

BRONZING



WESTERN ART BY CURTIS ZABEL

Two bull elk, spooked from the dark timber, bolt over a rise and are captured in bronze to the last realistic detail. They are frozen in motion for others to enjoy and appreciate for hundreds of years to come. This piece and the bronzes on the following pages were molded into lifelike form from a lump of wax by Curtis Zabel.

Curtis Zabel grew up near Hayden, Colorado, a rural town twenty-five miles west of Steamboat Springs, and has lived in Routt County most of his life. He lived outside Hayden until 1967 when he moved to a ranch next to the river in the lower Elk River Valley. He lives on this ranch now with his wife, Shirley, and his two sons, Kirk and Ty.

"It's a kind of simple life I guess."



Being in the mountains and living on ranches all of his life has profoundly influenced Curtis' art as can be seen in his old western and wildlife paintings and sculptures. "I've always lived on a ranch and in the country, and we've always had something to do with the ranching business. It's kind of a simple life, I guess."

Being artistically inclined Curtis has been involved with art his entire life. He sold his first painting when he was a freshman in high school.



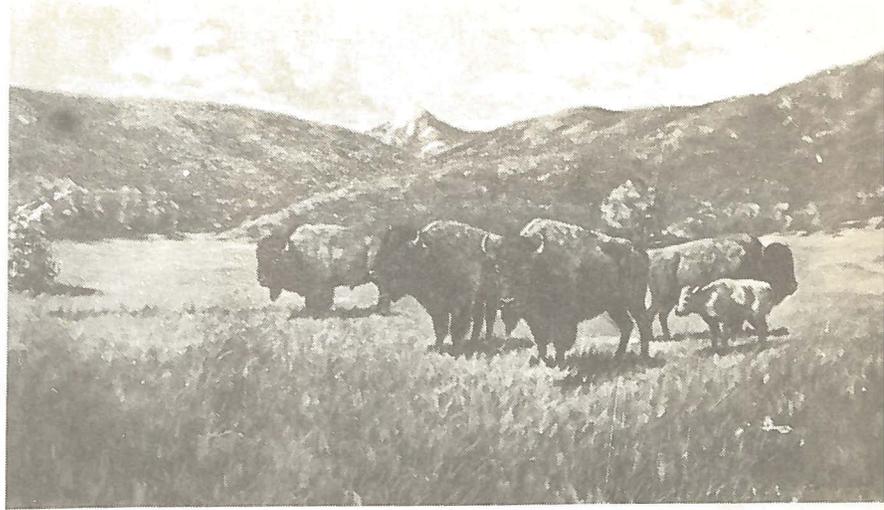
Curtis with one of his many western paintings.

In addition to his bronzes, he also does paintings which are almost as amazingly real as his sculptures. "I do a lot of painting for commission; people have a particular picture that they want and I do it." Many of his paintings have been of big game, elk and deer, and the rugged mountain areas where he has lived and seen these animals all of his life. In addition to his wildlife scenes Curtis has done various portraits of ranchers working with their cows and even one of a local rancher's buffalo in his pasture.

Curtis is a versatile artist who says, "I think sculpture is my strongest point right now," and it really shows in the exactness of his bronzes.

The first year Curtis did bronzing to sell was in 1972. Since then he has done sixteen different pieces at costs from \$125.00 to \$1,500.00. One third of the profit goes to the foundry, another third goes to the gallery where his works are exhibited. The last third goes to Curtis, the artist. "It sounds like a lot of money, but actually the artist doesn't get all that much."

Subjects for bronzes are varied and come from ideas that Curtis has or things he sees in his daily work on the ranch. He produces lifelike moldings of many different kinds of animals, and many of his models come from the stock on his ranch. "If I have a problem, I'll just go out in the corral and look at the horses, or whatever I'm doing - basically animals are all the same, and if you can do one you can do them all, with just a few adjustments."



Above: Buffalo herd under Hahn's Peak in Elk River valley. The herd and the painting owned by Bob Moss.

Below: Curtis in calving time going out to check on new arrivals.

Left: Section of Curtis' bronze team roping.



The winters around Steamboat Springs are very long, and ranch work usually slows down from the hectic pace of spring and summer. It is during these months of winter solitude that Curtis does most of his art work.

Though Curtis' work has been seen throughout the nation most of his work is shown at galleries in Palm Springs, California; Wickenburg, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Empire, Colorado, and Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The Lewis and Clark Gallery of Steamboat Springs (now closed) was responsible for the most sales.





"Forefooted" A cowboy lassos and brings down a bronc.



"A horse that's never been rode and a cowboy that's never been thrown!"



Horse and rider in a narrow escape.



"Scotched" to avoid getting kicked when saddling a horse. The hind leg is tied around the neck and the horse is blindfolded.

PROCEDURE OF BRONZING



Curtis working on a wax of Coke Roberts

Completing the wax figure to look just right takes all the talent of an artist of Mr. Zabel's calibre, but this is only the first step in a complicated procedure that turns the fragile finished wax into a shining bronzed sculpture made to retain its beauty for generations and generations.

"I start by heating the wax (a special artist wax used for sculpturing) until it becomes pliable. Then I shape the wax into the basic form I want." When Curtis has the shape he wants he uses tools like pencil, scalpel, toothpick and pocket knife to intricately carve the details into the wax form. When the original wax model is completed, it is sent to the foundry in Loveland, Colorado, where a mold is made with a plaster of paris outside and a raw rubber inside, which brings out every detail. After this cast of the original wax is made he takes it home and re-works the pieces until they are back to the original shape. "After the mold is made it comes apart from the original model. Then I close it up and put a rubber band around it and pour wax that has been heated to 190 degrees into the mold. After it has dried take the mold off and another wax sculpture is made."

Next Curtis takes the waxes back to the foundry where they dip them in a slurry compound which builds a shell around it. After the waxes have been dipped several times and cooled the compound is heated, and the wax is melted out. The foundry then pours liquid bronze into the same cavity the wax comes from.

Most bronzes are cast in two separate pieces. The base and the figures. The shell around them is then broken, and the two pieces are welded together, and cased which is the smoothing over of welded areas, to make it look natural. The finishing touches such as ropes, and bridle reins are made from twisted or flat metal wires which are welded on.

Last comes the patina, an aging process that gives a rustic look. Only it is done with chemicals to speed the aging process. The patina comes in many different colors and shades. Most western bronzes such as Curtis' are done in brown patina.

RANCHING OR ART?

Ranching is not a hobby or part time job for Curtis. He is a full time rancher and manages a good size ranch in the Elk River Valley. Through use of modern ranching techniques one of the healthier beef producing cattle herds in the area.. Ranching isn't Mr. Zabel's only full time job - art work also takes up a great amount of his time. "I don't really count the hours, but if I'd work steady it takes about a week to do one wax."

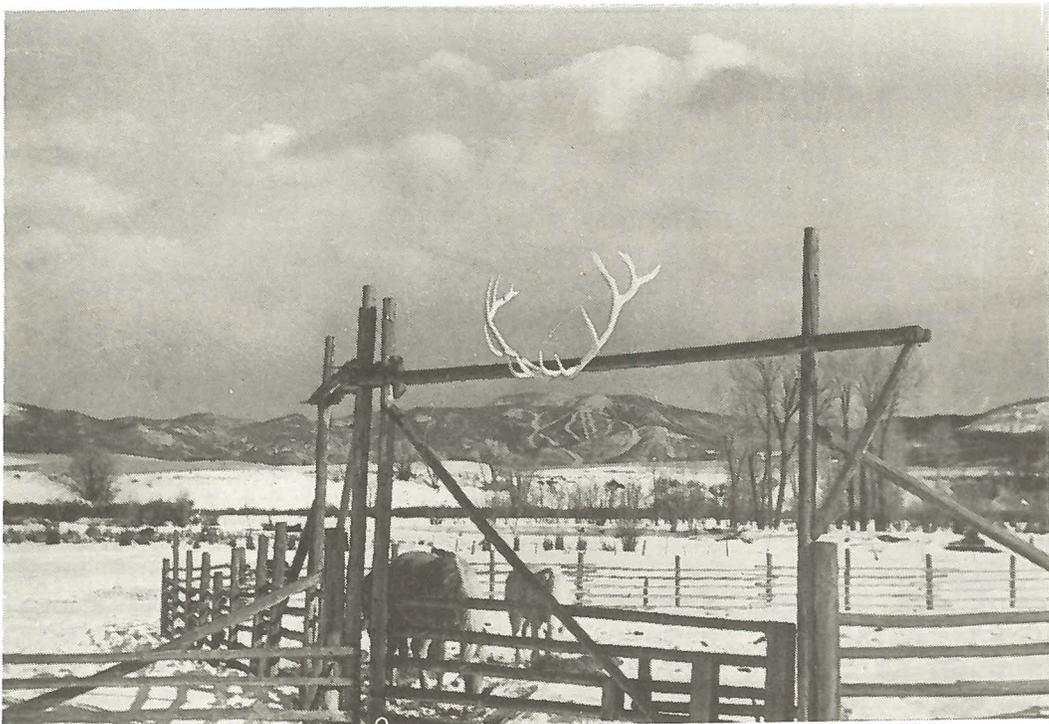
When a gallery sells one of Zabel's works it has to be replaced and even if Curtis is in the middle of calving season he manages to complete another sculpture. Calving time this year has been busy with late April snows complicating the situation, but at the same time Curtis was preparing for a showing of his art in Prescott, Arizona.

Curtis has acquired nearly nationwide recognition for his art, and although his sculptures are relatively high priced his business has risen to equal the profit from his ranching outfit. Instead of purchasing each of his bronzes from the foundry, Curtis invests his money in having more bronzes cast.

"Well, I'll have one of each eventually, but for right now we just have two of our own."

Having the best of two worlds is ideal, but conflict arises between the "good life" in the mountains running a herd of cattle, and the demanding life led by a famous artist.

"I don't know what Shirley and I are going to do... We've considered art strongly full time, but we would kind of like to keep the kids on the ranch, you know, it's a good place for them, and there's a lot they can learn... That's one of the reasons that it's hard for us to make up our minds."



Curt's corral, symbolic of the old West with progress, the ski hill, always beckoning in the background.