

## Loet Vanderveen | An Animal Kingdom

By: Bonnie Gangelhoff | June 1, 1999

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Loet Vanderveen with Seated Cheetah.

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*By Bonnie Gangelhoff*

When sculptor Loet Vanderveen was growing up in the Netherlands, he was a frequent visitor to the Rotterdam Zoo. The staff allowed the eager youngster to enter the monkey cages to feed and pet the primates. At night, because Vanderveen's family lived close to the zoo, the boy could hear the lions roar from their cages.

The regular forays to the zoo might have continued had World War II not intervened and abruptly changed the tenor of everyday life for Vanderveen. Indeed, little could have prepared him for the fate that would befall his country and his beloved animals at the Rotterdam Zoo.

In 1941, on the eve of an impending German bombardment, Dutch soldiers shot and killed the zoo's predatory animals. Officials took the cautionary measure because they feared the lions and tigers would threaten citizens if they got loose. During the bombing Vanderveen and his family took shelter in a neighbor's cellar. When they finally emerged, the city was ablaze, and the zoo had been leveled into a pile of rubble. Many of the remaining animals perished.

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(left to right): Kenya Elephant, bronze, 10 x 7; Kneeling Elephant, bronze, 6 x 8; and Imperial Elephant, bronze, 26 x 14 1/2.

Vanderveen was 17, and he will never forget seeing one of the elephants, who had managed to survive the massacre, wandering aimlessly and surrealistically through the burning Rotterdam streets. "I have been apprehensive about fires ever since," Vanderveen says. "It bothered me that the animals were shot, but with the German occupation I began to see much more horrible things, human suffering."

Such scenes have stayed with him all these years and Vanderveen, now 77, can still paint a picture of the war's devastation as if 60 years ago were yesterday. In his Carmel, CA, condominium, he flips through a recently published book about the Rotterdam Zoo. It contains photographs of the facility prior to the bombing. He thumbs through the black-and-white images, clearly moved by the remnant of his boyhood that he holds in his hand.

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Nearby, a flock of his mini-ature bronze ostriches sit on a heavy wood coffee table. The sculptures evoke such movement in their design that an observer can easily imagine the ostriches darting across the table at a moment's notice. In another corner, a camel is seated peacefully on a pedestal near a window. Both pieces serve

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 Giraffe Family, bronze, 19 x 20., sculpture, southwest art.

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as reminders of Vanderveen's long and successful career as a sculptor known for creating sensitive, graceful creatures in bronze: monkeys, elephants, horses, cheetahs, giraffes, bulls, and bison.

The M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco has shown his work. So have the Oakland Museum of California and the Pasadena Art Museum. A long list of people in government and the entertainment industry collect pieces from the artist's menagerie, including former President Gerald Ford, Bill Cosby, and Elizabeth Taylor. Vanderveen has never met any of the celebrities who own his bronzes. A self-described private man, he visits his condominium in Carmel once a week. The rest of the time he lives with his two Dobermans, Raven and Dune, in a remote area of California's Big Sur region adjacent to the Santa Lucia National Forest. His home and studio are perched on a mountain 1,600 feet above the Pacific Ocean.

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 (left to right): Baboon and Baby, bronze, 9 x 10; Gorilla, bronze, 9 x 5; and Reclining Gorilla, bronze, 11 x 14., sculpture, southwest art.

(left to right): Baboon and Baby, bronze, 9 x 10; Gorilla, bronze, 9 x 5; and Reclining Gorilla, bronze, 11 x 14.

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Outside his studio Vanderveen is surrounded by wilderness where mountain lions, bobcats, foxes, and deer roam freely. Inside, sleek bronze animals in various stages of creation dot the room. Sprawling work counters line the walls of the sunny space.

Like many artists Vanderveen keeps a variety of art books at his fingertips for inspiration. Among the most important are ones about Rembrandt Bugati, a turn-of-the-century Italian sculptor. "He was able to capture the moods of animals perfectly," Vanderveen says. "I try to portray the essence of the animal in an elegant way by omitting details as much as possible, leaving just enough to convey a mood."

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 Stretching Camel, bronze, 12 x 17, and Camel Couple, bronze, 19 1/2 x 12, sculpture, southwest art.

Stretching Camel, bronze, 12 x 17, and Camel Couple, bronze, 19 1/2 x 12.

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For example, in many of the animals he sculpts, Vanderveen depicts few facial features. An upturned slice with his fingernail on a wax model suffices for the smile on a cat's face. Primates are the exception because they have such a variety of facial expressions compared to other animals, Vanderveen says. With monkeys he is likely to capture their more human expressions of happiness, excitement, or fear by fashioning more details: eyes, mouths, ears, and noses.

Vanderveen spends anywhere from two weeks to a month sketching and creating wax models. He then turns the models over to artisans at nearby foundries who complete the final bronze mold work and add the finishing touches including patinas and waxes to bring out the color and finish. The entire process from the pencil sketch to the finished piece of sculpture generally takes about 10 weeks.

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 Running Cheetahs, bronze, 27 1/2 x 63 1/4., sculpture, southwest art.

Running Cheetahs, bronze, 27 1/2 x 63 1/4.

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While Vanderveen's preference for animals as his subject matter seems natural given his childhood experience, his path to a career in sculpture was less certain. In 1942, a year after the bombing of Rotterdam and the devastation of the zoo, Vanderveen, 18, made plans to leave the Nazi-occupied city. From an acquaintance he learned of an escape route, which he jotted down on a matchbook cover. "I was just thoroughly tired of not being free. There were Nazis on the street, curfews, and brutality," he says.

The route led Vanderveen to France, the Dutch Island of Curacao in the Caribbean, and eventually Canada where he joined the Dutch army. He was then shipped back to Europe for training with the Royal Air Force, but vision problems forced him to study for a navigation assignment instead. Vanderveen never saw active duty. "By that time the war was over. Don't tell anyone," Vanderveen says jokingly.

During the decade following the war he lived in Zurich, London, and New York City. He first studied sketching in Zurich and eventually worked in the fashion industry designing sportswear. Not satisfied with his chosen profession, however, he began studying ceramics with Fong Chow, curator of the Far East department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. From Chow he learned about Chinese glazing techniques, and he began creating ceramic pottery.

Meanwhile Vanderveen discovered he detested crowded, urban life in New York City and longed to live by the ocean. In 1959 he moved to his present location in California after being struck by the isolated beauty of the Big Sur. He became a U.S. citizen the same year. "I didn't feel like becoming a citizen in New York, but when I moved to California I decided I was ready, and they accepted me," Vanderveen says.

In his new surroundings, his ceramic pottery work from his days in New York eventually evolved into the creation of bronze animals he is known for today. A world traveler, Vanderveen says he draws inspiration from studying art and cultures in faraway lands like New Guinea, Java, and Burma. He also has returned to Rotterdam several times and to the new zoo the city built after the war. "It doesn't have the charm of the old zoo," he laments.

As for future goals, Vanderveen says he still feels the need to improve his work, but he then adds with a robust, satisfied laugh, "I'm sorry, I just don't have any more ambitions beyond that."

Photos courtesy the artist and Coda Gallery, Palm Springs, CA, and Park City, UT; Coast Gallery, Pebble Beach and Big Sur, CA; Whitt-Krauss Objects of Fine Art, San Diego, CA; Fingerhut Galleries, Sausalito and Laguna Beach, CA, and Edina, MN; and Pavo Real Gallery, Chicago, IL, Boston, MA, and Boca Raton, FL.

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