

Joe Brown: Friend, Teller of Stories,
Sculptor of Athletes and Writers

By

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Not since the Golden Age of ancient Greece during its fifth and fourth centuries had the athlete been a constant theme of sculptor's art until the work of R. Tait McKenzie (1867-1938) and his talented apprentice and assistant Joe Brown (1909-1985). Of the two sculptors, McKenzie has received greater recognition, not as a sculptor of athletes but for his combined talents as an educator, physician and sculptor.

McKenzie's disciple, Brown, has not received the recognition he deserves as a sculptor of athletes and a forceful spokesman for sport as a valid subject for the serious artist. Brown displayed diverse and extraordinary talents. During his career he created over four hundred pieces of sculptural works, wrote excellent articles on his unique views on art and a number of fine short stories based on his experiences as a professional boxer, created unique playground equipment, and told stories employing genuine imitations of Robert Frost, John Steinbeck and Huddie Ledbetter. Joe Brown deserves special recognition as an artist in his own right. However, as McKenzie's art never received the recognition it deserved, Brown may continue to be slighted by authorities because of his association with McKenzie as well as the fact that he did not acquire the traditionally accepted art credentials. Furthermore, the fact that Brown used athletes as subject matter on a regular basis probably causes art critics to believe him to be obsessed with athletes as subject matter.

McKenzie, by his own admission, clearly leaned on the fifth and fourth century Greek sculptural forms in creating his modeled interpretations of the youthful athletic figure in action or at rest. As an artist, his plan was to record in sculpture his impressions of the great renaissance of athletic competition in the time which he was living. McKenzie was successful in this quest and has been at times referred to as a reincarnation of a fifth century Greek sculptor.

Joe Brown, obviously influenced by McKenzie's rationale for his art, carried on the tradition of sculpting the athletic heroes of his time. As Brown developed as a sculptor, he attempted to break away from depicting athletes as "frozen" in a moment of time. His experiments with human movement through the use of direct observation and multi-exposed photographs led him to create figural sculpture that conveys to most viewers a feeling of an athlete

performing rather than a posed athlete in a static position.

Brown believed that creating meaningful art results from an outgrowth of personal strong feelings, and that he as an artist felt and saw things in athletics and selected athletes that he wanted others to experience. This resulted in his sculpting a great number of athletes in an assortment of sports. One of America's best sports writers, Red Smith, knew Brown and studied his sculpture of athletes. Smith wrote an introduction to Brown's 1966 Retrospective Catalogue, and in that piece he called Brown "a great sports reporter" because "he reproduces the fluid action with faithful accuracy, he captures the zest for combat." He goes on to tell the reader of the Catalogue that if making us see and feel and remember these things is the name of the game, then Joe Brown "plays it better than anybody I know."

My first meeting with Joe Brown took place after experiencing his unforgettable luncheon presentation at a 1963 joint meeting of the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Academy of Physical Education. The joint program included a number of national figures including Jesse Owens, but of all the speakers there, none made as lasting an impression on me as did the late Joe Brown. (See illustration 1) At the luncheon we began a friendship that for years resulted in reciprocal visits to the University of Tennessee and to Princeton.

Recently, I discovered a manuscript of a taped interview for the Oral History Program of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia in which Brown detailed our first meeting in Minneapolis (College of Physicians 54). In this interview he spoke of the beginning of our "solid friendship" and the small clay head of a prize fighter he gave me after his presentation. Joe had modeled it in the course of his talk to illustrate his remarks and today it commands a special place in my office.

Several years later Joe made his first visit to the Knoxville campus as the featured speaker for the dedication of the Joseph B. Wolffe Collection of R. Tait McKenzie's sculpture. He captivated the audience with his engaging personality. In subsequent years he returned to Tennessee to present a number of lectures until eye problems forced him to cease travel of any great distance.

My visits with Joe at Princeton to record his memories of his former teacher, R. Tait McKenzie, were exhilarating. The insights he provided were invaluable in completing a book on the life and works of the remarkable Canadian Physician, Sculptor, and Educator. Other trips to Princeton were made to seek Joe's assistance in acquiring McKenzie's sculpture or paintings of McKenzie for the Wolffe Collection at Tennessee. With each visit my understanding of McKenzie expanded and as a bonus I experienced the joy of listening to Joe recount stories of his past. As a result, my admiration and respect for Brown himself and for his work grew enormously.

Joe Brown spent his early years in the slum called "The Devil's Pocket" in South Philadelphia where he was born. The fact that the Browns were the

only Jewish family in a predominantly Irish neighborhood caused Joe and his brothers (as he liked to say) "to learn to fight and run well." His father, a tailor by trade, and his mother loved their children very much and were extremely influential in their lives. The legacy Joe's father passed on to his children was one of discipline, hard work and common sense. His mother offered the Brown children a rich philosophical outlook on life.

Among the many stories Joe told about his parents, there are two, in my judgment, that best illustrate their involvement in shaping his life. The first involved an early clay modeling experience at his parents' home. Apparently one morning near 3 a.m., Joe was attempting to mentally capture a boxer's movement by "shadow boxing" in front of a mirror. This early morning activity was preliminary work for his modeling a boxer in clay. The resulting noise awakened his parents and brought Joe's father to his room to investigate the noise. Finding Joe jumping around without clothing, his father asked him what he was doing? Joe responded, "I'm making a statue," causing his father to reflect for a moment and as a concerned parent to remark, ". . . It's better than being a bum" ("Joe Brown's career" 3).

A story often told by Brown concerned his mother, who one day overheard an argument between her son and a small group of children. One of them called Joe "a lousy Jew", to which young Brown replied ". . .yeah and I'm proud of it." Joe's mother quietly took him aside and in a thick Russian accent explained, ". . . you're a Jew, but you had nothing to do with it. So don't be proud of it and don't be ashamed either. Just wait until you do something you can be proud of, my son, and then you can feel proud of who you are . . ." (Fox 1980).

Other people touched Joe's life in significant ways. His brother Harry, "The Kid" Brown, was a prizefighter who unintentionally inspired Joe's brief but important professional boxing career. Both Walker Hancock, an accomplished sculptor and Douglas Durer, an eminent illustrator, hired Joe as a model and intensified his interest in the art of sculpture. And of course there was his teacher R. Tait McKenzie who, for seven-and-a-half years shared his studio with Brown. Joe characterized his relationship with McKenzie as "painful, fruitful and unforgettable" and always spoke with deep respect for his mentor and his work. (Brown 1)

Brown, a 1931 graduate in physical education from Temple University, joined the Princeton University Physical Education Department in 1937 and taught boxing for approximately twenty-five years. Concurrently he taught sculpture, until he retired in 1977, in the Creative Arts Program, initially as a resident fellow and later as a professor in the School of Architecture. The uniqueness of Brown's dual appointment at Princeton brought him national publicity, but his observation was that ". . . boxing and sculpture make an unusual but not an incongruous combination . . ." ("Joe Brown to retire"). He often remarked that this unusual combination caused some of his fellow Princetonians to view him as an "anti-intellectual" and made his long but

successful fight to win accreditation for his sculpture course very difficult.

Brown was a strong advocate of excellent teaching and often stated that his experience taught him ". . . the great teachers of physical education are the greatest teachers I've ever known . . ." (Joe Brown Builds"). He scorned those who belittled the physical education profession and had little patience with art academicians who snubbed his teaching and work in art, labelling them as "intellectual bullies" for thinking "...that art should be done by someone who is [already] dead or very remote in time and place." After teaching sculpture to thousands of non-art students in nearly forty years at Princeton, Joe averred that they ". . . produced some good work and often know more about the creative act than the people who have been teaching [art] for years . . ." (Shirley). He firmly believed that art was infinitely more than something done by a few people for a few people and that everyone has the capacity to appreciate art.

While Brown is perhaps best known for his sculptural figures of athletes, his efforts extended beyond sport. Most notable are his sculptural portraits of writers like Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, John O'Hara, James Michener and Thomas Wolfe.¹ It is interesting to note that most of the writers Joe modeled were professed baseball fans(or sports fans in general).² Joe loved the instinctual life as much as the intellectual and it seems he prized these same qualities in the subjects of his art.

Brown's method for creating these portraits was dynamic and interactive. Rather than sitting in one position during a modeling session, each was told to talk or do as they wished while Brown sculpted. His subjects were encouraged to be themselves in order to allow Brown to better understand their emotions and characteristic expressions. Brown's method resulted in his creating portraits that were more than an excellent physical likeness of his subjects [see illustrations 2 - 6]. Moreover, these "posing" sessions were keenly recalled by Brown and later became colorful anecdotes. His well-known models provided Brown with a wealth of material that he skillfully employed in a variety of formal and informal teaching situations. Anyone who had the good fortune of reading or, better still, hearing Brown's anecdotes firsthand (including his artful imitations of Frost's or Steinbeck's voice and gestures) never forgets the experience nor the lessons Brown recalled learning from his more famous subjects.³

Joe modeled Frost's portrait bust in 1951 after several friends helped persuade the poet to pose. While visiting Princeton for the sessions, Frost saw Joe's nine foot figure Dropped, Antaeus 1951(see illustration 7), a boxer on his backside attempting to get back on his feet. Frost remarked to Joe ". . . Oh, my, someone's given him a good one. Is he going to get up? . . . [Brown] said 'I am never telling'. . . [Frost] 'said, Never do.' They'll[the public] talk about it 10 times as much" Frost then likened the reaction Joe's downed boxer aroused to the reaction his poem "Mending Wall" kindled in people who asked Frost if the poem were an isolationist or interventionalist

piece. Maintaining the mystery, as he advised Joe, he would respond by saying he didn't know what they were talking about (Crump 19). Perceptive observations of Joe's sculpture of athletes, like Frost's, by the other writers who posed for Joe were either not offered or there are no readily available records of any comments tendered. But it is clear they all enjoyed Brown's company.

This was especially true in the case of Steinbeck. Within hours of their first meeting the two became (in Joe's words) " 'old friends,' having raked over the coals the people they both didn't like." He and Steinbeck got together for "posing" sessions on a number of occasions and discussed a variety of topics. During his last visit Steinbeck rendered Joe a tearful reading from a recently completed manuscript, *America and Americans*. The sculptor ascribed the emotion to the fact that, with whatever confidence he had written about the American people, he had not convinced himself that Americans "were going to be all right."

Brown lost the use of his right eye in the 1940's and in the winter of 1978-79 his left eye began to develop serious problems. He continued his work as a sculptor, using a telescopic lens to finish a number of pieces including his Ben Franklin, Craftsman (See Illustration 8) for a downtown Philadelphia location. Franklin, writer, swimmer, scientist, and diplomat, is the classic example of the renaissance individual Joe admired. Brown's mentor, R. Tait McKenzie, also paid tribute to the Youthful_Franklin (1914) in the form of a successful eight foot statue on the Penn campus. Joe's Franklin was not as successful. It generated widespread criticism including the comments of one artist who said it looked like sculpture done "by the blind"(Katz 211). Even those close to Joe confide that his Franklin is not representative of the body of his fine work. Others felt that he should not have attempted to do the Franklin piece while suffering serious eye difficulties. His doing the piece reminds one of an aged and retired champion fighter who returns to fight "one more" fight and normally fails miserably. But Joe, like many of the champions didn't know how or when to quit.

While the eye problems slowed Joe Brown, they did not stop him. This was not the case in his bout with cancer which proved to be his most difficult fight and unfortunately his final one. Even in this the artist found an ironic parallel. In an interview with Tom Fox, a Philadelphia sports writer, Brown remembered a prizefight in which he fought in 1929. He said that he knocked his opponent down fourteen times in three rounds, explaining that the three knock down rule was not in place at that time. To his astonishment this opponent kept getting up, making Joe consider that if this guy kept getting up, he might lose the fight. Joe continued the story by saying that was 50 years ago, ". . . and here I am still fighting, only I'm the one who's getting up. That's life and ". . ."that's why I keep getting up now. You see, it's so easy to be up because it's so much harder to die " (Fox 1984).

The matter of Joe's place in the world of art as a sculptor of athletes

will continue to be evaluated by critics. It appears certain that he will find what to me is his deserved place as the rightful heir of R. Tait McKenzie and a proud member of a tradition reaching back to Thomas Eakins, George Bellows and Marhonri Young. Joe never appeared to be excessively concerned with art critics but early in his career he seemed ever interested in his art winning the approval of respected sports writers. A few of the sports writers who provided Joe and his work warm acceptance and aided in promoting his career were John Kieran, Red Smith, Stanley Woodward, and Arthur Dailey.

In a November 21, 1952 letter, Joe thanked Red Smith for his article about Joe's recent show of sculpture at Yale University. He stated that Smith's article ". . . showed better understanding of my work than anything that has appeared in print." While preparing the article, Smith wrote a letter [n.d., but obviously November 1952] declaring that he would prefer having Joe's Boxers (See illustration 9) ". . . than, say, Marilyn Monroe [in sculpture]." Years later Smith wrote one of the two introductions [the other by Norman Thomas] for Joe's 1966 Retrospective Catalogue 1932-1966, focusing on the boxing pieces which were his favorites. In a December 20, 1966 letter about the Catalogue and its contents Smith compared Joe's sculpture of a boxer with one of the best leads he ever read in a magazine story. He was referring to John Lardner who began a magazine story with "Stanley Ketchel was 24 years old when he was shot and killed by the common-law husband of the lady who was cooking his breakfast." Smith went on with telling Joe ". . . it isn't possible to lay it out more cleanly and sharply and plainly than that. Not on a typewriter, anyway. Perhaps a guy with a blob of clay in his hands can do it still better, but I'd love to see you and John Lardner fight, him with his typewriter and you with your chisel." Near the end of the letter he seemed to favor Joe in such a fight when he wrote (but didn't explain why) that he had a ". . . notion that a piece of sculpture lasts longer than a piece of writing . . ."

Stanley Woodward visited and corresponded with Joe as early as 1949 and clearly relished him and his sculpture of athletes. So did Arthur Daley who exhibited his regard for Joe in his article "Hewn by Hand," for the New York Times on January 14, 1957 when he described Joe as "A rather extraordinary personality . . ." But, of all his writer friends, Joe credits John Kieran, a highly regarded writer with the New York Times, for attracting wide recognition to him and his art work. Kieran wrote about Joe in an excellent 1941 New York Times article, "Clay in a Boxer's Hands," and later alerted and urged the then famous Red Smith to review Joe's 1952 Yale Exhibition. In Joe's judgement these were key events in launching his career as a sculptor/educator and brought him national publicity, including a story in Life magazine.

My last visit, in spring of 1978, with Joe was at his Canal Road studio prior to his illness with cancer. We kept in touch only by telephone after

that. In each phone conversation his voice was weaker but his spirit and determination never seemed to diminish. Even though I eventually realized that Joe wouldn't win this fight, the news of his death in March 1985 came as a shock to me. A few years have passed since then but those of us who knew him still miss him. From time to time I have occasions to meet and talk with other friends or former associates of Joe. We almost always agree that Joe was one of the few people who seemed to know how things fit together. Fortunately, for all of us many of Joe's impressions and insights remain in his art.⁴

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Notes

Interviews and informal discussions the author had with Joe Brown over a Twenty-year period(1963-1985) form the basis for much of the content in this paper.

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1. In 1962 Mr. Lew Feldman, a rare book dealer, of New York City commissioned Joe Brown to do a series of portrait busts of eminent American Literary personalities. The original list of subjects for the project included Carl Sandburg, Pearl Buck, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost and John O'Hara. Thornton Wilder, e.e. cummings and William Faulkner were also mentioned in connection with the project. Thomas Wolfe, who died in 1938, was eventually added to the list and sculpted by Joe from photographs. Brown's letters requesting Sandburg and Buck to pose were unsuccessful. There do not appear to be any letters or documents of direct attempts to solicit Miller, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, e.e. cummings or William Faulkner although Joe wrote a March 27, 1964 letter to Elizabeth Otis, who aided him in getting Steinbeck to pose, indicating that Faulkner agreed to pose but died before it could be initiated.
2. See Robert Frost, "A Day of Prowess," Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Collier Books, 1966; John Steinbeck, "Then My Arm Glassed Up," Sports Illustrated, 23 (Dec. 20, 1965) 94-102; Thomas Wolfe, Letter to Sports Writer Arthur Mann, Feb. 16, 1938; The Letters of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Elizabeth Nowell. New York: Schribners, 1956: 722-23; John O'Hara, Letter to Sports Writer Red Smith, June 10, 1964; Selected Letters of John O'Hara, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli; New York: Random House, 1978: 453; and James A. Michener, Sports in America, New York: Random House, 1976: 3.
3. A few examples of these stories can be read in: Arthur Daily, "Hewn by

Hand," New York Times, 14 January 1957; "A Packet Portrait: The Winner is Often the Loser, He Discovers; "The Princeton Packet 15 July 1965: 1; R.F. Livolsy, "Joe Brown- Sculptor," Princeton Shopper, 29 September 1976: 1, 3; Joe Brown, "Movement and Figurative Sculpture, "Quest, Monograph 23 (1975): 84-87.

4. Joe Brown's sculpture can be viewed in a permanent display at the Harry Fields Gallery of the Sculpture of Joe Brown (which was joined with the Lloyd P. Jones Gallery of the Sculptures of R. Tait McKenzie in Fall 1987) in Gimble Gymnasium at the University of Pennsylvania.