

2-2016

Insect Bronzes of George Foster

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Le Tirant, Stéphane and Ratcliffe, Brett C., "Insect Bronzes of George Foster" (2016). *Faculty Publications: Department of Entomology*. 662.

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Insect Bronzes of George Foster

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The artist's fabulous bronze insect sculptures, including magnificent scarabs, have been exhibited at the Montréal Insectarium, the Canadian Museum of Nature, the Museum of the University of Nebraska, and many art galleries. Others are in permanent exhibition at the Insectarium of Hong Kong and elsewhere in Asia. George Foster appeared in the episode "Living Art" of the *Insectia* TV series in 1999. Some sculptures are part of the personal collection of Stéphane Le Tirant, Brett C. Ratcliffe, and the late Henry F. Howden and Roger-Paul Dechambre. We want to acquaint the readers of *Scarabs* about this artist.

Insect Bronzes - by George Foster

For most of my working life I have been casting bronze for sculptors by molding from their originals, and I developed some special casting techniques. I was raised in Ontario and built my first small foundry/studio there. At the age of 30 I moved to rural Quebec (Eastern Townships) and built a much larger foundry. I tried my hand at making



Artist George Foster.



Trypoxylus dichotomus male, bronze, 8cm.



Xylotrupes gideon male, bronze, 7.5cm.



Xylotrupes gideon female, bronze, 4cm.



Xylotrupes gideon female, bronze, 4cm.

my own sculptures in addition to the casting I did for others, and that was mostly figurative work, some of which were sold through galleries.

Most foundries use the lost wax method (cire perdue), but one can also “burn out” organic materials such as insects and dead June bugs. Insects were my first candidates to make into bronze or even silver to make pendants and other jewelry. Some of these were shown at a gallery in Montreal along with my other work. It went over well, and the gallery owner decided to wear an aluminum water bug on a leather thong apparently for the rest of his life. One of the visitors said “it’s too bad you can’t make them much bigger” and that stimulated me into a research project to do just that. Remember this is before computer 3-D printing, and so I was confined to analog processes such as pantography along with many hours of sculpting details in wax models while peering through a stereo microscope focused on complete specimens.

I was impressed by the insect collection at The Canadian Museum of Nature, and I set about buying or borrowing similar exotic specimens to enlarge and cast into bronze. The Insectarium of Montreal at that time was still an unrealized dream of the notary and insect collector Georges Brossard.

Philosophical ideas and questions emerge concerning the bronze sculptures of insects given that they are a kind of “objets trouvés” or “found art” and not really my creations. However, they are framed as “fine art”, and they are the most difficult and time consuming bronzes to do. Since the 1980s the passion to do them and to keep seeking out new ones has consumed much of my life. I’m sure there would have been more socially relevant and certainly more lucrative pursuits for me, but there is my collection of big metal insects to see, crazy or not.

As a child, my favorite books were about wildlife and studying the wonderful drawings of vertebrate anatomy in old text books. My father bought me science stuff like a big chemistry set or tools to make things, and the world of physics opened up. I studied science at McMaster University but really wanted to be an engineer making machines and devices.

The local media have called me call me “The Bug Man”, but many people are called “bug men”, usually entomologists or insect collectors. A well known portrait photographer living near me captioned his print of me (among other portraits displayed) holding a bronze beetle and a welding torch, “George Foster, Mad Scientist”. This title grows less worrisome to me with time.



Dynastes granti male, bronze 6cm.



Catharsius molossus male, bronze 6cm.



Catharsius molossus male, bronze 6 cm.



George Foster and a cast of an ant tunnel.



George Foster exhibition at the Montreal Insectarium.

My parents were market gardeners and artists when they had time.

I also alternate my art with gardening. I do many experiments growing unusual, even tropical, food plants on my farm and in the large mostly solar powered greenhouse in cool Québec. What a dream it would be to have some leaf or stick insects hanging out in the greenhouse! Maybe one day.

My current project is to finish my last three bronzes and replace some that have been sold to have an intact collection. *Cyclommatus imperator* (Lucanidae) has very long mandibles for its body length while two “tigers”, *Amblycheila cylindriformis* and *Manticora latipennis* (Cicindelidae) (suggested by biologist and writer Robert Wrigley), finish what I need to do.

My bronze collection has been shown in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Sherbrooke, Vancouver, Colorado, Nebraska, Washington, and at a national meeting of the Entomological Society of America. The largest show was local for me in Coaticook, Quebec, and a film was made of it and the studio/foundry. The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) purchased and borrowed some of my larger pieces. My favorite may be one they borrowed but declined to purchase.

It was instead purchased by a political writer and friend. It was collected by a famous Canadian entomologist, Henry Howden. I told Henry and his wife I found the tiny specimen he lent me to be “visually symphonic”. The bronze of this (*Glyphoderus centralis* from Argentina) is 17 inches long.

So what am I and what have I done making this collection? If I could speak for these wonderful creatures, I would say “Hey look at me. I’m not just a functional bug. I’m nature’s work of art. Look at how I move. Rejoice at my fantastic colors and iridescences and go to the insect sculptors of the world to be in awe of my form.”

George Foster

Acknowledgments

We would like to thanks René Limoges for the photos of the bronze sculptures, Marie-Ève Gagnon for the photos of the George Foster exhibition at the Montréal Insectarium, and Ron Graham for the photos of George Foster.



George Foster exhibition at the Montreal Insectarium.



George Foster bronzes in the Team Scarab Lab in Nebraska: *Heliocopris dominus* male and female, bronze, male 15 cm and *Phanaeus lancifer* male, bronze, 9 cm.