

STEVE HANSEN  
Presentation  
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How did papier mache develop from a childhood exercise into a full-blown career? "It's something that I've always done and when I began to make art for sale, I came back to papier mache. Wood carving, which I actually prefer, takes too long, and bronze casting is tedious. Papier mache is fast and cheap. "

"I like it because I can do large things and not lose spontaneity. There's the least investment of time and I'm always impatient to get my ideas into a form."

Steve Hanson was a native of Tacoma, Washington, and after his father took a job in public relations with Dow Chemical, they moved to Michigan. After he graduated from Midland High School in 1968, he attended WMU off and on for three years, paying his tuition by selling his papier mache creations. "I never ever completed a winter term," he said. "I always left about halfway through for someplace warm, maybe a couple of weeks in southern California or Baja. One time I went to Spain. On another escape my destination was Italy."

He felt that, although he has great respect for them, colleges and universities are too slow a way for learning anything. "When I wanted to learn metalsmithing, for example, I took a job in a foundry for six weeks. A course like that would have lasted at least a term in college, and I wouldn't have learned as much."

He entered one of his figures in his first exhibit when he was 13. By 17, he was being paid to produce them. His art has been his only source of income since 1967.

When Steve is doing a work, he starts out with a drawing "to try to illustrate what I want to accomplish." "That is necessary so that I can build the armature, the frame to hold the material up while it is drying. The frame, a silhouette of the figure, is built of plywood and bits of stiff wire."

The pencil drawing is his blueprint and guides him, but it is not etched in stone, and Hansen often adjusts along the way. Constructing the armature takes anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours, depending on the size and complexity of the figure.

Next, he slops a bunch of unfolded newspapers with glue, wads them sheet by sheet, and sticks the globs on the plywood. Speed is essential to capture the body language and the right proportions.

"The body is then covered with of a couple of layers of heavy-duty paper, like grocery bags. When the figure dries, it shrinks and shrivels up so I have to repeat some of the process to give it the shape that I want. Depending on the size of the

sculpture, it takes ten to fourteen days to allow me to paint it. "By the time it is totally dry, it's almost hollow because there is so much water in papier mache."

The size of his figures range from six inches tall to nearly life-size. His sculptures are described as "whimsical, zany, and absurd," and his sculptures amount to life's inconsistencies made tangible in lumpy papier mache."

Steve has called his works "cartoons of American life. It's all fantasy," he said. "They aren't supposed to be bolts of lightning. If some people see perceptions of themselves in the figures, that's fine.

Hansen depicts ordinary people doing ordinary things, but the results are far from ordinary. With his wry humor and ability to whimsically illustrate universal qualities, he transforms his subjects into timeless sculptures. Hansen views his art simply as distilled observations of the world around him, not as social comment or criticism. However, some of his lifelike figures serve as funny irreverent counterpoints to certain of America's "establishment" ways. He likes to hang around airports because, "people are always carrying really silly stuff."

"I make observations, never statements," Hansen said. "Many of my things are narrative farces. I like them to be regarded as strange objects. I don't think much about my work outside of doing it."

He and his wife currently live in New Mexico.

Sources: Stephen Hansen "The kalamazoo Years" exhibit book and interview by Helen Sheridan, Director of Collections and Exhibitions" – September 8 – November 15, 1992

"The Picasso of Papier Mache" from Encore Magazing of the Arts: March, 1982"