

Owlman

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chickens and other farm animals, "there are people who swarm his booth to see what he has."

Seven times, he's landed a spot in the prestigious "Birds in Art" show at Wausau's Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, a showcase of some of the world's finest wildlife artists. Cameron's pieces have been featured in magazines and two works are included in the 1997 "Atlas of North American Birds — Owls."

"It's hard to believe I've done owls for — this is my 41st year," he says. "I never have tired of the bird."

A self-taught artist, Cameron, 64, is a warm and welcoming man with an easy laugh. He never planned to become Owlman. Growing up in southern Wisconsin, he helped his father with his farm and house-building business.

He came to Madison to major in pre-med at the UW, but with a weak high school background in chemistry, it didn't work out. Two years later, he transferred to the Wisconsin Institute of Mortuary Science in Milwaukee, and got his only formal art training: "We had to sculpt a life-size head and get all the proportions right."

Cameron returned to Madison and worked at a couple of funeral homes, but the pay was poor and the hours grueling. "I really, absolutely enjoyed the work," he says. "I enjoyed working with people — every aspect of it except for (being on call) 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Still in his 20s, Cameron scraped together some savings and opened the Double C Ceramic Shop on South Park Street. He ran the business from 1965 to 1974 and "it really became very successful," he says.

By then he was working in clay himself and marketed his wares — including a handful of ceramic owls — at summer shows. A freelance writer and photographer approached him at the Wilhelm Tell Festival art show in New Glarus, and soon a feature on Cameron's owls hit the wires.

Suddenly, people at art fairs would point and say, "There's



CRAIG SCHREINER — State Journal

While owls are Clarence Cameron's artistic obsession, at home he dotes on two pet parrots, including Chica, above, who can whistle part of Beethoven's 5th.

EYEING OWLS

Remarkably engineered to suit their environment, nocturnal owls have amazing hearing and layered feathers that allow them totally silent flight, all the better to catch their prey.

Owls have superb night vision and the most forward-facing eyes of all birds, giving them stereoscopic vision. (They have to turn their heads to see but, contrary to myth, can't swivel them 360 degrees.)

In part, it might be owls' eyes — large, round and seemingly penetrating — that have made the animal a symbol with wildly different meanings across cultures.

"There's this subconscious human thing," says Clarence Cameron. "Some people see (owls) as good luck. Some see them as bad luck, an evil omen."

In western culture, the owl often symbolizes wisdom, thanks to its association with Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, war and the arts. A new generation knows the bird as a benevolent helper and conveyor of the post, thanks indeed to Harry Potter.

— Gayle Worland

the man with the owls!" Cameron recalls with a laugh. "They bought my owls and they didn't buy anything else. At the time, I was struggling to make a living and I thought, 'Well, this is all right. I'll just make more owls.' And it just gradually grew and grew."

That purely commercial decision "all kind of changed," he says, "when I got into soapstone."

After 24 years working in clay, Cameron was approaching burnout when a bird-carver friend suggested a new material. "With soapstone, I really felt I found myself," he recalls. "Life kind of slowed down. Now it's

just the joy of carving and finding the owl in the stone."

He's also worked in pewter and bronze — again, totally different mediums "that require a radically different mindset," says John Michael Linck, a Madison toymaker and longtime friend. "Clarence is a risk-taker. He pushes in new directions every few years."

Wearing those big spectacles, his jet-black hair in a ponytail, Cameron sits at a table in his basement workshop, carving his owls in his lap. He starts with a jagged chunk of soapstone, using a rasp to whittle the stone down to its most basic shape.

Raw soapstone, or hydrous magnesium silicate, is exceedingly soft. Commonly known as talc, soapstone is named for the fact "that it is as slippery as soap when wet," Cameron says. He gently carves it using files, his father's old pocket knife and dental tools, then polishes it with fine steel wool to see colors and patterns emerge.

Over the years, Cameron has studied owl behavior, increasingly taking more artistic license with his portraits. With more than 200 species across the globe, "owls take on lots of different characteristics," he says. "Most of the time, mine are fairly abstract. People come up and say, 'Is this a great-horned owl?' and I say, 'Well it could be, but it could be a long-eared owl, or a screech owl,' or whatever."

In the Bay Creek home he shares with Bob Lockhart, his partner of 44 years, Cameron dotes on pet parrots Chica, a Mexican Redheaded Amazon who can mimic the sound of a Game Boy and whistle part of Beethoven's 5th, and Groucho, a Congo African Grey.

But it's the owls that pay the rent. Cameron has customers around the world, many of whom have become friends.

"When you buy an owl from Clarence," says fellow artist Linck, "you don't just pick it up on a shelf at Marshall Field's. Part of that owl is the person who made it."

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