HILDEBRAND/REGISTER PHOTOS

An abstract cougar emerges from the hands of bronze sculptor Franco Vianello.

Art and Heart

From Register Staff

ST. HELENA — This Sunday's fifth annual "Art and Heart" art show and sale presented by St. Helena Hospital Foundation will feature hundreds of pieces from a variety of artists, including many from Napa Valley.

Mel Amaral, Connie Dillion, Dorothy Graham, Ruth Jones, J. Doreen Mann (last year's best of show winner), Shirley Roberts, Eloise Rota, photographer Rhoda Stewart, Franco Vianello and Donald Wheeler.

Chairman Dauna Currie said some 100 artists are signed up from the Bay Area and all of Northern California "as well as Anita Basham, who is bringing her painted furniture all the way from Lubbock, Texas."

Columnist Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle will attend as honorary chairman. San Francisco artist Joan von Briesen is painting his portrait, which will be auctioned off at the art show.

Juried works include watercolors, oil, pastel, acrylic, mixed media, photography, wearable art, sculpture and ceramics, with awards to be presented in each category.

It's a chance to meet the artists in person and to make purchases that will begin at about \$25 to several thousand dollars.

Proceeds from the event will go toward additional equipment for the new cardiovascular lab at St. Helena Hospital.

The show and sale will be held in St. Helena on the front lawn of Vintage Hall (inside if it rains), at 437 Main St. from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Admission is free, and "Heart at Risk" screening for cardiac risk factors will be available throughout the day.

For more information, call the St. Helena Hospital Foundation at 963-6208.



Vianello's realism creates paradoxical tension and beauty of motion, as with this reaching cougar.

Africa, South America and the Orient, as well as in this country, especially the mid-West and Texas.

For a Venice-born, classically-trained sculptor who is also a master in glass, marble, stone and wood, Vianello's Pony Express riders and native American rodeo ropers are a jolting contrast to his early apprenticeships with Italy's celebrated.

His roots in Renaissance Italy began in 1937 in Venice, where he was born to a family with a heritage of over a century of sculptors and founders. He began his traditional training in a foundry at the age of 9. By the time he was 11, his talent was recognized by famed sculptor

Napoleone Martinuzzi, who accepted young Vianello as an apprentice. By 13, he was studying at the Institute of Arts in Venice and continued on to become a *maestro*, Italy's honor conferred on a master of his art.

But Vianello's survival skills came from growing up in war-ravaged Europe, learning all he could about carpentry, blacksmithing, electrical wiring and plumbing. He even mopped floors at the school and still values vocational trades for young people trying to find entry jobs in today's market.

He and his wife, Jane, have been foster parents to more than 30 teens. Now in their mid-fifties, the Vianellos say they're ushering out the last bunch to have more

time for themselves.

"If I was (still) in Venice, I'd be making gondolas," says Franco Vianello, in earnest, referring to his adaption to California cowboys.

He immigrated to the United States in 1959 as a recognized sculptor, and was a U.S. Army paratrooper for two years after being drafted. He married Jane the night he got out of the military and then landed a job as a carpenter.

His "gallery" is his living room, looking out onto rural west Oak Knoll Avenue, near the Red Hen complex. The view overlooks their pond and the park-like setting with his bronze sculptures of animals, even Moses with his tablet. The

Vianellos built this two-story house themselves in the early '80s.

They enjoy going to craft fairs and talking with other artists in their studios, finding the gallery setting removes the artist from essential feedback.

Franco Vianello reminisces about Venice and the glass blowers who would talk about themselves and their work and life as people stopped to watch. "You'd buy a piece and get a story. That's the way it should be."

He willingly does the same for the patient visitor.

Among his larger works is his 18-foot-high four horsemen bronze statue in the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center in Oklahoma City. Another, the "Bucking Horse," is in Canada commemorating the legendary Calgary Stampede.

His mama bear and cubs fishing is on the Napa Valley College campus.

How does Vianello size up other sculptors? By how they "sketch," he says, the sculptor's term for the first rough rendering.

"How he puts his clay down. Once you start removing, you lose the whole feeling of the piece" by overworking it.

The artist must trust himself. Thousands of visitors driving up Highway 29 pass by Vianello's home and studio every year, unaware they're only a few hundred yards from this world-class master.

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