

**THE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION
OF THE MAGNIFICENT WORKS
OF THE GREATEST NATIVE AMERICAN SCULPTOR
SPENT THE SUMMER AT
THE FRED JONES JR. MEMORIAL MUSEUM OF ART**

Allan Houser:

**A LIFE
IN ART**

by **KATHRYN JENSON WHITE**

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Allan Houser has set for himself a powerful challenge: to maintain his ties to the Native American traditions that define him while moving beyond those traditions to the universal emotions and concepts that define the greatest art.

The aesthetic stretch required to meet that challenge was apparent in the great diversity of the work included in "Allan Houser: A Life in Art," the retrospective exhibition that spent the summer at the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The pieces that quietly but powerfully filled the museum inside and the five monumental pieces that imposed themselves on the landscape outside ranged from very realistic depictions of human and animal figures to abstractions in which all realistic details had been stripped away and only essence remained.

"I'm for experimentation," Houser said one morning in June at the museum as he sat among the powerful, evocative pieces in the exhibition he had come to open the night before. "That's the story of my life. I know I have a deep feeling for who I am. Tradition and living my dad's life through him and my mother led to that. I don't want to lose that, so I do things with, for example, mother and child figures.

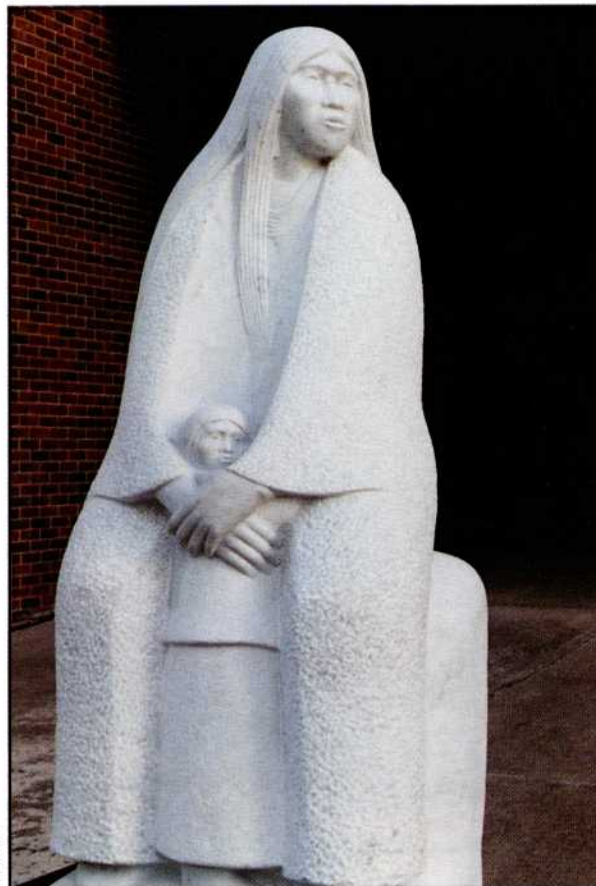
"Then I do something strong and wild like the mustangs. In the beginning in sculpture, I wasn't thinking about design. I was just trying to do something realistic. Then I needed to do something else, play with design and free form."

Houser certainly has not lost interest in realism, but his artistic vision now often manifests itself in more abstract, elemental pieces.

One of his current favorites, one of three pieces created especially for the OU exhibition, is a piece large enough for viewers to step inside to experience



Gil Jain



Gil Jain

ABOVE:
Allan Houser, center, welcomes Flora Weyerackwe, left, from the Apache tribal headquarters, and Ft. Sill Apache Princess Rhonda McCoy, to the opening of his show.

AT LEFT:
"Remembering"
1989
Carrara Marble

OPPOSITE PAGE:
"Thinking of Him"
1980
Alabaster

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ABOVE:
"A Safe Return"
1991
Carrara Marble

AT RIGHT:
"They're Coming"
1982
bronze

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spatially as well as visually. The silvery slopes of this flowing piece suggest bleached hides billowing out with the wind or, as Houser sees it, traditional Indian shelter.

"The tepee was going to be bigger than that, but transporting it was a problem," he explains. "It is not really a tepee, but it's tepee-like. I think it's spectacular. That's one of the designs I'm proudest of. I was playing with a sculptural form, and I wanted something people could walk into. I painted it blue-black on the inside for a nice contrast with the silver-grey of the outside.

"I had intended having little symbols, like pictographs inside. I wouldn't overdo; I don't like to overdo anything."

Not overdoing can be seen as a guiding principle in Houser's work. His most powerful pieces may well be those he has reduced to the bare minimum.

"Seeking Harmony," a small, abstract bronze from 1990, originally was planned to be 15 to 20 feet high, Houser says. He wanted to place it at the World Trade Center in New York City and make it, like the tepee, large enough to allow viewers to enter.

Although the curved, arching form represents nothing specifically, it carries within it Houser's spiritual heritage. He has said that he created it to draw attention to centuries-old Indian values, especially those that involve living in harmony with nature. In the realization of his vision, however, he met obstacles.

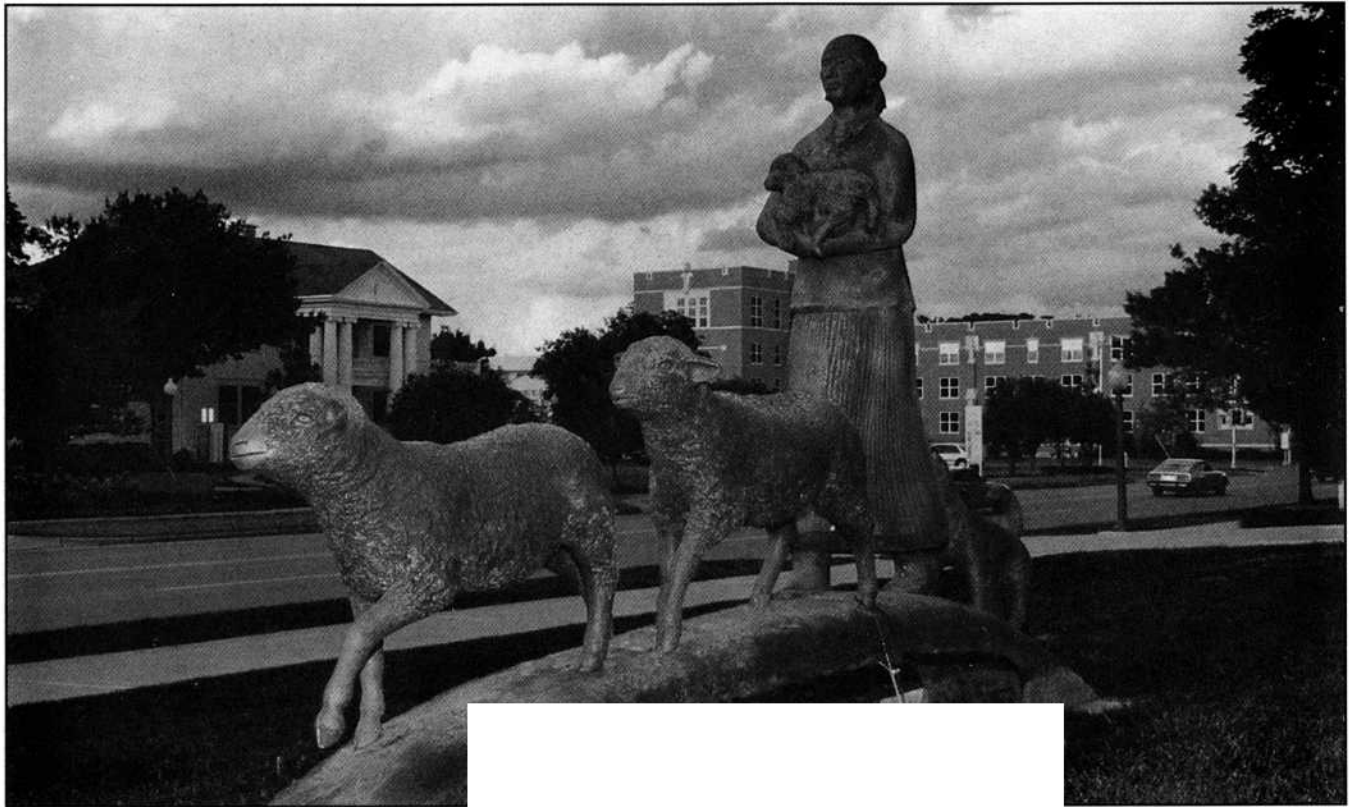
"I wanted people to be inside it and see the sky in the openings," he says. "You have big ideas; then you find out the cost of casting, and they get toned down a bit.

"I've always had big vision, but only in the last few years have I been able to afford bigger casting. That's a big problem today with young artists. There's too much expense in doing the large things.

"My piece at the Oklahoma State Capitol would cost \$65,000 to have cast today." Houser's sculptured tribute to the Native American, "As Long as the Waters Flow," was installed on the South Plaza of the Capitol in 1989.

In part because of Houser's big vision and in part because of his dedication to sound design principles, his work is receiving increasing critical acclaim.

That acclaim reached a new peak



Among the most popular works in the Houser retrospective was "Homeward Bound," which had a high visibility location in front of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art on West Boyd Street.

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when President Bush named Houser a recipient of the National Medal of Arts in July. This prestigious award has been given annually since 1985 when President Reagan authorized Congress and the National Endowment for the Arts to create an official medal to recognize both artistic excellence and support of the arts.

Tom Toperzer, director of the OU museum, says of Houser, "He's No. 1 in American Indian sculptors, maybe No. 1 in American Indian artists, period. He is literally a link with tradition, with the past. He's 78 years old and has studied at the Santa Fe Indian School. He was there with a group of Native American artists that included Harrison Begay, Pops Chalee and Gerald Nailor. He has never stopped working, progressing, improving.

"He is a true lifelong artist. He has evolved from the very tight, traditional format that was almost required of those at the Santa Fe School. He constantly is breaking boundaries, moving

A deep feeling for tradition, learned through the lives of his parents, finds expression in Houser's mother and child figures, such as the 1991 bronze, "Pueblo Legacy."

from very flat painting to three-dimensional, moving from traditional detailed pieces to abstracts in which he simplifies and removes details to the point that some of his pieces are just suggestions."

Houser's beginnings as an artist are found in the Native American traditions of story telling and singing, according to the artist. He remembers vividly the visual images evoked by the graphic, often painful words and stirring melodies of his mother and father's historical tales and songs.

Houser was born in Apache, Oklahoma, in 1914 into the Chiricahua Apache tribe. His family had been interned with Geronimo at Fort Sill until 1912, and Houser is said to have been the first Apache child born into freedom.

He recalls that his father, Sam Haozous, reviewed the drawings his son had made from the old stories to ensure that they were correct in the smallest detail. If an individual had been wrapped in cloth in his father's story, and his son depicted the figure in leather, Houser redid the



Gil Jain

ABOVE: "May We Have Peace," completed by Houser just before the exhibition, was displayed at the Parrington Oval entrance. BELOW: Museum director Tom Toperzer, left, Mrs. Fred Jones and Donald Walp study "Sunrise Song."



Gil Jain

picture to his father's specifications.

"When I was beginning, the stories were an important thing," he says. "They were the basis of it all. I had all those beautiful words that I used to sit and listen to from my dad. He had been through the war. He was Geronimo's interpreter at Fort Sill. I was fascinated by the stories.

"Some of the stories were not so beautiful; they were bloody and terrible. I would look at him and admire all those things he went through. People used to come from Arizona and New Mexico just to sit beneath the trees in the summertime and listen to him sing old songs from the 1880s. I remember people crying.

"This is what made me think about trying to do something to record the stories. He told them in such realistic ways."

In 1934, when he was 20, Houser traveled to Santa Fe to study under Dorothy Dunn at the Painting Studio of the Santa Fe Indian School.

"When I left, I was starving," he says. "You could sell art for \$30 or maybe \$50 a piece, but I was thinking

beyond that. I was thinking of really being in the arts; I was thinking big. I've always said that if I had stayed in Oklahoma, I would have starved to death. In Santa Fe, there was an art market."

Houser returned to Oklahoma in 1940 to study with muralist Olle Nordmark in a program for outstanding students and teachers at the Fort Sill Indian School in Anadarko.

"Nordmark was a Swede out of New York who was teaching through the Department of the Interior. The department thought it would be wise to get someone who was really skilled technically to teach some of the Indian boys like Steve Mopope and Woody Crumbo and Archie Blackowl.

"We were all mature and fairly successful. I had done murals in Washington. Nordmark taught us fresco and secco, painting on wet and dry plaster. Building the walls for the murals began my interest in three-dimensional work.

"Nordmark said, 'You should be a sculptor. I'm going to get you some wood carving tools.' He bought me a little set, and he said, 'Find some sugar pine or gumwood, some of the softer woods and just experiment.'

"That was the beginning, that stimulation to think more about three-dimensional forms."

Although Houser has said that without doubt his parents—repositories of cultural information—were instrumental in making him the artist he is, he also points repeatedly to internationally renowned sculptors Henry Moore, Constantin Brancusi and Dame Barbara Hepworth as major influences on his art.

One of his career high points was having a small version of the large tepee-like piece accepted into the Henry Moore show in Japan. One of his major regrets is that he never met Moore, the Englishman who died in 1986.

With steady dedication spanning almost 60 years, Houser has progressed in reputation to numerous awards and honors and to having his work on public display around the world and in many private collections.

He has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for painting and sculpture and the New Mexico Governor's Award of Visual Arts. In 1985, he was inducted into the Okla-

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Tom Toperzer, left, visited sculptor Allan Houser at his Santa Fe studio for one of many preliminary discussions that led to a retrospective exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. The work in progress in the photograph, later titled "Ready to Dance," was part of the show.

homa Hall of Fame, and in 1989 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Indian Resources Institute in Washington, D.C. His "Offering of the Sacred Pipe," a bronze of an Indian extending a peace pipe, is outside the United States Mission at the United Nations in New York.

His work has been in exhibitions ranging from the New York World's Fair of 1936 to the Salon d'Automne, Grand Palais, in Paris in 1981. It is to be found in the permanent collections of more than 20 museums around the United States and France and has been in touring exhibitions in South America, Germany and Eastern Europe.

At present he is interested in the Smithsonian's plans to build a Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. He already has discussed with museum planners several of his pieces to be placed there.

The OU exhibition, the largest of Houser's works ever mounted, came to Norman from Los Angeles on its way to the Scottsdale Center for the Arts in Arizona and the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana. The

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art showing originally was scheduled for summer 1993, but when Gov. David Walters named 1992 "The Year of the Indian," Toperzer arranged to move the dates up a year.

Sponsoring the event in Oklahoma were the University of Oklahoma President's Partners and the University of Oklahoma Foundation, with as-

His "Offering of the Sacred Pipe" is outside the United States Mission at the United Nations.

sistance from the OU Office of Administrative Affairs and the State Arts Council of Oklahoma.

Preparing the Houser show was a monumental task in itself.

"It was quite difficult to install,"

Toperzer says. "Everything came in a crate, and these aren't crates you just take the lids off and lift something from; these you must break down. Only a couple of the pieces could be picked up and moved by a couple of individuals. So we used forklifts.

"Typically we plan the layout of the exhibition with a scale model, then lean the actual pieces against the walls and change our minds to find places where they work better. We couldn't really do that this time. We moved a couple of pieces more than once, but most of them we had to place and stick with.

"In fine tuning an exhibition, especially with sculpture and so much open space, you might want the piece just six inches to the right so it doesn't overlap this other piece or block out this one. Well, these you just don't take your foot and nudge over six inches. It takes three guys and a forklift."

About 15 people were involved for almost a full week installing the exhibition as three semi-trailer loads rolled into Norman filled with Houser's work.

According to Toperzer, attendance at the museum shot way up for this

exhibition. While parking availability during the summer was helpful, the main reason was simply that the exhibition was very good. The opening night crowd of well over 700 broke the 600 record set when the museum reopened after remodeling in 1986 with a Eugene Bavinger exhibition. Weekday attendance doubled and weekend tripled.

Although he sketches constantly and still draws and paints on occasion, Houser devotes most of what he perceives as his ever-more precious time to

been experimenting a lot recently, and I'm always learning new things. I'm trying to use my approach to stone, the massive feeling I like, to see stone adapted to abstract and nonobjective work as well as to representational things."

In his Santa Fe studio, Houser has two sculptors working with him. One, whom he calls his "rough-out man," is now responsible for removing the large chunks of excess stone to allow the rough shape of Houser's planned piece to emerge.

bothered and just spent my time doing what I like to do, but when you get to a certain place, it goes along with the profession."

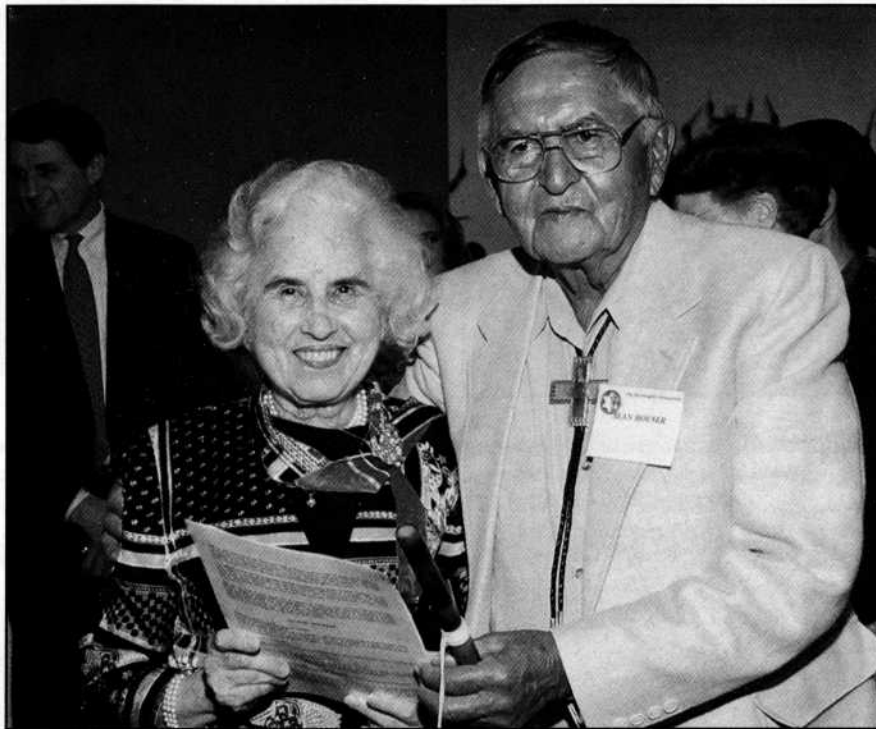
And although he frets over time spent away from the creation of his work, he finds rewards in the reception that work receives.

"At an exhibition, a lady came to me after seeing 'Earth Mother,' and said, 'You done this to me.' She had tears streaming down her face. Then her husband came down the stairs, and he began to cry, and she put her arms around me and said, 'Do you mind if I kiss you?'" The tone in which Houser tells this tale of touching another human through his art makes clear that he cherishes the experience.

In the harmony between his deep roots in Native American culture and his reach to universal art, Houser makes beauty that touches all who view it. He is a thoughtful man, one who has pondered the tension between the realistic and the abstract, between traditional Native American art and the wider world of creative endeavor.

In response to the federal legislation mandating that only those Native Americans who are officially on a tribal roll or who receive special dispensation from a tribal government may call what they do "Indian art," he says: "I don't see anything wrong with moving into mainstream culture. I tell the young artists who were so discouraged when they found out they didn't have a card to prove they were Indians, who couldn't exhibit in certain places, I tell them, 'Don't depend on those places. We're beyond that now.' A few years ago, that was probably their only chance.

"We've all got to go on. These young kids are becoming educated to compete with the rest of the world. They can have Indianness in subject matter if they want, but they must compete with everyone else."



Gill Jain

No one seemed to enjoy the gala opening of Allan Houser's Oklahoma exhibition more than the native son himself, shown here with Allece Garrard, one of more than 700 enthusiastic museum-goers who set a Museum of Art record for an opening night crowd.

three-dimensional art. In an impressive book on Houser distributed by the Smithsonian Institution Press, author Barbara H. Perlman quotes the artist as he speaks on the varied satisfactions of sculptural media.

"There's a thrill in direct stone carving that you don't get in plaster or other things," he said. "Of course, bronzes are also essential to my work. I try to choose subjects that are related to the qualities of the material. The permanency of bronze, its ability to weather outdoors, is very appealing. The excitement of stone comes immediately, while I'm working with it. I've

Early in his career, Houser liked nothing better than to strip down to the waist and attack a fresh piece of stone. Now, with several pieces going at once and a sense of urgency about all the pieces he has still in him to realize, the sculptor concentrates his time on the detail work.

He also must deal with the demands of fame.

"It's hard," he admits. "I realize that in the position I am in and being pretty well known, there are a lot of demands on my time with lectures here and there. But it goes with what you are. I would have rather not been

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art wishes to thank the Norman Committee for Conventions and Tourism for promotional funding, OU physical plant personnel for assistance in installing the sculptures and OUPD for providing security for the exterior exhibits.