



Presidential Eagle, bronze, 15" tall.

Wheatley Allen: *Flying with Eagles*

By Michael Potts
Photos by Scott McCue Photography

HOWARD WHEATLEY ALLEN'S EYES SPARKLE with genuine excitement as he maneuvers his walker. He is quick to explain: "I was exposed to Agent Orange in Viet Nam, and have been surviving Parkinson's for 24 years now. Can't walk, can't talk right. . . but my life has never been more wonderful!"

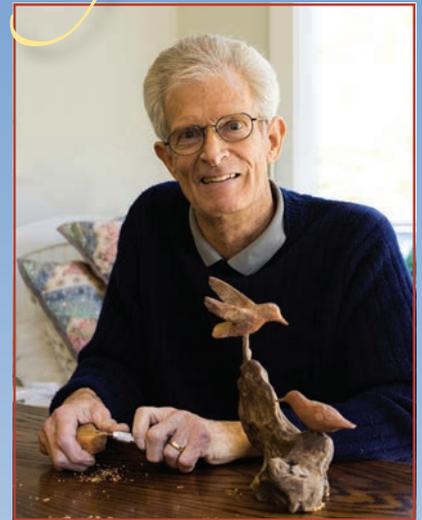
Renowned in the greater world, Wheat has been a quiet member of Mendocino's artistic community for more than four decades, but on the global stage, his work is large: his website describes him as "Sculptor to Emperors, Presidents, and Kings," and his works have often been chosen as gifts to heads of states around the world. But Wheatley says it this way: "I'm just a bird carver."

While his mobility has dwindled, Wheatley's enthusiasm for his work, and the people it brings to him, continues to be remarkable. He is excited to tell about his work *Flight of Eagles*, first conceptualized in response to a 1988 invitation to propose a large sculpture for the Reagan Library, then a building in Simi Valley. Wheat briefly describes his proposal: three life-sized bronze eagles soaring out of a 20-foot black stone obelisk "representing the blackness and horror of war. Eleven members of the committee

were in favor, but Nancy wanted pink," and the project was abandoned . . . only to reignite in the wreckage of the Pentagon on September 11th. The plan, complete with an impressive fountain, was to erect the eagle-topped obelisk at Flight 77's point of impact. That project, too, stalled.

Now, a patent attorney has purchased the design and has arranged to erect it on a prominent hill in San Mateo. Three 20-ton black marble and obsidian blocks are being finished at a foundry where the eagles are being cast; dedication is scheduled for summer, 2014. "I feel blessed to have this finished in my lifetime," Wheat exclaims. He passes me something he has written for the unveiling: "*Flight of Eagles* symbolizes mankind's reborn dreams of becoming one loving and forgiving world family, flying out of the darkness into the light, leaving behind the horrors of War, Carnage, and Destruction, Forging ahead, Creating lasting peace, strength, and prosperity for all."

There is a pure simplicity to Wheatley's sculptures that gives them timeless validity. Is there some deeper message in his work, something of the spirit? Wheatley grins guilelessly and insists, "They're just birds. I like the shapes. They teach me to sit and look." He started carving those shapes at an early age, and an encounter with "Trader Vic" Bergeron at Lake Tahoe set him on his career path. "I sold my first piece to Vic when I was nine," Wheatley recalls.



Larry Wagner photo.



Mallard Family, bronze. Mother, 7" long; ducklings, 4" long.

The scion of a pioneer San Francisco family, his favorite memories of his youth are outdoors in nature. While his family were avid hunters, he writes, "I was a terrible shot. I couldn't hit anything. Even at a young age, I loved birds and thought they were so beautiful I didn't want to shoot them."

After college at Dartmouth and a stint in the Navy, Wheatley and the love of his life, painter Rosemary Allen, followed their

dream to settle on the North Coast. "We've been married for 47 years, so I guess we're pretty much committed," Wheatley says with a twinkle. Asked what inspires his work, he smilingly quotes Garrison Keillor, "I can't afford to wait for inspiration. It's just a job." Turning serious, he adds, "My work isn't great cutting edge art. I'm inspired mainly by the wood." Wheat picks up a knife and block of clear, straight-grained redwood that is beginning to resemble a bird, and says "To steal Henry Moore's words, I simply carve away everything that doesn't look like a quail." He speculatively litters the table with red curls. "Parkinson's isn't good news for anyone, but for someone who makes his living with steady hands . . ." He looks up, hawk-like, and concludes, "Having to live through this inconvenience has taught me a lot about life. I can't hold back, I just do it. Doesn't it seem we have some inner resource where we can find extra strength when we need it?"

Wheatley's art has placed him prominently in the global movement for peace. Asked to provide a suitable gift for Mikhail Gorbachev, he sculpted a snow goose, a bird that summers in Siberia and



Falcon, bronze, 10" tall.

winters in California. The gift made a lasting impression on the Russian president, who in 2009 told an interviewer from *The Nation*, "We must view the world with our eyes open, not just through our personal or private interests. . . . During the nuclear arms race, I was given a gift by an American, a little figure of a goose in flight. . . a goose that lives in the north of Russia in the summer and in the winter migrates to America.

It does that every year regardless of what's happening, on the ground, between you and us. That was the point of this gift and that's why I'm telling you about it."

"My birds went flying all around the world, and now they're coming back to land in Mendocino," Wheatley tells friends at a reception in his honor at the Art Center, where a permanent collection of 40 years of his work, featuring his bronze birds, is being established. Thanks to the generosity of two of his most avid and long-term collectors, Donna and Ray Worster, some of his birds are coming home for all to see.

Lindsay Shields, Executive Director of the Mendocino Art Center and an avid "Wheat" fan, has reignited the intense interest in his work, from local fans to San Franciscans who



Saw Whet Owl, bronze, 7" tall.

attended the reception in the Art Center's Main Gallery last November. "It was monumental," Shields stated. "From receiving the full collection from the Worsters, to producing an archival DVD of the work, to witnessing Wheat play his own piano compositions, to enjoying a gallery full of friends and admirers. . . it was a perfect pinnacle of his international influence coming home to roost. Isn't that what life's about? We are so very lucky to house his bronze bird collection, in perpetuity, at the Art Center."

The Howard Wheatley Allen Bronze Bird Collection will be exhibited at the Mendocino Art Center, September 15–29. Visit Wheatley Allen's website at www.wheatleyallen.com.



Pelican, bronze, 16" long.