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Bronze wildlife sculptures are dream come true for Leslie man

By Hugh Leach
Lansing State Journal

LESLIE - A lack of available time and the need to make money to support his family sidelined Roger Smith's dream for many years.

That all changed six years ago.

"I enjoyed wildlife art when I was in high school and always dreamed of doing more of it," Smith said from the office of the Leslie hide-tanning business he owns.

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"While my wife Vicky and I were on vacation in 2000, she said I ought to try it. I came home and jumped right into it."

Since then Smith has created some 30 bronze sculptures of deer, bears, chipmunks, antelopes, dogs and other animals, ranging from life-sized down to miniature figures.

His work can be seen

in galleries and shows in Michigan and as far away as South Carolina and Colorado.

"His stuff is very nice," said Bernie Camp, owner of Wheaton's Framing & Art Gallery in Mason.

"If I had the expendable cash, I would definitely buy his life-sized deer sculpture."

The sculpture, "Up and Running," depicts a 10-point buck leaping from its forest bed.

"I've seen a lot of art, but I stared at that piece for literally an hour," Camp said.

Catherine Babcock, executive director of the Lansing Art Gallery, also is impressed by Smith's work.

"It's very realistic," she said. "His anatomy of animals is fabulous. I think that probably comes from his experience with taxidermy."

She said a life-sized clay model of a sculpture of a newborn fawn displayed at the Lansing Art Gallery drew plenty of attention.

"People who saw it were quite excited about it," she said.

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(Photo by KEVIN W. FOWLER/For the Lansing State Journal)
Life-sized art: Artist Roger Smith (left) discusses the life-size clay model of the bronze sculpture at right earlier this month at Smith's Christmas Wildlife Art Exhibition in Leslie. Since high school, Smith has dreamed of creating wildlife art.

On the Web

- www.rogerswildlifeart.com

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People who saw it were quite excited about it," she said.

When he started, Smith said he consulted some of the handful of other Michigan wildlife sculptors for advice.

"They told me to just jump in and start doing it," he said.

"So I learn by doing and by reading everything I can get my hands on."

His first works were his own ideas, but he now does commission work as well, as long as the subject interests him.

"I have been commissioned to do a black bear and a grizzly bear," Smith said. "I'd also like to do wolves and foxes."

Smith said a life-sized creation involves about 300 hours of work on his part, not counting the research he does to prepare for it.

That's in addition to spending days running his business.

"My problem isn't a shortage of things to do," he laughed. "My problem is a shortage of time to sleep."

He tries to do a mixture of sizes of sculptures each year.

"Something to fit everybody's budget," he said.

A life-sized piece may cost \$30,000 to \$50,000, a considerable part of which goes for the materials used to create it.

"But its durable art and requires minimal maintenance," Smith said. "If it's displayed in the right place, it will be around for hundreds of years."

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