



TRIBUTE TO THE WHITETAIL[©]

A Sculpture 50 Years in the Making

By Tom Yacovella

The Power of Antlers

Antlers. They've fascinated us since the beginning of time.

Cave paintings depict male deer with antlers of oversized proportions, illustrating how early man was drawn to their magnetic powers.

In medieval Europe trophy antlers were prized gifts of state, coveted by princes.

Cultures around the world still revere antlers for their medicinal value. And even the most experienced naturalists continue to see their magic as a special quality as old as wilderness itself.

A 50-Year Journey

My love affair with antlers and the majesty of the creatures who wear them started as a young teenager. It was on a remote hiking trip in 1952 that my eyes first caught the unmistakable tines of a shed antler. So began a 50-year journey of collecting these treasures and becoming ever more a student of them and their bearers.

It was to be a lifelong experience that would eventually guide my touch and feel for bone, muscle, form and function to create the sculpture piece — Tribute to the Whitetail[©].

Magical Moments

Each year following that first experience I made numerous outings in search of new shed antlers. To me, discovering a shed antler is like finding a Native American arrowhead: I feel connected to the past. In this case, I am connected to the antler's original owner, a buck, two or three years old or perhaps older.

Even though I am usually alone, I run to each antler as though I had found a buried treasure! I might feel or look foolish doing it, but my rush to the antler is a rush to a magical moment.

A few years ago I took my camera 14 feet up a hemlock, hoping to get some photographs of a rack buck I had seen. After a two-hour wait with no activity I spotted what looked like the pedicled end of a shed antler on the ground.

A burning desire sent me climbing down the tree and back up again, even at the risk of alarming deer and disturbing a very peaceful photo set-up. I just had to have that antler in my hands.

Such is my love of the antler!

The Search

As one who spends considerable time afield year-round, I have found antlers in a variety of places, but several sources have contributed significantly to my collection.

I've gathered the most antlers by visiting northern deeryards after severe winters. These yards have yielded not only the annual sheds of mature bucks, but antlers of various sizes from deer that became the victims of winter starvation or predation.

A deeryard is a wintering area where a herd of deer concentrates around a food source, usually on south-facing slopes. However, deeryards seldom stay the same. Deer habits change as food sources change and those sources can be affected by logging, fires, farming, floods and even climate. Deer move on when food becomes depleted, making a find of cast antlers very difficult.

My trick to finding shed antlers in late winter or early spring is to find well-

traveled doe trails. Such trails are well-etched into the snow or earth and contain a steady stream of deer droppings.

Next, I concentrate 40-60 yards to the prevailing wind's leeward side of the beaten trails. It is there, especially in heavier cover, that I find the shed antlers of wary bucks.

When I lived on the New York-Pennsylvania border a conservation official was a great help to me in furthering my collection. He knew of my passion for antlers and made me aware of a site to which a large number of deer killed by automobiles had been taken. It was a source of not only rack antlers but of smaller horns such as spikes and four-pointers, which can be next to impossible to find as natural sheds in the wild.

Here, because my collection was to remain completely natural, I gathered only antlers that were intact or broken as the result of buck fights or other occurrences in the wild. Taking antlers broken or fragmented unnaturally from a car collision was out of the question.

I might also add that I have never purchased a set of antlers for my collection, even though in some areas it is legal to market them. Usually they are offered in various grades, with the largest sizes commanding the most dollars. My favorite story is that of the Jordan buck, a big set of antlers that was once the all-time national record. Interestingly, the set was first bought at a garage sale for \$3, but after being measured, its value skyrocketed — eventually approaching \$150,000!



An Idea is Born: A Sculpture of Antlers

As the years rolled by, my collection continued to grow until it eventually numbered hundreds of antlers. I began to think about what would happen to the collection if I were to pass on to that “great deeryard in the sky.” Would anyone be able to relate to the many rewarding experiences in the field the collection represented? How could I pass along an appreciation for all of these unique treasures called antlers?

In January 2001 it occurred to me that the best way to answer these questions and keep my collection intact would be to use the antlers to create a life-sized sculpture of a white-tail buck. I would combine the knowledge and experience gained from countless wonderful times afield, with my capabilities as a wildlife artist, to guide me through an adventure in 3-D, an area of art I had never explored.

From the very outset my sculpture was to be called Tribute to the Whitetail©. This would be consistent with my practice of naming each painting I’ve created right at the outset — and then work toward the fulfillment of that title. It would also be a departure from my usual work in watercolors and acrylics. This would be a three-dimensional piece in which I could illustrate different perspectives using a play of light, with attention to correct anatomical movement throughout.

Such movement was essential because only in being anatomically correct would my creation be a true sculpture and not just a pile of bones. If the deer’s dimensions were not normal, it just wouldn’t work. Consequently, the following two years became not only a period of creating the sculpture itself, but a time of intense study to ensure accuracy in my interpretation and execution of every detail.

When I first told close friends about my idea of constructing a deer out of antlers, they really thought I had gone off the deep end this time! They, like I, had never seen or heard of such a creation and questioned both its feasi-

bility and the time it would consume to create.

I even began to have doubts myself, but I likened my ambition to that of Korczak Ziolkowski who, in the 1940s, envisioned a sculpture of the Sioux Chief Crazy Horse carved out of a Dakota mountain. Although my creation would be less spectacular in size, I felt similar energy and enthusiasm for completing a project many considered equally impossible — in this case, transforming a mountain of deer antlers into a likeness of the wearer himself!

The Creation

As I launched into my work, I viewed each antler as an important piece of a giant puzzle. I determined to use each intact, to retain its own dignity and grace and out of respect for the deer’s individuality.

I also resolved to use every antler, including stubs and those with abbreviated breaks from combat (buck fights), in their entirety. None would be sawed or otherwise altered to fit the various bone and muscle shapes that would form the sculpture.

Antlers broken near their burrs or pedicles were used as metatarsals. Shorter and flatter (what I call “palmated”) antlers were used for the lower jaw or mandible. Still shorter palmations found their way to the hooves.

Delicate antlers bearing fine tines were used for sculpting the tail and ears. Pronounced curled spikes formed the eye shapes and preorbital glands, while longer, straighter spikes were used to create the back legs. Larger racks simulated bone and muscle.

The endeavor became both a passion and an obsession. Most days I worked with the antlers. Even when I wasn’t, I was at the very least thinking about their placement. Half way through the project I began to get a rush of satisfaction and a very special sense of accomplishment.

Hundreds of antlers and two years later my sculpture piece was completed. All but a very few antlers from my collection had been used!

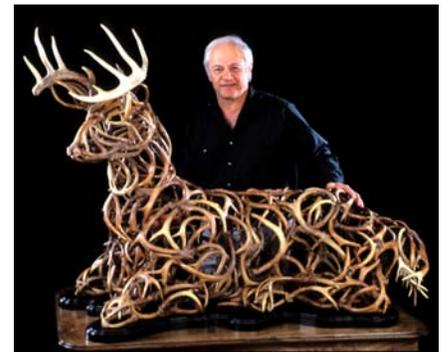
The finished sculpture portrays an alert, bedded whitetail buck in the 240-pound class. The position of his ears and head shows that he has been alerted by a sound in the woods, perhaps a running squirrel or snapped twig.

Feeling the Connection

As prize antlers characterize a well-nourished deer, they have provided me with nourishment of another type. Every antler I’ve collected and now woven into my sculpture has captured my thinking, my sight, my smell, my every sensation of a particular experience. Each embodies a special moment, frozen in time, linking me to the deer, keeping me rooted in nature and reminding me that one cannot hold a piece of nature without feeling a connection to something much greater.

As I study my creation for a few moments each day, my eye settles on a particular antler and the events surrounding its finding me. The original bearer might still be alive or long gone, but he lives on, as does my collection, through my sculpture.

And if ever I were to part with my creation, a major part of me would go with ... Tribute to the Whitetail©.



Tribute to the Whitetail© Facts and Figures

Length (end-to-end): 61 inches

Width (side extremes): 26 inches

Height (base to antler tip on head):
41 inches

Total Weight: 60 pounds

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