

Okanogan Artist Lives Light on the World Despite a Wealth of Heavy Metal

Story by Susan Lagsdin

Dan Brown

was only half kidding as he gestured toward the hillside heap of scrounged, donated, bartered and recycled metal pieces, most of them rusted, some undefinable.

“It’s in my will,” said the long-time educator and sculptor of found objects. “When I die, two of my artist friends have agreed to come over and clear all this stuff out of here.”

At 63, recently retired from his art teaching career and, filled with years of project ideas, Dan’s not planning to go anywhere soon. But he knows his friends will value what he’s named The Boneyard, a slope on the mostly unseen back part of his property near the Okanogan River.

Hauling and positioning a growing collection of “mixed media” to create the ever-larger sculptures he envisions may eventually mean acquiring a forklift and flatbed truck with a hoist. (His wife, Susan, once quipped, “My next husband is going to be a jeweler.”)

But he’s also intrigued by much smaller, art-worthy bolts and wire, castors and tubing, bottle-caps and railroad spikes. A vast cache of usable objects is always at hand. “Sometimes,” he said, “When I’m out working on one thing, I’ll have an odd little piece

just sitting nearby so I can think about how to use it.”

Dan said from third grade on he was always drawing, but an outdoor life and an early fascination with insects led him to a wildlife biology degree from Washington State University, a K-12 teaching credential and jobs in science classrooms.

After teaching at an international school in Pak Kret, Thailand, Dan settled in as Okanogan’s high school and middle school art teacher for three decades. “Those first teaching years were particularly demanding, and there wasn’t time to do much of my own art,” he said.

But his students did plenty, consistently excelling in a variety of media. Fifteen of his award winners now have their artwork on permanent display in Olympia’s Old Capitol Building, and the hallways and sculpture garden of Okanogan High School are filled with students’ drawings, paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, and mosaics. In 2001, the Washington Art Educators’ Association selected Dan as the High School Art Teacher of the Year.

The Browns’ activities create only a tiny carbon footprint, and a related desire to extend the use of found objects figured into Dan’s choice, around 1997, to move from watercolor painting

Dan Brown can find anything he needs for a project in his extensive “Boneyard,” a growing cache of repurposed and recycled metal. Somewhere in there lies the perfect piece for a current project or an inspiration for the next one.

to metal art.

But that decision was even more pragmatic. Realizing how many superb painters were based in the Okanogan and Methow valleys, Dan chose to go large and go outdoors.

“There’s only so much wall space in anybody’s house,” he said. “I made a conscious decision not to compete with the 2-D artists and to make art to go where people still had room for it.”

The other sculptors he knew worked in stone or wood, so he chose metal. Ever supportive, Susan gifted him with a plasma metal cutter and wire feed welder; he set up an angle grinder and a band saw, and he was on his way to regional renown.

Surprised (and pleased) when an early piece sold for \$1,500, Dan, ever frugal, evaluated his professional career, and considered gallery fees — sometimes 40 percent — and his years of experience. “I figured I should make at least as much per hour as a plumber or electrician,” he said.

A growing clientele, eager gallery owners, sustainable materials, and the satisfaction of placing and visiting his work on a site helped him know he’d made

a good choice.

Dan continues to produce unique, often nature-based, sculptures in an open-air workspace tucked next to the woodshed. “I don’t start until late morning in the winter, it’s so cold out here,” he said. “But most of the time I work all day.”

He is realistic about the physical demands of large-scale sculpting and imagines that he’ll eventually return to painting, already delving into new subjects and media with human forms, spray painting, and an art book of fictitious fish. But for now, it’s all heavy metal.

Humbled by the gifted sculptors with whom he’s associated, Dan said, “I’m still amazed that my work is at Sleeping Lady Resort (Leavenworth) — that I’m in the same league as Tony Angel, Rich Beyer and Dale Chihuly.”

Six galleries and as many public art installations currently exhibit his found metal creations, and they grace the properties of collectors across the region. The Browns’ own lawn is a sculpture garden, with a few pieces retrieved from galleries but even more ready to truck to exhibits or individual buyers.

Photo by Mike Irwin

Dan remembers years ago - when the first rigors of teaching subsided and the pace of his outdoor activities slowed — the joy of having free hours just to do his own painting. Retirement has multiplied that bounty with time, space, materials and a wealth of acquired experience.

Grateful for life's rewards, Dan reflected on his past accomplishments. His life list includes: "Our son turned out to be a good person ... I was a successful teacher ... Susan and I hiked the Camino de Santiago Trail (three times!) ... I like it when I have a beautiful weld ... Just becoming an artist is pretty darn nice."



Photo by Mike Irwin

Toco Toucan



Provided photo

Follow the Drinking Gourd

These sculptures (clockwise from bottom right) are only a few of dozens that indicate Dan's range and creativity. One is ready to exhibit, two have been sold to good homes, and one perches on the artist's pergola.

"Tree Pose," which, coincidentally, balances perfectly even without its sturdy base, represents Dan's new interest both in creating realistic human forms and his daily practice of yoga.

"Early Morning Coffee on the River." This salmon, leaping nine feet in the air, will be part of a late summer Confluence Gallery group show. Its base comes from a dismantled Blue Star Coffee Roaster.

"Follow the Drinking Gourd," spikes formed into start shapes, was inspired by the Underground Railroad. Another in-progress sphere is composed of artifacts from a 100-year-old farm.

"Toco Toucan" is the species names of this life size bird, one of the artist's retained favorites and evocative of the couple's Peace Corps work in a national park in Paraguay.



Photo by Mike Irwin

Early Morning Coffee on the River



Provided photo

Tree Pose