

# A Wrinkle In Time

The back road to Lou Moore Hale's studio south of Stillwater cuts through a chunk of Oklahoma farmland spread thick with wheat and sprinkled with redbuds, dogwood and the occasional honeysuckle. On a spring day, the profusion of life and energy bursting from the earth serves as a fitting metaphor for the sculptor's work—finding life buried in the clay and coaxing it to the surface.

Although Hale has a master's degree in public administration from the University of Oklahoma, she is a sculptor by trade and by choice, known for her realistic portraits of everyday people and celebrities alike. Through her work, Hale has captured famous figures from Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, to "Granny D." Haddock, who in her 90<sup>th</sup> year walked 3,200 miles across the country in support of campaign reform.





Lynette Lobban

Lou Hale works on a bust of her historian husband, Doug, at her studio south of Stillwater. In addition to being her favorite model, Doug loaned his considerable writing and interviewing talents to the biographic portion of her Oklahoma Centennial art project.

## An OU alumna captures Oklahoma elders in clay and provides clues to the mystery of remaining young at heart.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

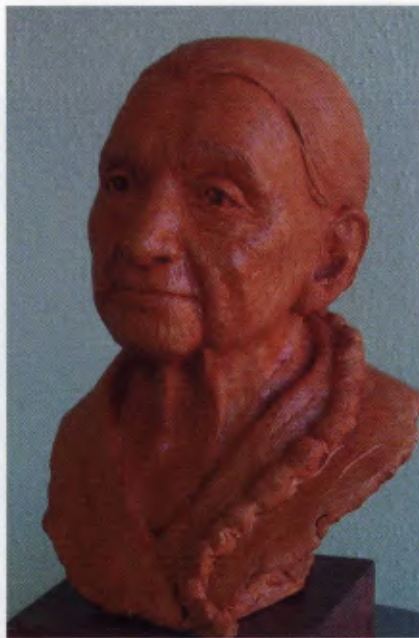
“Granny D. was one of my favorites,” says Hale. “It was a challenge to capture her wit, her charm. I visited her at her home in New Hampshire, and she had a PBS advance crew sitting cooling their heels in her living room while we chatted on her deck.”

Although Hale’s profession is sculpting portraits commissioned by clients—mostly of their children—she loves the texture and character she finds in those with longer life experience. “It gives you something to hang on to,” she says of the wrinkles and smile lines. “A baby has this perfect skin, rounded soft flesh and no landmarks save the outlines of eyes, nostrils and lips. There’s not much written there yet. But older people, they have their life stories on their faces.”

Hale was visiting an old family friend, Celesta Frost Rippetto, when she had an inspiration. Still beautiful and vibrant at 99, Rippetto was something of an OU legend for not missing a Sooner football game in 50 years. The sculptor thought Rippetto, who had been her mother’s Chi O sorority sister at OU in the 1920s, would make a great subject and asked if she could take some photos. “Celesta said, ‘Sure, but if you’re going to do me, why don’t you do Dale, too?’” Hale recalls.

“Dale” was Dale Arbuckle, another lifelong friend of her parents, a former OU football star at free safety, who was also close to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. With the Oklahoma Centennial approaching, Hale began wondering what other Sooner centenarians were out there with stories to tell.





Photos provided

FROM LEFT: OU alumna Celesta Rippeto was Hale's inspiration and first model for her Centennial project. Others included Carrie Sahmaunt, a Kiowa elder who raised her 10 children and a nephew on a farm near the Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma, and Dale Arbuckle, a former OU football player and long-time friend of Hale's parents.

"Naturally, as a sculptor, I wanted to capture a likeness of the subject," Hale explains, "but I also wanted to tell their stories in brief biographical profiles, what these people meant as Oklahomans." With that in mind, Hale's Centennial project "Facing a Century: Life Stories in Sculpture" began to take shape.

She enlisted her husband, Doug Hale, author and professor emeritus of history at Oklahoma State University, to do the biographies. The couple worked in tandem, Doug interviewing while Lou took photographs. Although Hale lowered the age criteria to subjects in their 90s, seven of the 15 were 100 years of age or older when she completed their portraits. The result was an intimate look at Oklahomans of considerable character and integrity, who shared the common denominator of living longer than most.

The show opened to glowing reviews at the Leslie Powell Foundation Gallery in Lawton. Since then, the group of portraits that Hale affectionately refers to as "my old folks" has traveled around the state and will be exhibited at Redlands Community College in August.

The subjects ranged from Charles Dutreau, 98, a retired army lieutenant colonel, to Verne Dermer, 92, a master



Photo provided

The Oklahoma Heritage Association gallery in Oklahoma City exhibited Hale's collected works from her Centennial project in December 2005. Since then the sculptures have traveled throughout the state and will be featured at Redlands Community College in El Reno in August.





Photo provided

Pearl Schloeman of Stillwater survived pneumonia, cancer, a broken hip, a car crash and being struck by lightning before her 100th birthday in 2003.



Photo provided

At 91, Elnor Ragan, left, was one of Hale's younger models for the Centennial project. When this photo was taken with Hale in her studio in 2004, Ragan was still teaching violin, lifting weights, gardening and preparing gourmet dinners for her many friends.

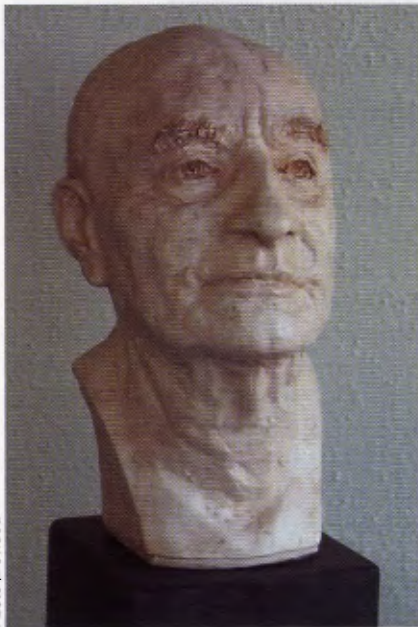


Photo provided

U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. Dutreau, was born in a dugout in Custer County in 1906 and awarded the Bronze Star in Korea. He posed for this portrait shortly before his death in 2004.

gardener, to Otis Clark, now 105, a survivor of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. They crossed lines of race, gender, marital status and religion. The common thread, says Hale, was not a lifestyle or a

health habit, but curiosity—a continuing desire to learn.

Hale is intimately familiar with that trait, having inherited it from two ink-in-the-veins journalists and life-long adventurers. Lou was a teenager when she moved with her parents from Oklahoma City to southern Texas where her father, Morris Price Moore, became editor of the *Brownsville Herald*. When he died unexpectedly, her mother stepped in first as a feature writer and later as city editor of the paper. In the 1950s Louise Beard Moore returned to her alma mater and became an artist in her own right, shaping and molding OU journalism students while serving for decades as supervisor to *The Oklahoma Daily* and *Sooner* year-book.

“My parents always encouraged creativity,” says Hale. “As a child I remember sloshing away with big brushes, paint and an endless supply of newsprint.” Before moving to Brownsville, Lou studied with Richard Goetz, one of Oklahoma’s finest painters, who later

instructed at the Art Students League in New York. “He taught at Municipal Auditorium in a real studio that smelled like oil paint,” recalls Hale. “It was intoxicating.”

In the 1960s, Hale got together with other young homemakers in Lawton who basically taught themselves how to sculpt. She did three portraits, then life “swept her away.” She had children, divorced, returned to Norman and started teaching at Kennedy Elementary School. There she gravitated toward fifth-grade art.

“Teachers played to their strengths, and mine was art,” she says. “Our class time always ran over, the kids and I had so much fun. I burned up several blenders trying to make papier mache.”

Around this time, Hale began taking classes from OU alumnus Grant Ritchey at the Firehouse Art Center. “I loved working with him. I learned so much. And working from a model? There’s no substitute. We can work from photographs, but a live model . . . it’s like



playing on a really good violin instead of a practice one.” Not long afterward, Hale had her first exhibition at the Firehouse.

In the early 1980s, her daughter introduced her to a handsome history professor, who became her husband four years later. Very early in their marriage, Doug asked Lou, “What would you like to do if you could do anything you wanted?”

“I told him I would sculpt,” she says, “which sounded so high-flown and unreachable. It’s involved. You need certain things; you need space. You can’t do it at the kitchen table.”

Doug became her model. He sat for her in their garage with the open door providing natural light. She begged the local community art center to offer sculpture classes. Art students from OSU came to teach, and when that source ran out, Lou was asked to take over the classes. By this time, she was also accepting commissions and realized her high-flown dream had come true.

Her husband was not the only one who supported her during the early days. At her first official showing at Dodson Galleries in Oklahoma City, Hale was thrilled to learn that she had sold one of her pieces to an anonymous patron. It was years before she learned the patron was her mother. “Mother wanted me to be encouraged, but she did not want me to know that *she* was the encourager,” she says. “I learned later that she took the piece home and hid it in her closet because she certainly could not display it.”

That first purchase worked, as Louise Moore, who died in 1992, had hoped. Hale is now a successful artist, with as many commissions as she cares to handle. She has joined creative forces with a small coterie of artists on a wooded acreage known as the Studios at Berry Ponds. Over the years, Hale has studied with Oklahomans Paul Moore, Jim Franklin and Rosalind Cook, as well as sculptor Bruno Lucchesi and in Italy with his son Paul, among others—always continuing to learn, to stay curious.

“You have to keep reaching to get better. It’s like a musical instrument. The more you practice, the better you



Photo provided

The Reverend Otis Granville Clark and sculptor Lou Moore Hale take a break from a photo session at Clark’s Tulsa home. Clark, still going strong at 104, witnessed the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, before moving to California. There he worked in some of Hollywood’s most famous households, including as a butler for Joan Crawford.

get. Sculpting is exciting, and you get to a point, if you’re lucky, where the clay actually speaks to you. It’s mainly in the eyes and the expression. Putting life into the eyes—that’s the struggle. If you don’t get that right, you don’t have anything. Just a lump of clay.”

Walking through Hale’s studio, one does get a sense of being watched. From children to the “old folks,” there is a sense of life and light emanating from her work. Her prep work includes recording each subject in dozens of photographs before touching the clay. She literally gets down on her hands and knees to look up at the faces and often climbs a ladder to look down in order to capture the subject from all angles.

Back in her studio, she plops a lump of water clay onto a support “like a ball on a stand.” All of the pieces are modeled solid, and when she is about 80 to 90 percent through, she cuts off the top of the head (“Students love this part,” she adds) and hollows them down to about three-fourths of an inch thick. Then she reassembles the work and pierces it so air can escape during her

low-firing process.

After the firing, she selects her patinas. Like an alchemist, she putters and ponders over the right ingredients to bring her subjects to life. Her arsenal includes everything from acrylic floor polish to clothing dye. One of her favorite finishes is “tinted wax,” otherwise known as shoe polish. “It’s wonderful,” she says with a smile. “It comes in every color—you can do magic.

“The hardest part sometimes, for any artist, is knowing when to quit. ‘When is my book done? When is my poem good enough?’ Somebody said, ‘Every sculptor needs to be two people. One to do the work, and the other to tell you when you’re through.’”

With her gallery success and commissions coming in, Hale might not be through for a very long time.

“I would like to be doing this into my 80s,” she says. And perhaps like her centenarians, into her 100s as well.

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of *Sooner Magazine*.