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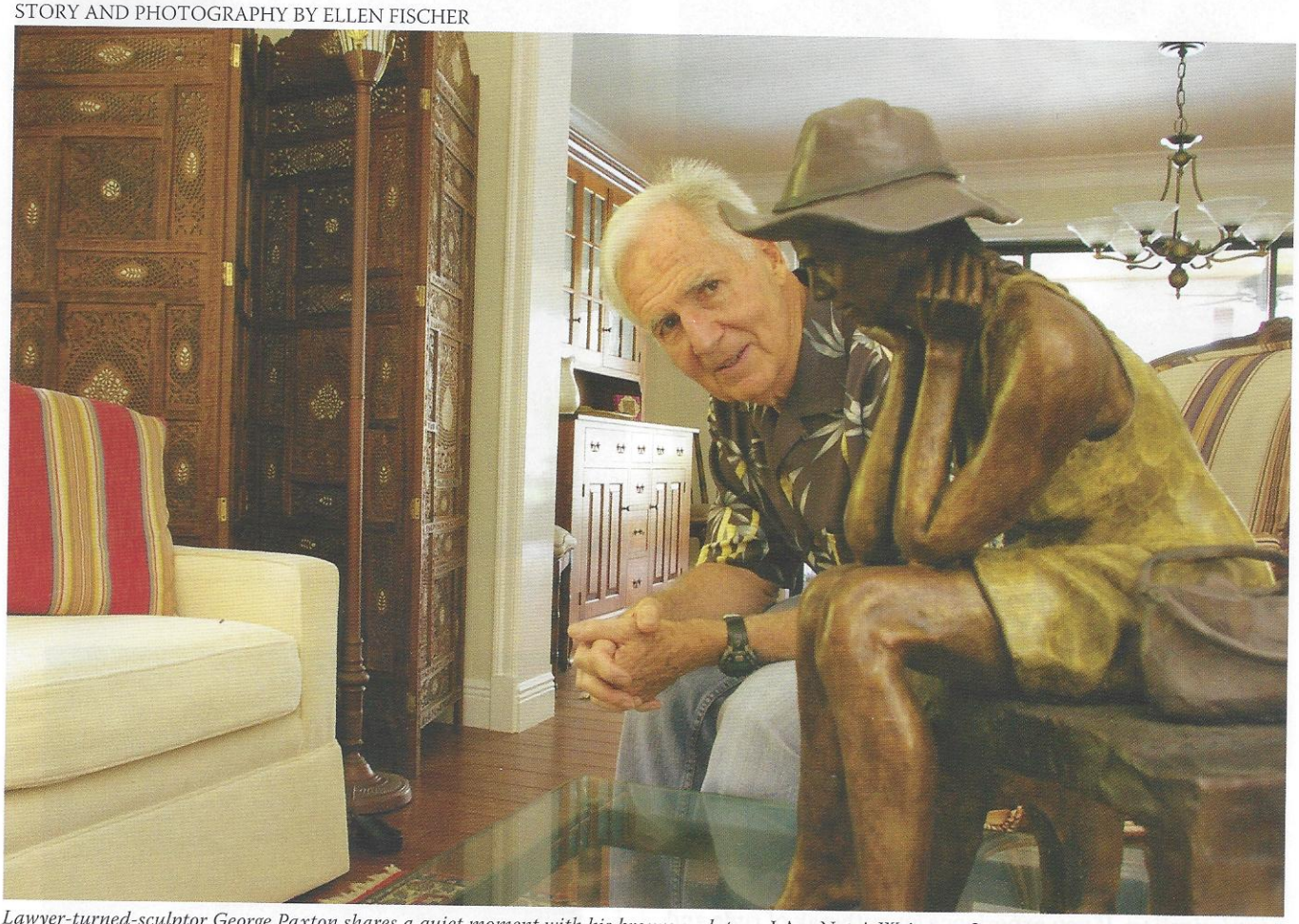
After 30 years as a lawyer, George Paxton is devoting his life to sculpture.

A BEVY OF SILENT BEAUTIES

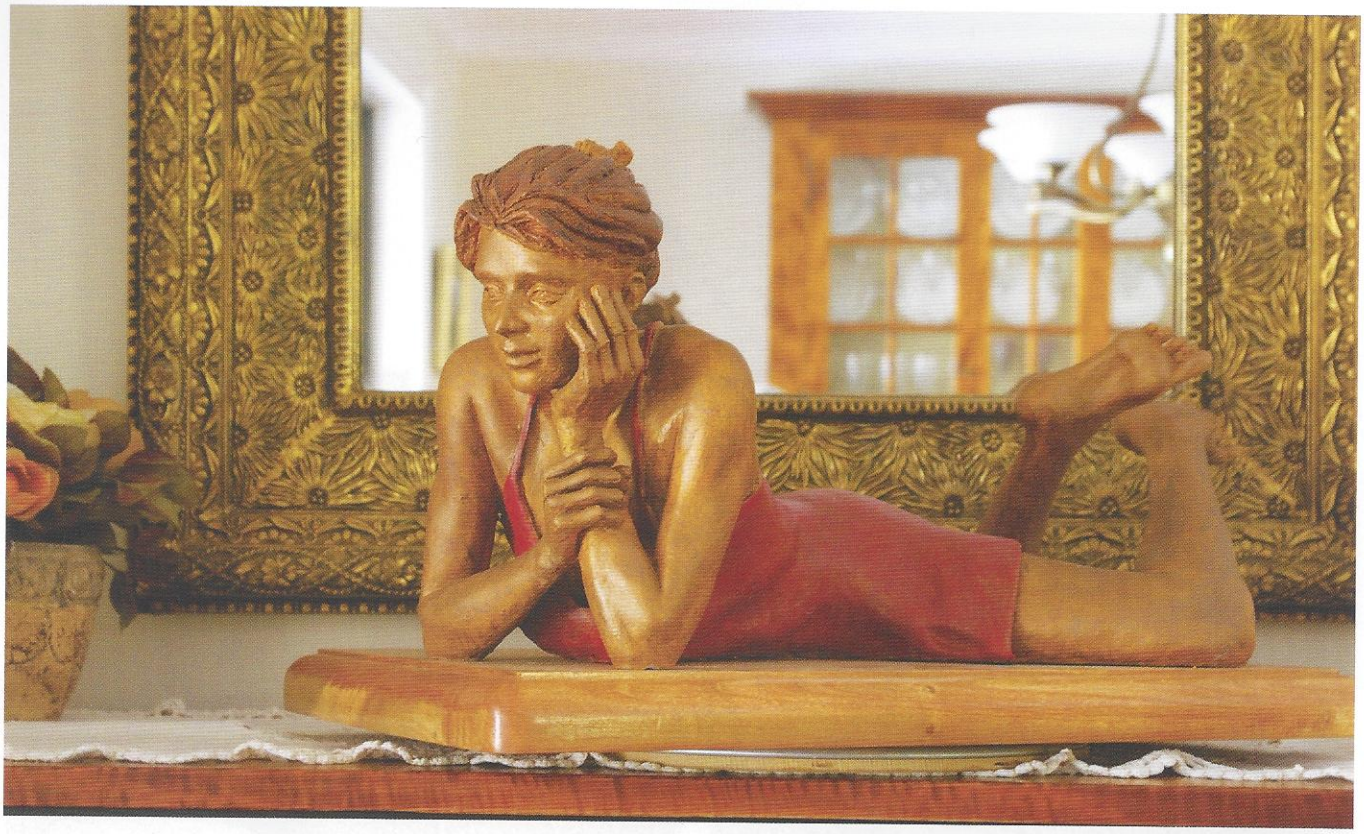
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELLEN FISCHER



Lawyer-turned-sculptor George Paxton shares a quiet moment with his bronze sculpture, I Am Not A Waitress. *George's empathetic nature suits him as a sculptor of figural works.*

Trim, silver-haired George Paxton is a quiet man with watchful brown eyes. He is someone who looks before he leaps but, once committed, will pursue the course without flagging. His current goal is to create figural sculptures that resonate with the passion of his heroes: Michelangelo, Bernini, Rodin. But can a man who has devoted most of his adult life to the practice of family law prosper as an artist? One glance at those intent eyes will erase all doubt.

Artistic talent runs in his family, George notes. "My father was a musician. He played a number of instruments: saxophone, trombone, clarinet and piano." Doggedness is also a family trait. George Paxton Sr. earned his living in music. Beginning in the late 1930s he worked as a big band arranger and tenor sax player, and in the mid-'40s he formed his own group, the George Paxton Orchestra. It played in ballrooms in New York City and toured the East Coast until Paxton took over the leadership of the house orchestra at New York's Capitol Theatre. He soon began publishing music, and in 1958 he and a partner founded Coed Records Inc. The company published 100 singles during its seven-year lifespan; its stars included Adam Wade (*The Writing on the Wall*), The Duprees (*You Belong to Me*) and The Crests (*Sixteen Candles*).



In Thoughtful, *George applied thin color washes of acrylic paint mixed with bronze or gold powder to the fired clay until he achieved the desired depth.*

An untitled terra-cotta figure celebrates the beauty of the female form.

George Jr. recalls his father's colleagues – superstars Perry Como, Nat King Cole and Vaughn Monroe, among them – visiting his family's Long Island home. George's father wanted him to study music. Young George dutifully took piano lessons but wasn't any good at it. All that he retains from that time is a vivid memory of his teacher chasing him around the piano in a frustrated rage.

George's talent ran to visual art; he had an aptitude for drawing that he indulged from an early age. After graduating from high school, he studied for a time at the Art Students League before attending Vanderbilt University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology. His graduate work was taken in law at American University in Washington, D.C., where he received a Juris Doctorate in 1967. After a stint as a solo practitioner, George joined the offices of Lerch, Early & Brewer in Bethesda, Md., where he headed the firm's matrimonial department handling divorce cases.

"I did that for more than 30 years," he says. "I've seen a great many people at very unfortunate times in their lives." Immersing himself in the practice and ethics of family law, George became a sought-after expert in the field. He was appointed to the Maryland governor's task force on family law, wrote and edited a family law newsletter and was elected a fellow in the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers.

Modeled in plasticene clay, George intends to have Looks Like Rain *cast in bronze. The bronze will hold the same lace umbrella that accessorizes the clay version.*

The demands of his practice did not allow George the leisure to create art until relatively late in his law career. At first he satisfied the artist within by collecting paintings, but by 1990 he had turned his attention to making art. He dedicated himself to its study with the same persistence with which he built his reputation as an attorney; art was not to be a hobby for him, but a profession. He began by taking studio classes at the Corcoran School of Art and at the Art League in Alexandria, Va. And when he had a new house constructed for himself in Bethesda, he made sure that its design included a well-equipped studio.

The idea of building something through one's own effort, be it a legal case or a work of art, has a strong attraction for George. When he set his mind to become an artist, he gravitated toward work in three dimensions because, he says, "I like the fullness, roundness and completeness of sculpture." For George, "sculpture" means realistic figure modeling. With lawyerly circumlocution he explains, "I think, generally speaking, that sculpture is more reality-based. There's obviously abstract sculpture, but most of it, I think, if you did an analysis and took a hundred thousand paintings and a hundred thousand pieces of sculpture and broke it down into which is more realistic, you'd probably find, on a continuum, that the sculpture would be more reality-based than paint."

Given his background in applying practical strategies to the thorny issues of divorce, it is perhaps not surprising that George prefers to apply realistic techniques to the problem of portraying three-dimensional forms. In figure sculpture he has found an art discipline that matches his talents as a problem-solver: it does not tolerate half-measures, inaccuracies or loose ends.

When he retired in 2004 after more than 30 years with his law firm, George embarked on a course of self-directed study, signing up for seminars taught by some of the best-known figure sculptors in the country. These included Eugene Daub, who is known for his monumental groups; Robert Liberace, who works in the tradition of the Italian Renaissance, and Philippe Faraut, a forensic academician. George also sought training in Italy, taking workshops in figure modeling and portraiture at a studio near Pietrasanta, and at the Florence Academy of Art.

Clay sculpting tools are carefully organized in the artist's studio.

In 2004, George and his wife Sharon moved to Vero Beach looking for "a warm, hospitable place that provided the opportunity for teaching and community involvement." He found all that he desired here. He teaches figure and portrait sculpture at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, and is also on the board of directors of the Cultural Council of Indian River County, where he is concerned with the creation of a cultural arts center that would enable artists to work, exhibit and interact with the public.

Standing in his studio off Old Dixie Highway, George is surrounded by projects in various stages of completion, as well as finished works. A life-sized synthetic human skeleton shares the space with him. Ostensibly it is there to remind George of the precise configuration of bone and ligament upon which all figures – fat or thin, tall or short, male or female – are constructed. It is also a memento mori for one whose second career follows a long and successful first. "*Ars longa, vita brevis*," the macabre armature grins, reminding the sculptor that the study of human anatomy is one that requires more years than even the youngest student has to give.

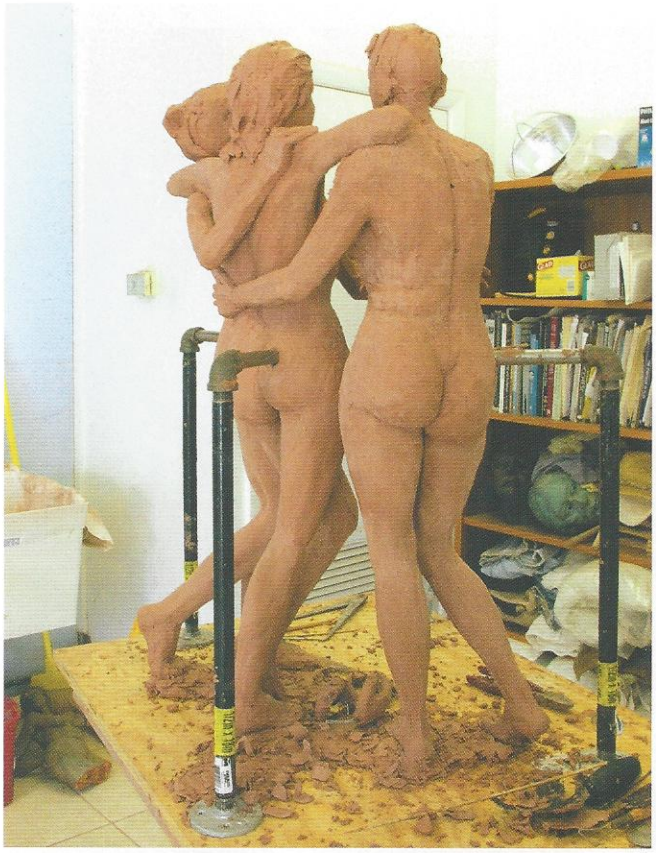
A low table next to a work sink holds George's tools, an assortment of wood and metal implements designed to cut, carve and smooth the terra-cotta (earthen) and plasticene (petroleum-based) clays with which he works. To the left of those tools, calipers and rulers lie ready for use; with them the sculptor can translate the life-sized limbs of his model to the scale of the sculpture he is working on.

A freely modeled figurine rests nearby. "This is a fooling-around sort of piece," George says. "A 20-minute sketch. I just decided I wanted to do something based on the idea of a maquette." He explains: "For a maquette, you just take a long block of clay and divide it into eight sections," which roughly translates to the 7½ head lengths on which the proportion of the human figure is traditionally based.

A rubber mold taken from one of George's original clay sculptures lies on the studio floor. Surrounded by an outer plaster shell, the mold can be used to create wax or plaster copies.

"And then you can move it around." George shows how he can shape the sections into head, torso, arms and legs, positioning them in a lively facsimile of the human form.

The other sculptures in the studio are larger and more finished than that quick study. Except for two male portrait heads, all are female; they stand, sit and lie in a variety of postures. Some are portrayed wearing clothes, others are clad in the nudity that art historian Kenneth Clark distinguished, by its idealized perfection, from its cellulite-and-all naked counterpart. George's nudes are mostly oblivious of their unclothed state; if, perchance, they seem to be aware of the sensuality of their skin, it is with the self-assurance of an exultant Venus that they wear it. The center of the room is dominated by a work in progress. Sculpted in pink plasticene, it is a roughly half-size figure of a woman in a short, strapless dress. She holds a dainty lace-covered parasol in her right hand, and her left hand is outstretched, palm up, in the universal gesture of testing for raindrops.



The Three Graces *is a work in progress. The most difficult part of modeling the group is getting the special relationships between the figures just right, the artist says.*

The face, its symmetrical features tilted toward the heavens, solemnly assesses the chance of a downpour. "I'm going to cast this, and be careful about casting the hand so it will hold the umbrella," says George. He plans to have the finished bronze work hold the same wood and cloth umbrella that accessorizes the present clay version.

In art speak this sculpture is called a genre piece, because it tells a story from everyday life. George calls it *Looks Like Rain*. Its story is almost as brief as its title: "Poised young woman may-or-may-not be caught in a sudden downpour." At its most effective, genre's portrayal of the human experience is immediate and timeless. George also creates academic figure pieces. Such sculptures have their roots in classical ideals. They celebrate the beauty or strength of the human form; a back-story, if there is one, is superfluous.

George's studio abounds in the latter type of sculpture. Another work in progress is that *non plus ultra* of classicism, *The Three Graces*. In mythology, the Graces are goddesses who represent beauty and refinement. They have been depicted by artists through the centuries as three nymphs whose limbs intertwine in a decorous roundelay. For George, sculpting his version of this artistic battle horse is a test akin to scaling Mount Everest. Its completion will tax everything he has learned about his craft and try his ingenuity with unexpected problems along the way. George says that the most difficult part so far is the spatial relationship of the three figures. "It's one thing to get individual figures right, but then to get them to actually get together, work together, that's hard," he says.

A few feet away from the Graces, classical perfection with a hint of the humanly obtainable is found in George's nearly completed sculpture of a supine damsel. With her legs delicately arched into the air, she shields her face with her left forearm; her right arm is flung back in a gesture of abandon that is perhaps mingled with surprise. She could be Danaë, the mythological princess who was visited by Zeus in a shower of gold or, as famously painted by Rembrandt, in a burst of blinding light. But enough about myth. Like Rembrandt (and a host of artists great and small) George is hanging his beret on the slimmest excuse to show a girl at the pinnacle of ripe beauty.

To hear George talk about this sculpture exclusively as a lesson in anatomy belies the evidence of one's eyes. "In this piece I wanted the pelvis to be going in one direction and the rib cage to go in the other direction, to create this compression here and the elongation there," he says, pointing at the sculpture's midsection. "To me this piece would be boring if she's just stretched out straight on the block. I wanted the legs to go up and I wanted them to be close, but I wanted the feet to be crossed over." After some further remarks about the tibia (shinbone), George proclaims that part of the sculpture's interest lies in the way he has slightly exaggerated the curving shins of his startled beauty.

Does George prefer doing a genre piece to an academic study? "I like both, but I think in the genre piece there's a little more going on with it," in that there is a psychological connection with the viewer, he says. For him, it is ultimately about seizing the transitory, whether it's the step of a goddess or the slump of a waiting woman. "To me it is a combination of getting the physical reality and the accuracy ... and some movement in the pose with a sense of what's going on with the person," George says. Behind him his sculptures stand silently, each one waiting its opportunity to testify on his behalf. ❀

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