
LESS IS MORE

STEFAN SAVIDES AIMS
FOR AVIAN ACCURACY IN
SIMPLE, ELEGANT DESIGNS

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

STEFAN SAVIDES remembers, as a very young boy, seeing his mother lift up his mattress and place dried leaves between the mattress and box spring, explaining that the weight of the bed would preserve them. “I want them to last a long time,” she told her son. Says Savides today, “I thought, *that’s pretty cool*. So the first little dead bird I found, up went the mattress and in went the sparrow—which, of course, my mother soon discovered,” Savides says with a smile. “It was my first piece of ‘taxidermy.’” Just a few years later, at age 12, he received his first actual taxidermy lesson from a retired preacher who spent a few hours showing young Stefan what he knew.

By 16, Savides was himself teaching taxidermy classes at night school in his hometown of Vacaville, CA. As soon as he graduated from high school, he moved to the Klamath Basin in southern Oregon, a resting spot on the flyway of millions of migrating birds and a destination for legions of waterfowl hunters. There he set up his first taxidermy shop in a picking plant, where hunters took their birds to be plucked and shipped home. Sleeping on a couch in the plant and eating free giblets (birds’ innards that otherwise would have been thrown out), he lived on almost nothing while making \$50 a



Top Notch, bronze, 9 x 12 x 7.



representation

Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY; **Broadmoor Galleries**, Colorado Springs, CO; **RS Hanna Gallery**, Fredericksburg, TX; **Dick Idol Signature Gallery**, Whitefish, MT; **Rimrock Gallery**, Prineville, OR; **Manitou Galleries**, Santa Fe, NM; www.stefansavides.com.

upcoming shows

Solo exhibition, **Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History**, Jamestown, NY, through December 30.

Favell Museum Art Show & Sale, Klamath Falls, OR, September 25-November 7.

The Brinton 101, Brinton Museum, Big Horn, WY, November 7-December 23.

Southeastern Wildlife Exposition, Charleston, SC, February 12-14, 2021.

Night of Artists, Briscoe Western Art Museum, San Antonio, TX, March 26-27, 2021.



▲ **Air Africa**, bronze, 38 x 31 x 13.

◀ **Summer Breeze**, bronze, 26 x 7 x 9.

day mounting waterfowl—good money for a young man in 1968. From there he continued refining his skills and moving up in the field, eventually attracting clients from around the country and serving as a judge for taxidermy competitions. At the same time, he was carving birds in wood, creating paintings of birds, and sculpting forms to be used as armatures by other taxidermists.

At some point Savides envisioned preserving his beloved subjects in an even more permanent form: bronze. Today his award-winning pieces draw on decades of experience and understand-

ing of avian anatomy and behavior, along with well-honed sculpting skills. In what he considers the highest honor of his career to this point, his work is currently featured in a solo exhibition, *Birds in Bronze*, at the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History in Jamestown, NY. None of this would be possible, the 70-year-old artist believes, without the influence and encouragement of his greatest teacher: his mother.

SAVIDES' MOTHER, a master of the ancient Japanese art of ikebana,

or flower arranging, had a strong contemporary aesthetic and an innate sense of design. The family home was graced with a never-ending parade of elegant arrangements she made with unusual elements from nature—kelp found on the beach, small pumpkins, stones, even a ripe persimmon—as well as fresh flowers. As a boy Savides absorbed his mother's understanding of composition and design, both by osmosis and in informal lessons. Beginning with his first taxidermy efforts, he incorporated dried grasses, driftwood, and other natural materials to create

settings for his subjects, rather than simply mounting a bird on a stump. He showed his mother his work, and she offered feedback: “No, get rid of that. Pull that out,” she would say of extraneous items, and then ask which version he thought looked better. “I learned: Less is more,” he says.

Savides’ parents both encouraged his passion for birds. When he was 4, he was mesmerized by the neighbors’ chickens down the alley. He delighted in tossing pebbles through the wire fence to watch them scuttle around, thinking it was feed. “Every time my parents couldn’t find me, they retrieved me from the neighbors’ chicken yard,” he says. A couple of years later his mother organized a small Junior Audubon Club for her son and his friends, showing and teaching them about backyard birds. Stefan had his own birds as well, winning baby ducklings in the dime toss at the county fair and raising little sparrows and blackbirds he found and pigeons his father bought for him.

Stefan and his family frequently visited relatives who lived in San Francisco.

As often as they could, he and his cousins would ride the streetcar (a 25-cent fare) to the California Academy of Sciences, with its natural history museum. During one of these visits he had the astounding realization that all the animals and birds in the dioramas had been preserved and put there. He stored away this information in preparation for the time, which soon came, when he could learn the art of mounting birds himself.

By the time he opened his own taxidermy shop, Savides had a strong knowledge base about numerous bird species and their behavior. In his sculpture he combines that awareness with compositional fluency to create engaging and true presentations. Yet while his work is exacting in anatomy and form, his aesthetic inclination remains inspired by his mother’s art. He favors simple, graceful lines and a selective rendering of details, often with textural surface qualities that add an element of abstraction. *SUMMER BREEZE*, for example, depicts a bobwhite quail atop a square-edged post counterbalanced by the delicate sweep of tall stems and

leaves. “I have to say I owe everything to my mother,” he says. “She was a soft, sensitive person who saw the beauty in nature and lived to present that.”

AS HE SPEAKS, Savides gazes out his studio windows into the bird-rich environment he has established on an 8½-acre property outside of Klamath Falls. After buying it some 30 years ago, he built a half-acre pond behind the house. Scores of waterfowl use the pond as a resting spot or full-time home, including so many white-fronted geese in early spring that they completely cover the water’s surface. Enormous white pelicans, great blue herons, mallards, teals, and other birds also come and go or stay, protected from land animals by an electrified fence surrounding the pond. Winged predators—horned owls and bald eagles—can still reach their prey, but even bullfrogs are not allowed in, since they eat baby ducks. “You build it, then you want to play god: You’re good! You’re not!” he says, laughing.

The pond and its inhabitants give



Tres Pescadores, bronze, 6 x 23 x 8.

Savides and his wife Irena enormous pleasure, as well as providing endless inspiration for his art. It is essential for the sculptor to see his subjects in their natural environment in order to gather as much information as possible on how they act and interact. In some cases, he may aspire to sculpt a certain species for years before garnering the firsthand experience needed to create an accurate portrayal. In the case of MAMBA SAMBA, for example, he could not have produced a 4-foot-tall bronze

of a secretary bird, whose wings span 5½ feet, without seeing the magnificent, long-legged creature during a sojourn in Africa. The secretary bird preys on extremely poisonous snakes by spreading its wings—like a bullfighter distracting a bull—and then striking the serpent's head with a closed avian 'fist.' In Savides' rendition, the snake adds structural stability to the large sculpture, as well as a gently curving shape. "It's one of the coolest pieces I've done," he says.

The artist's quest for excellence ex-

tends to the studio and foundry he built next to his home. With views out to the pond, it contains areas for his sculpting—primarily in clay, with details such as talons done in wax to retain their delicate shapes—and for mold-making and wax-casting before the cast is sent to a full foundry for bronze-pouring. Then the raw metal sculpture is shipped back to Savides, where the artist and his team, including Irena and her son Joseph, clean it, repair imperfections, and apply the





Globetrotter, bronze, 5 x 14 x 4.



▲ Double Shot of Wild Turkey, bronze, 36 x 44 x 43.

◀ Mamba Samba, bronze, 48 x 65 x 48.

patina. Savides oversees the processes and does the final patina steps on each piece himself. His work ranges from tabletop size to monumental, including private commissions and public art.

On an even larger scale, he considers his property “one big piece of art,” with attention to design details in landscaping and gardens, as well as in his home. He bought the land for its location, close to town but with a rural feel. It came with a rustic, patched-together house that originated as barracks in a World War II Japanese internment camp just across the California border. The structure had been moved to Oregon by a previous owner and wasn’t worth saving. Savides tore most of it down and, on its footprint, built a home full of light with niches for displaying his artwork.

While his mother’s arrangements inspired him to incorporate elements of a bird’s environment, Savides was also strongly influenced by the paintings of John James Audubon, who produced an enormous volume of North American bird portraits in the early 1800s. Audubon killed his subjects and then positioned and painted them in dynamic poses. For the most part these poses were imaginative and nontypical of the species’ actual behavior. Still, Savides was intrigued by the approach. Throughout his career he has infused his own creations with a feeling of vitality and suggestions of bird life in the wild. “Avian behavior is fascinating—males dancing around for hens, all the different attitudes, a lot of dynamic things going on,” he says. “I work hard to put all that in my art.” ❖

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

See more of Savides’ work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/savides-s-oct2020.