

GIB SINGLETON

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FEATURING Gib Singleton



“Last Call at the Palace” by Gib Singleton, 22” by 23” by 14”, bronze sculpture

Editor’s note: This article, entitled “A Love Affair with Bronze,” was written before the author’s death in 2014.

Man, I love this stuff. The first time I saw a picture of Donatello’s David, I knew I wanted to work with it. It has a depth and a luster that no other medium does, and it lasts damn near forever, so it can be appreciated for generations.

Bronze was so important it had a whole era of human history named after it, and a whole era of art history. You can make big, heavy things out of it — like statues and battle axes — or small, subtle things like rings and guitar strings. You can polish it like a mirror, which is what warriors did with their armor going into battle, or color it with patinas, or just let it oxidize naturally. Over the last five thousand years, it’s been made into tools, weapons, building materials, jewelry, musical instruments, ship fittings and, of course, art.

Basically, bronze is an alloy of copper and tin, and sometimes of other metals. It depends on what you want to do with it. A traditional art bronze is ‘85 3/5’ — 85 percent copper and 5 percent each tin, lead and zinc. But if you want a sword that will keep an edge, you mix copper, tin and antimony. When I wanted a little more highlight, I used to go down to second-hand stores and get old brass doorknobs and hinges, and throw them in the furnace, too.

The “lost-wax” casting method appeared maybe five thousand years ago, and it’s the process we

still use for my stuff today. Once you know how to use it, you can do really elaborate designs, because bronze expands a little bit just before it sets, so it fills in all the fine details. And you can also do large pieces, because lost wax lets you do hollow pours and segmented pours.

The first life-size bronzes we know of were made by the Greeks. In fact, bronze just about disappeared from art for a while. It’s a strategic metal, and if you didn’t have access to tin, which is pretty rare compared to copper and iron, you couldn’t make it. And then you had to melt down whatever you had and recast it. That’s why you don’t see a lot of bronze sculptures from Greece and Rome, unless they come from a shipwreck or something. They melted them down for swords or armor or whatever. Even during the Renaissance, a lot of bronze was melted down and made into cannons. Later, when English and Spanish sea captains were exploring the New World, they were ordered to bring back any bronze they found — along with the silver and gold.

One of the reasons that Donatello’s second David is so amazing — besides being an incredible piece of art — is that it was done in bronze and it wasn’t turned into a cannon. Even Michelangelo’s



bronze David was melted down.

Rodin is the guy who really brought back bronze sculpture and launched the Bronze Age of art — after they started making weapons out of steel, so you could actually get bronze. After that, most of the big-time artists — Picasso, Degas, Matisse — at least played with it, along with the guys we all know as sculptors, like Remington, Giacometti and Henry Moore.

As an artist, that’s a hell of a tradition to follow in and live up to. You’re making a piece of art that will hopefully still be here hundreds or even thousands of years on. And you’re trying to tell a truth in your work that will ring true to generations of viewers who haven’t even been born. You’re trying to create a piece of art that’s going to make sense to and touch people from different times and cultures, and maybe even different planets.

That’s a pretty serious responsibility, and a pretty amazing honor.

— GIB SINGLETON