

MEMORIES CAST IN BRONZE

A young Newfoundland sculptor is winning fame and hearts with his work



NEWFOUNDLAND BRONZE FOUNDRY

BY BILL COULTAS



NEWFOUNDLAND BRONZE FOUNDRY

Logy Bay, Newfoundland, sculptor Morgan MacDonald could only imagine the horror of it all. Flying shards of ice, -30° temperature, stuck on an ice pan in the North Atlantic, hundreds of miles from the nearest cut of land. The wicked winter wind whistling around the abandoned sealers as they fought for their lives. On the end of a falling and rising ice pan was a father and son. They had lost the fight. They were frozen together in an eternal embrace.

Decades later Morgan turned that haunting frozen sculpture into a bronze one that is a permanent part of the Elliston, NL, landscape. It was not an easy task. Physically, perhaps, no harder than others. Emotionally, a definite no.

FREEZING HISTORY

While planning his work, Morgan remembered Cassie Brown's famous book, *Death on the Ice*. It is required reading in the Newfoundland and Labrador education curriculum: an incredible account of that tragic event where 78 sealers froze to death on the ice fields following a horrific storm. Once discovered, the bodies had to be sawn, axed and pried from the ice pan. After the sealers' bodies were winched up onto the deck of the sealing ship *Bellaventure*, they were transported to St. John's where they were unloaded like cords of wood and placed in the basement of the King George V Institute. It took two days to thaw out all the bodies and place them in caskets.

On that front Morgan had plenty of images to work with and draw from. But he also well remembered the time when he saw Michaelangelo's *La Pieta* at the Vatican in Rome. The image of the Virgin Mary holding her crucified son is something that will always be imprinted in his memory. It was almost on the gripping same level as seeing the picture of the father and son

frozen together. That image moved him deeply, much like the *Pieta* did in Rome; and for him reality struck home when he first saw that photo. "This is not a work of fiction. This is real. This is how they perished. Frozen in an icy grip."

EMOTIONAL BURDEN

Many of Morgan MacDonald's bronze statues carry heavy emotional baggage. It's not always like that, of course, but his deeply caring personality put him in good stead when he was awarded the commission to fabricate a monument marking the shooting deaths of three RCMP officers in Moncton, New Brunswick. Widows, children, grieving parents, fellow officers formed a challenge that went beyond the physical act of casting a statue.

"You have to be professional at the same time as not be dehumanizing," he says. "The final work of art will ring hollow otherwise. As an artist, I can't say what's going to be in the sculpture. It's a process of getting to know the person or persons. You have to realize you're a complete stranger to these individuals. You're trying to build a bond, be more or less a conduit."

Morgan continues, "The big part of it was listening and taking a back seat as the families communicate to you their feelings and thoughts. The family is the core. This is what can't be forgotten. They were police officers but also fathers, sons and husbands."

His approach was tested when he connected with the family of Fabrice Gevaudan. Fabrice's wife Angela soon warmed up to Morgan and as a result, some fun family stories came to light. Constable Gervaudan had many skills, one of which was being a diver. "One of the poignant stories she told me was that Fabrice would collect rocks from his many dives and bring



NEWFOUNDLAND BRONZE FOUNDRY

Above: Morgan and Sheila working on a sculpture unveiled recently at NL's Government House grounds, celebrating the 100th anniversary of NONIA.

them back to his step-daughter Emma, to show she was always in his thoughts." When Morgan heard the story, he asked her if she still had the stones, and suggested that they could be part of the monument. As a result, they were incorporated at the base of the statue.

Nadine, the wife of Constable Doug Larche, was quite taken by Morgan's approach and said it was an unexpected privilege to be able to have so much input. As a result, ballet slippers grace the base of his statue. It's a gesture his daughters will forever remember.

Constable David Ross and his wife's footprints are at the base along with his boys' prints. You can also see a bear paw print. Why? Because to the family he was affectionately called "Papa Bear."

"To me being told these personal stories, I was given a sacred trust by all three of the families. It's a very privileged place to be and you have to treat it with the utmost respect."

Morgan was further honoured when totally unbeknownst to him beforehand, he was asked to hold the Talking Stick when he addressed the audience at the unveiling. Fabrice's wife Angela is Indigenous and she explained to him that the Talking Stick is a sacred item. Morgan understands that he is the keeper of the storied creation of the bronze statues—the finality of the journey.

REMEMBERING THE BEOTHUK

To date all the commissions Morgan has been involved in were very rewarding; but like most artists, he entertains tackling a project that comes from his own soul, his own imagination, his own initiative. That came to fruition last summer when he had an exhibition with his co-worker and assistant Sheila Tandy Coultas. Both had an enduring attraction to one of the

most tragic events in Newfoundland history, the extinction of the indigenous Beothuk Indigenous tribe.

The last chieftain of the Beothuk, Nonosbawsut, was murdered by a group of early European settlers in March of 1819. Morgan sculptured ten Beothuk figures while Sheila painted ten works of art onto large wraps of birch bark, using traditional materials such as red ochre.

Morgan began his side of the project by sculpting a statue of the Beothuk Chieftain.

"The imagination is a powerful tool. I'm trying to make it come alive. By highlighting the demise of this lost culture, we can note what we've really lost here." Nonosbawsut was murdered right before his wife Demasduit's eyes. Their infant son died several days later, and Demasduit died of tuberculosis less than a year later in January of 1820, after having spent time in settlers' homes.

In an equally tragic incident, Demasduit's niece, Shanawdithit, is reputed to have been the very last of the Beothuk tribe when she died in 1829.

In his research Morgan came across a description of Nonosbawsut. During a previous encounter with settlers, the Chieftain was struck in the face by an axe, leaving a terrible looking scar that stretched from his left cheek, across his two lips and onto his chin. This is only one of two physical descriptions of any Beothuk native. Morgan's sculpture of Nonosbawsut very much represents the violence, terror and ruthlessness the Beothuk faced as their tribe was exterminated. The sculptures and paintings touched a lot of hearts and souls.

CELEBRATIONS OF PAST AND PRESENT

Not all the statues that are produced at the Newfoundland Bronze Foundry have such a dark, dramatic theme. Morgan's work covers a wide range of subjects which celebrate music, historic events and personal accomplishments. His latest commission marks two notable Canadian icons. The statue shows a woman sitting on a park bench with suitcases at her side. The depicted woman is Ruth Goldbloom, who was one of the driving forces behind turning Pier 21 into a museum. Pier 21 is an important part of Canada's history, which honours and remembers the more than 1.5 million immigrants who passed through its doors. Herself the daughter of immigrants, Goldbloom was forever grateful for what Canada has offered and given to her family. Canada represented and reinforced her belief in tolerance and diversity. Her exuberant and dynamic personality will always be on display through Morgan's newly completed piece of bronze art.

Two of Morgan's latest commissions haven't come from winning any competitions. They kind of came out of the blue. That is not a surprise to the many Morgan MacDonald admirers. After several years of producing insightful, high-quality work, he is building on a momentum that is a testament to his skill and perseverance.

Expect to see more of his work pop up across the country as more and more people come to appreciate his talents. 