

Artist to Collect

Paul Brunelle





written by Ron Garant

Early in his life, Paul Brunelle realized he had a strong connection to the natural world. He was also captivated by art and began drawing and painting at an early age. As a child, he often visited his grandparents who lived on the southern edge of Algonquin Park, Ontario, a peaceful location he found perfect for working on his latest painting or hiking in the woods.

Born in Campbellford, Ont. in 1954, Paul explored western Canada as a teen, living in Alberta and Northern Ontario before settling in southern Ontario. During this time – the early '80s – he was busy selling his paintings, when he met the potter James (Jimmy) Clennell, who introduced Brunelle to the medium of fired clay. Working in Clennell's pottery studio, Paul began learning to handle the new medium and eventually opened his own studio there. It was then that his love of nature and art came together in the sculptures of birds in clay. With the success of this medium, he soon moved on to open his own home studio where he continues to develop his art.

First showing his artwork at the 1988 Buckhorn Fine Art Festival, Paul has continued



Red-tailed Hawk, details, fired clay

to participate annually at Buckhorn – this past summer he was included in a special exhibit called *Sculpted Dimensions* with an international group of sculptors. It was at Buckhorn that he met the American painters Al Agnew and Jan Martin McGuire, who encouraged him to bring his art to other shows in the U.S., including the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was named *Featured Sculptor* in 1996; the *Wild Wings Fall Festival* in Lake City, Minnesota, where he won the *People's Choice Award*, and the *Waterfowl Festival* in Easton, Maryland. For over twenty years, Brunelle devoted his work to these shows, and now he has a new challenge – working closer to home and bringing his art to more people in Ontario. To that end, he is participating in the *Algonquin Park Art Gallery* show again this year. His work has also been featured in *Wildlife Art* and *InformArt* magazines.

When he started sculpting in clay, Paul narrowed his focus to the study of birds. Partly because of a natural attraction to them when spending time outdoors and partly because he thought he would learn more and advance his sculpture by not studying too many different subjects. This has worked for him and he continues to learn with each new sculpture. The



above & left, Red-tailed Hawk, details, fired clay



Saw-whet Owls, fired clay





above, Screech Owl, fired clay

anatomy of birds, their feathers and how they are placed in tracks on the skin, and how these groups of feathers interact with other groups as the bird moves, creates a fantastic landscape on the surface of the bird that he continually tries to understand. It also explains why he has concentrated on a very small number of species with which he has come into personal contact.

Brunelle's creative process generally begins with him sketching in pen very small, loose and free drawings of the bird, sometimes filling several pages. In doing so, when he notices something he likes, he can refine and build on the idea. He follows the sketches with a small version in clay, only a few inches high, so he can solve the

three-dimensionality of the work. Water based clay has been valued by sculptors for its direct responsiveness in quickly capturing expression and movement and the ways it can be modeled. It can be brushed like impasto paint or carved, depending on the control of its moisture content.

Lastly, with a solid brick of clay, Paul begins modeling the bird, usually life-size; refining the shapes until the surface detail and texture is reached. At that point, the design continues to evolve as he stands back to observe the piece, considering the formal elements of sculpture. The movement and character of the bird is woven into the process as well. Sometimes a sculpture might begin with a theme that he expresses to himself

right, Great Horned Owl, fired clay





left, Red-tailed Hawk and Bobwhite Quail, fired clay

above, Kestrel Female, fired clay

in words like stability and strength, or action and power, or tranquility, or rhythm and flow.

Next, the sculpture is hollowed out, dried carefully and fired, after which the painting stage begins. "Painting the sculptures feels like an extension of my study of oil painting," Paul says. "For me, art is all about learning, you learn and create and then you do it again. There is no end and along the way, hopefully, you leave a trail of something beautiful added to the world. I am inspired by other arts, like great painting, drawing, architecture and music. For example, an understanding of methods used to create an inspiring painting may not relate directly to my sculpture, but its actual high quality of achievement is my motivation. I see this beauty in nature as well, and something as simple as a fallen branch in the woods may seem as complex and beautiful as any great work of art.

"I am currently also working in oils, which is where I started at the age of twelve. I am painting en plein air as much as I can. I love the process of working outdoors, trying to capture the fast moving light and essence of the scene before me.

I usually get all I can in a totally engrossing hour to hour and a half. Sometimes this little sketch can be the basis for a larger picture in the studio."

Brunelle has worked in his home studio for over two decades, keeping regular hours and often working into the evening and on weekends. "An artist doesn't wait for inspiration," he says, "he gets to work. I live in the country so I can go out my back door and go into the woods and along a creek. There are fields and a pond as well, and being able to walk there has been something that I would hate to be without. I don't have to go very far to set up and start painting or observe birds."

For the aspiring fired-clay artist, Paul doesn't feel it takes a great investment in tools to get started. "Some simple wire and wooden sculpture tools are required but mostly your hands will get you going. There are many resources now available -from books and workshops, to the internet." To that end, he offers workshops in his studio to help people get started, and has led classes introducing bird sculpture in clay at community art centres as well.



above & right, Kestrel Fledglings, fired clay

Brunelle likes to contemplate ideas that have been quoted from other sources, such as this one attributed to [Auguste] Rodin: "Conceive form in depth. Clearly indicate the dominant planes. Imagine forms as directed towards you; all life surges from a centre, expands from within outwards. In drawing, observe relief not outline. The relief determines the contour. The main thing is to be moved, to love, to hope, to tremble, to live. Be a man before being an artist!"

Paul's influences include some great Canadian artists such as Glenn Loates, Fenwick Landsdowne, George McLean, Robert Bateman and Michael Dumas. He also enjoys the art of Raymond Harris Ching and Lars Jonsson. Japanese art plays a role in his artistic outlook as well, noting the strong presence of nature in historical Japanese renderings of birds, flowers, snow and the moon, and other recurring subjects that hold important symbolic meaning.

As Paul points out, "In our modern lifestyle we are now being confronted with many challenges as a result of our disregard for the well being of the natural world around us, and lack of understanding of our interdependence with it. It seems like a good idea to work toward being one with nature by creating works of beauty."

Brunelle is currently working on sculptures of a Bobwhite Quail, American Kestrel, White-Breasted Nuthatch and Black Capped Chickadee. He enjoys the challenge of commissions and feels "it's really an honour when people believe in your art enough to work with you in planning something that will really enhance their own space. I look at it as an exciting part of the creative process and have started some great relationships. I consider it a thrill to have someone share their imagination in collaboration with me."

For more information on Paul's outstanding works of art, please visit www.paulbrunelle.com.

