

Presentation of
The Society of Animal Artists
Lifetime Achievement Award to
Kent Ullberg
October 1, 2016, Houston, TX

Though I had no part in the nomination or selection of Kent Ullberg for the Society of Animal Artist's Lifetime Achievement Award, I endorse it whole heartedly, and I want to thank, Reneé Bemis for inviting me to play a role in the celebration this evening. The scale and sophistication and volume of Kent's work, and his dedication to The Society of Animal Artists, entitle him to this award.

Kent was born Jean Kent Ullberg in Gothenburg, Sweden, on July 15, 1945, a little more than two months after Germany surrendered and one month before Japan's surrender brought an end to World War II.

Kent's father was a musician and a landscape painter who made ends meet working as a machinist, shipbuilder, and sailor. Kent's mother was trained as a sculptor and worked as a textile artist, painter, and weaver.

Kent's father took him on plein-air landscape painting trips as well as weekly visits to the Gothenburg Art Museum where he saw the work of Bruno Liljefors (1860–1939), a painter in Sweden, whose stature there was equivalent to that of John James Audubon in America.

As a boy, Kent had various hobbies. Art, fishing, the study of natural history, and taxidermy figured chief among them. Kent memorized the Field Guide to the Birds of Europe by Roger Tory Peterson, an American of Swedish descent, by the time he was ten.

As a teenager, Kent studied sculpture and taxidermy at the Gothenburg Natural History Museum with its exhibits director, Björn Wennerberg. Realizing that the teen had the aptitude, interest, and talent required for a career comparable to his own, Wennerberg recommended him for admission to Konstfack, the Swedish state school of art in Stockholm, and a position in the research and exhibitions department at the National Museum of Natural History, and it was during this time, in 1962, that Rachel Carson's book Silent Spring came out and made a profound impact on Kent's understand and appreciation of ecology and the need to protect it.

After sailing to South America and back as a merchant marine, Kent studied painting, drawing, and sculpture at Konstfack from 1963 to 1966. While he was an art student, he met and dated the granddaughter of Bruno Liljefors, who was also an art student, and met her father, Lindorm, himself a painter.

To graduate from the Swedish art academy, Kent was required to complete a diploma assignment, and the topic he prophetically chose was sculpture in contemporary architectural design.

After graduation, Kent requested and was given a leave of absence and a stipend from the National Museum of Natural History. He studied in Germany, where professional training was offered in taxidermy and museum design, and he traveled throughout Europe to study museums and museum practices. In Münster, Kent earned a professional certificate as a taxidermist from the German Association of Preparators and Biological Sculptors. In Berlin, Kent studied the sculpture and taxidermy of Karl Kästner at the Humboldt University Museum of Natural History. From Germany, Kent went to France where he studied taxidermy at the Paris Natural History Museum and works at art galleries and museums by Antoine Louis Barye and successive generations of romantic animal sculptors. He also studied works by modern masters from Brancusi to Matisse.

To fulfill a boyhood dream of seeing wildlife in Africa close up, Kent began writing letters to safari companies seeking employment. Although he never expected to leave the National Museum in Stockholm, Kent surprised himself in 1967 when, at twenty-two, he was offered and accepted a job as a safari taxidermist by Botswana Game Industries, with the proviso that he work for a minimum of one year. After fulfilling that obligation, Kent worked independently as a guide and taxidermist. Among his clients were staff from the Denver Museum of Natural History.

In 1970, Kent was hired as curator of the Botswana National Museum and Art Gallery. During his tenure there, he went on collecting expeditions from the Okavango River Delta to the Kalahari Desert; mounted specimens; prepared dioramas and painted their murals; organized exhibitions of local and regional artists; and managed traveling exhibitions, including one of modern sculpture by Henry Moore.

In 1972, the Denver Museum of Natural History hired Kent as a consultant for its African Hall and flew him to Denver. Before returning to Sweden for the Christmas holidays and then back to Africa, Kent spent a week in New York, where he visited galleries and museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, where he saw a bronze cast of Matisse's relief sculpture *The Back*, which would later influence a Triptych he entitled, *Evolution*.

In 1973, Denver museum staff returned to Botswana for a second collecting expedition. Kent served as host of the expedition on behalf of the National Museum and Art Gallery. A year later, Kent's career and life were directed to the United States when Charles Crockett, Director of the Denver Museum of Natural History, offered him the opportunity to curate the museum's African Hall.

This opened the door for Kent to establish himself in the United States, which is where his career as a sculptor really began. It's a whole nother story, which sad to say, time prevents me from re-counting in full here.

So let me fast-forward to a few personal anecdotes and highlights.

In 1977, Kent applied for membership and was accepted as a member of the Society of Animal Artists. The year 1977 has personal meaning for me, since it was the year I became Director of a new, small art museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, where I would first

meet Kent a few years later. In May of the same year, 1977, at a folk festival in Denver, Kent met Veerle Vermeir. Born in Belgium, the daughter of a university professor, art critic, and author, Veerle had immigrated to the United States and had similar interests. Their common interests blossomed into a deeper relationship, and they were married in Denver on May 5, 1978.

In that year, Kent was also elected to the National Sculpture Society. Six years later, in 1984, Kent attended the annual meeting of the National Sculpture Society in New York. A highlight there was the address Philip Johnson made in response to the Society's Henry Herring Medal for Sculpture in Architecture for the ATT Building that he had completed the same year. Johnson had pioneered the International Style in the United States and, in fact, curated a museum exhibition entitled, The International Style, which was produced way back in 1932. The ATT building featured a Chippendale-style cornice and immediately became an icon of postmodern architecture. Johnson's address informed and helped shape Kent's consciousness about postmodernism, especially when Johnson stated that representational art was displacing nonrepresentational art, just as postmodern architecture had displaced International-style architecture.

As Kent immersed himself in interpretation, philosophy, and the context of postmodernism, he was given several opportunities to develop this aesthetic in new, monumental sculptures. In May 1986, for example, The National Wildlife Federation commissioned Kent to produce a sculpture fountain for a plaza formed by the addition of two buildings to the organization's headquarters in Washington, D.C. This opportunity allowed Kent to embrace the marriage of sculpture and architecture, together with the media of cast stainless steel which Kent had pioneered in 1980 with Bob Zimmerman at Art Castings of Colorado, and incorporate the performing arts, by titling his composition *Whooping Cranes engaged in a mating dance, Rites of Spring* after the ballet by Igor Stravinsky.

On March 24, 1989, the *Valdez*, an oil tanker owned by Exxon Corporation, ran aground on Bligh Reef as it departed after filling up with crude oil from the trans-Alaska pipeline terminal. As much as 38 million gallons leaked into Prince William Sound and eventually impacted some 1,300 miles of shoreline and 11,000 square miles of ocean. As satellites broadcast images of wildlife dead and dying in the oil slick, Kent was moved through grief to model a somber portrait in clay of a lifeless eagle which he completed in a matter of days. When Mozart's Requiem aired on the public radio station he was listening to in his studio, a title occurred to Kent that captured the pathos of the moment: *Requiem for Prince William Sound*.

In 1990, Kent took his sculpture to a new level altogether, with his epoch, *Sailfish in Three Stages of Ascending* an homage to Swedish Pop Artist, Claes Oldenburg, at the entrance of the Broward County Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale, with a reflective pool and fountains.

Since his early days, Kent Ullberg has produced more than 50 monuments and more than five times as many pedestal castings. With that kind of output, one could say that the scale and sheer quantity of his sculpture are a legacy worth honoring, and indeed they are. But there is so much more to the man.

I have known Kent Ullberg for 34 years. I first met Kent on September 10, 1982, the year Robert Bateman was inducted as Master Wildlife Artist of The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum. A little known fact is that in those years, sculpture was not juried into the exhibition Birds in Art. Rather it was curated by me or staff I assigned. If I am not mistaken, Kent was the first sculptor to exhibit a bronze in Birds in Art. Previously, sculpture in that exhibit consisted of decorative wood carvings, a genre that had evolved out of decoys. In 1983, Kent submitted a monumental sculpture entitled Eagle Rock, for consideration. It was such a hit that one of the museum's founders, Alice Woodson Forester, purchased it for the entrance of the museum to surprise her husband. The tour of Birds in Art that year included The Houston Museum of Natural Science and The Denver Museum of Natural History. I have a vivid memory of the dinner following the opening of Birds in Art at The Denver Museum; Kent recommended a Moroccan restaurant in a seedy part of Denver on Colfax; it started out with a blessing of rose-peddle water, and degenerated over 2 or 3 or more bottles of wine into a rousing debate about modernism in art, the merits of Tom Wolf's The Painted Word, and more topics than I can remember. It was a great evening and the start of a long friendship. Kent and Veerle subsequently joined me in 1986 to open Birds in Art at the Beijing Museum in China. Since 1988, when I joined the SAA, I have, of course, been touring his work in Art and the Animal. In 1992, to inaugurate the Roger Tory Peterson Institute and open the Society's 32nd Annual Exhibition, Roger asked me to organize a week-long conference at Chautauqua, and Kent co-chaired a panel of scholars including Roderick Nash, Author of Wilderness and the American Mind, and Marcia Eaton, Author of Art and Non-Art, among others. More recently, since 2002, I have been touring his one-man retrospective to museums throughout the U.S. including The Houston Museum of Natural Science. The exhibition premiered at The Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha to inaugurate his monument, The Spirit of Nebraska's Wilderness, and has been displayed at 18 venues nationwide.

All of which brings me full circle to the reason I endorse the award being given to Kent this evening and am pleased to present it now. Fundamentally, it has to do with respect. I respect Kent Ullberg first and foremost because he is such a deep thinker. He is informed by a purposeful understanding, knowledge and respect of science; and of art history and his chosen medium of sculpture. Kent has dedicated himself to educating the public about the environment and the dangers that confront it – from careless stewardship of natural resources to global warming. Kent is tremendously creative. He's also a technological innovator. His accomplishments are without equal. All of which make him an art historian's dream; and part of the history of art in Western Civilization. Kent is well spoken, and well liked, and he is as good of a human being as any that walks the face of the planet. Kent Ullberg is an extraordinary person who's lived an extraordinary life, and a stellar representative of the Society of Animal Artists. With that, I give you the next recipient of the Society of Animal Artist's Lifetime Achievement Award, Jean Kent Ullberg.

David J. Wagner, Ph.D.
Author, American Wildlife Art
Chief Curator, David J. Wagner, L.L.C.
And Tour Director, Society of Animal Artists