



following more than one muse

BY MAURICE STERN

Many visual artists have earned their living in other fields, sometimes in other areas of art. The French painter Henri Rousseau earned his living as a customs agent. The American avant-garde composer Charles Ives worked as an insurance agent in Connecticut, and was never to hear his orchestral compositions performed during his lifetime. The greatest operatic tenor of the 20th century, Enrico Caruso, was a fine caricaturist. His work was published weekly in a newspaper and is still available in book form.

How did these great names manage to keep the creative flame flickering while making a living in another field? Some people wait until retirement to express this talent, some are lucky enough to have a profession that is compatible time-wise and financially for the art form that is begging for expression. Such is the case with me, though I certainly could not profess to belong in such illustrious company.

I was an opera singer. This takes a lot of training, a lot of learning, ambition and determination. However, one cannot sing all day long, it is physically impossible. Enter drawing, painting, sculpting, if the Muse to express visual art is yanking at your coattails. I am of course describing my situation, but there are many routes the Muse will find to break free and bubble forth.

It all started one day in downtown Chicago when I passed an art supply store and was drawn inside. I exited with drawing materials, plasteline clay and modeling tools. What was I doing in Chicago? I was traveling with the New York City Opera Company on tour, a bus tour. What was a sculptor doing with the New York City Opera? I wasn't a sculptor yet. I was a tenor

soloist and had plenty of time on my hands during the long bus rides between cities and performances. After having completed reams of correspondence and read several books I felt a sort of creative tug in my psyche.

The art store was the answer: a light went on. When I got back to the bus for the next trek to I don't remember where, I started modeling palm-sized heads of my colleagues. Clay seemed to be for me. However, singing could not completely move over. It was my blossoming profession and support for my family. I had won several singing awards, in particular the Ford Foundation grant for Opera Singers which provided me with many operatic engagements throughout the United States.

I was born in New York City and attended the High School of Music and Art. It was my home after I graduated from Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. I soon became a member of the New York City Opera. Then came the fateful day in the Chicago art store, after which I was very involved with sculpture and after a couple of years, doing portraits of Dustin Hoffman and Robert Duvall, plus many others. I was supplementing my operatic engagements with sculpture commissions and was a very happy man to be pursuing both directions in art.

Then my voice started nudging me in the direction of Europe for the operatic repertoire and career experience I needed. I had the opportunity to study casting at an art academy in Flensburg, Germany. From then on I would cast my own work in plaster and do the patinas myself. Bronzes, of course were poured at a foundry. My portrait busts of local inhabitants were displayed in a show at the State Theater in Flensburg and an exhibit of my work was mounted at the M'hring Gallery in Wiesbaden which was the location of my next operatic engagement for three years.

As my operatic career progressed over the years I continued to produce portraits and exhibited. I spent a period of five years at the University of Washington Music School in Seattle as a Professor of Voice. The Cornish Gallery in Seattle presented a retrospective of my works in a one-man show. During this time I also re-established myself in the United States performing opera in Houston and Reno and singing with the Detroit Symphony. My voice had developed into a dramatic tenor and I returned to Europe once again to sing in Austria and Germany.

This part of my life was very physically engaging because of the difficult dramatic roles I was undertaking and the amount of new repertoire that was to be learned. These roles included the principal tenor roles in "Tannhauser," "Otello," "Pagliacci," "Turandot," "Aida" and "Carmen." There was nothing left over for my good but neglected friend sculpture. I shuttled between Continents for performances throughout the U.S and Italy,

France, Belgium, Germany and Iceland; also appearing in Canada, China and South America, Mexico and Puerto Rico. A dream was fulfilled when I became a member of the Metropolitan Opera Company.

In 1993 my voice and I came to an agreement and we released each other from bondage.

For a couple of years I felt adrift, as if I was missing an arm or a limb. Sculpting not only lessened the grief of my loss, but in retrospect, I realize that my sculpture had also profited from my life experience dealing with the wonderful music of great composers. Literally thousands of operas have been written, but few have survived the passage of time and the scrutiny of the public to become the standard repertoire which one can hear today. These operas stand apart as great works of art. The same standard applies to the great works of painting and sculpture that we all marvel at.

I had spent many years involved with music. Sounds like heaven, huh? But the reality of backstage life very often brings one back to earth with a thud—but to get into that I'd have to write another article, or maybe even a whole book.

But getting back to sculpture, in my portraits, I try to capture the character of the subject in the same way I tried to mold the characters I played on the operatic stage. I let the child in me come to life. I get to know the subject I am modeling through discussion, observation, perception and intuition. I sort of bathe in the subject's aura, so to speak. All this is, of course, while I am modeling the head, taking measurements, checking angles and distances, singing and having fun.

Unlike the normal sitting for a painting, I do not need the subject to pose in a fixed position. The model is sitting on a rotating chair and can just sit freely and converse with me as I work on different views by simply turning the chair.

During the first session I take many photos. The purpose is not to choose a pose, but to have every view of the model in the round. I take the first set of 12 photos completely around the model at eye level; then 12 photos from 45 degrees above;

and the last 12 from 45 degrees below. This gives me a quick reference to all positions. My sculpting stand has a platform that rotates and can be raised and lowered by a crank, enabling work from all angles.

Do I just start working with the photos and produce a portrait? Heavens, no! They by no means replace the sessions of actual sitting by the model. I work with the photos between sittings. How many sittings do I need? Well, the smart alec answer is, "Until the piece is finished!" But usually it's not more than five sessions.

Proper lighting is essential in creating and photographing sculpture. For the best photographic results of sculpture, I prefer the finished clay bust rather than the bronze or patinated plaster. When lit for photographing, the surfaces of clay are non-reflective (similar to human skin), show warmth and depth, and can produce the desired shadows. Photographing the polished bronze produces excessive glare, reduces depth and the portrait is distorted in the photograph. When it is necessary to photograph a bronze, I spray the bust with a dulling spray, but the results are not optimal as with photographing clay or bisque (fired clay).

One thing I forgot to mention—it has been my practice to search out people that appeal to me as subjects. Because I cast my own works, I sometimes offer the model a plaster copy of the portrait in exchange for posing. Naturally I keep a copy for myself. This arrangement generally works out well because the model is very interested in the work in progress and regards it as teamwork, and the work continues until it is finished to my satisfaction, with no time restrictions, and I sing upon request. I don't treat commissioned portraits any differently from the others except for one thing—I stop singing upon request!



Maurice Stern currently resides in New York City. His email address is mauricestern@yahoo.com Portraits may be viewed online at <http://mediagroup.com/vas/mstern/>



Bronze sculptures of Maury (opposite page), and Victor (lower left) and the hydrocal of Mimi (at right) were all created by Maurice Stern, shown at center in a principal tenor role in "Otello."