

TRENDSETTERS

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TOM BOLLINGER

*Sculptor, businessman,
creative visionary*

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM
PHOTOS BY CARL SCHULTZ

Tom Bollinger had an unusual childhood growing up in the late 1950s. He and his four brothers were among a handful of Anglo children on Lakota and Oglala Sioux Native American reservations in North Dakota, where his parents were teachers.

Those early years defined Bollinger in ways he didn't realize at the time.



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“All of us involved in the creative process bring something of our own perspective,” explains Bollinger. “I have a unique perspective because of the close-knit tribal view of the world that sees humans as part of the earth, not separate from it.”

That balance between human and earth is part of everything Bollinger now creates.



Looking for a place to fit in

Bollinger never quite fit in growing up in North Dakota, but when his father was named superintendent of the Phoenix Indian School and moved the family to Phoenix, the teenage Bollinger realized he didn't fit into life in Central Phoenix, either.

The sophomore attended Central High School.

“It was a bit of a culture shock,” says Bollinger. “When you grew up like Tom Sawyer, orienting yourself to the sun, moon and stars like I did, living in an urban area was difficult.”

Bollinger, who now lives in Scottsdale, says it was a challenge just to learn a new culture. He gives an example of how Anglos speak to each other and show respect compared to Native Americans. “In Anglo culture, you are taught to look people in the eye,” he explains. “In Native culture, it is just the opposite. You show respect by looking away.”

Soon after graduating from high school, Bollinger headed back to North Dakota and his parents' alma mater, Dickinson State University. Little did he know that taking an art class his first year would dramatically change his life.

Discovering art

Bollinger informed his parents, after he completed his first art class, that he wanted to change his major from business to art. His parents “strongly encouraged” him to stick with a business degree. Bollinger finished college with a B.A. in business administration and a B.F.A. in sculpture. But, college had introduced him to a new world.

“As a child, I wasn't aware that there were museums and art galleries,” he explains. “Traveling to Minneapolis would have been like going to Paris or the moon or Mars,” he laughs. But all that changed in college. “We took field trips to Chicago and Minnesota, and it opened my eyes. I realized people actually made a living from art.”

Bollinger fell in love with sculpture and creating art with his hands.

“Sculpture used to be considered the highest form of art,” he says.

Today, he continues to hold that connection to his work close. “The artist's hands, manipulation of form, and materials, are still important [despite all the technological advances],” says Bollinger.

He has dedicated his life to not only creating art, but also to sharing his passion with others.

An artistic life

Bollinger's work has been included in shows around the world, such as flanking the entry to the International Concept Art Fair/Sea Fair in Miami Port, Fla. during the week of the prestigious Art Basel Miami, and at the El Paseo Invitational Sculpture Exhibition in Palm Desert, Calif. (which is known as the Rodeo Drive of the desert), and his pieces can be found at places such as the Tempe Center for the Arts here in Arizona. He had tried the gallery circuit for a bit, but selling large sculptures in galleries is not always an easy task. After running New Mexico's famed Shidoni Foundry, he took the

proceeds from a public art commission in Albuquerque and returned to Tempe, where he purchased Arizona Bronze Fine Arts Foundry in 1997. Renamed Bollinger Atelier, the Tempe foundry is now internationally recognized for its commitment to creating exceptional work for some of the art world's superstars, including Donald Baechler, Thomas Houseago, Tom Sachs, Ed Mell, Hector Ruiz, and Will Bruder.

“You have to have a vision that's bigger than your community,” explains Bollinger. “As an artist, you strive to put yourself into your work.”

Bollinger believes it is important to share that love of art, of the craftsmanship behind the vision, with today's art students. Bollinger Atelier has an internship program with senior-level B.F.A. sculpture students at Arizona State University. The students work at the foundry for a semester, get paid for their work, and get college credit for the hands-on experience. Six of those past interns now work full-time at the shop.

Bollinger believes his unique background has given his art a close connection to the earth.

“We are creative beings and it's our obligation to be creative—it's what we do. I think about my relationship with the universe, with the planet, and the responsibility that relationship entails. In my work, I have gravitated toward connections rather than differences. But what are those connections? This is the central question I explore.”

Bollinger Atelier is a family affair. His wife, Kim, a jeweler, works part-time at the foundry. His daughter, Chequamegon Bollinger-Orme, a marketing professional and fashion designer, works at the foundry. His son-in-law, Charles Orme, an artist himself, also works at the foundry.

“My passion is sculpture,” says Bollinger, who hopes to pass the daily work at the foundry on to his skilled staff in the future. “I want to focus more on my personal art.”

To learn more about Tom Bollinger and the work he has available for sale or to commission art, visit www.tombollinger-sculpture.com. For information on the foundry, visit www.bollingeratelier.com.