



# Standing Watch at the Museum

BY ANNE BARAJAS



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**W**hen Kim Walker Ray began creating a sculpture to greet visitors to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, she had no idea that she would be returning bison to the same spot where they had lived more than a century before.

Ray is the first graduate student in OU's four-year-old Figurative Sculpture Program, which placed her and program director Paul Moore in the unique position to offer their assistance to the SNOMNH.

Moore, who also is artist-in-residence at OU, had been asked to develop a bison sculpture for the west entrance of the Oklahoma State Capitol. He chose to use the project as a commission for his sculpture students. The bison bull and calf sculpture was in the development stage when Moore heard that the SNOMNH was interested in featuring a sculpture at its entrance.

After consulting with Museum Director Michael Mares, Moore and Ray decided to focus solely on the bull figure, which tied nicely to the museum's interactive exhibit on bison hunting. The exhibit's centerpiece, a prehistoric bison skull, features a painted lightning bolt that is believed to be the earliest known artwork in the nation.

Ray relied on books, photos, and life studies she conducted at a nearby bison ranch that had been a natural bison habitat until the 1800s. She even studied bison skeletons. "To produce a piece that looks natural, you have to understand how the animal is made from the inside out," Ray explains. She also enlisted the assistance of graduate student Sohail Shehada.

Ray and Moore both are pleased that the results look so natural. The monumental 2,000-pound sculpture is slightly larger than the real thing. The sculpture is eight feet in height "from hoof to hump" and 11 feet long—one and a quarter the size of an average, 6-foot tall bison.

The sculpture's setting was designed to appear as though the bison is standing on a natural outcropping of rock. And the bronze was given a patina of "buffalo colors" that range in lightness and darkness.

Ray's research also revealed a coincidence that made the sculpture project seem almost predestined. While visiting the bison ranch, Ray was amazed to learn the animals had reactivated the same "wallow," or dirt bath, areas that earlier herds had used in pre-Territory times. When she returned to the SNOMNH site, Ray discovered that bison had once lived there as well. In fact, century-old bison wallows are still visible on the museum's yard.

"The bison is an exciting part of Oklahoma's natural history," Ray says. "It's not only a symbol of Oklahoma's past, but also its future."