

Ellis Nelson – The Man and His Work

The yard surrounding Ellis Nelson's rural Muscoda studio is filled with a myriad of art pieces ranging from a large metal dinosaur to smaller pieces like the curve-winged metal bats that appear to be flying overhead.



Ellis Nelson

Nelson, a self-taught metal sculptor, began creating sculptures several years ago. The retired auto mechanic and machinist recalls that it all began on a Saturday in February. 'I told my son that I wanted to make a dinosaur sign out of some sheet metal,' he says. His son helped him haul the sheet metal into his work shop but discouraged him saying, 'I wouldn't do it. You don't know anything.'

As it turned out, Nelson knew exactly what he was doing. From the large piece of sheet metal, he made a pretty nice dinosaur fashioned after the old Sinclair oil sign from his station.



He set it out in front of his shop and it immediately began attracting attention. Muscoda's newspaper, The Progressive, was the first to write an article about it followed by the Boscobel Dial. "About a week later, I got a call from the Iowa Telegraph Herald and they wanted pictures of the dinosaur. Everybody thought it was something to see," said Nelson.

Things just took off. It wasn't long and national television began to recognize his work. He was featured on Good Morning America and CNN. In 2013 his son, Tom Nelson, took over the business. For further information please go to darkmetalartworks.com.

A lifelong native of the small river town of Muscoda, he remains unspoiled by his quick and ever-increasing fame, Nelson explains it all by saying "I just started building things. I was probably one of the lucky ones in life; I soon found my medium was metal work."



Nelson said that his projects all begin with a mental image.

"You have to have a vision in your mind. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with a vision, and the first thing I do in the morning is build it."

Nelson explained that while most of his visions come to him at night, he also draws inspiration from pictures. Looking around his old repair shop turned sculptor's studio, one sees clippings from newspapers and a copy of a book featuring birds. Nelson says that he often sees an image he likes and then studies and mulls it over for a few days before deciding to recreate his artistic version of it.



It's surprising to learn that some of his smaller works are created in a relatively short time. Due to advanced technology, he has replaced the acetylene torch he once used for cutting metal with a more sophisticated air plasma cutter. "Things that took a half hour to cut out can now be done in seven to ten minutes. Another advantage is that it cuts so clean with no slag on the other side," Nelson said.

Over the years, Nelson has equipped his studio with a number of imaginative machines which were self-built in an effort to accommodate his work. The largest of these is a heat-regulated furnace fueled by sawdust. It serves as a source of heat for the studio as well as a forge for his metal work.



Nelson's sculptures can be seen at the Performing Arts Center in Milwaukee and the Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland but Nelson contends that his sculpture is "just a hobby." Friendly and unpretentious, he enjoys having people stop by to see his work and chat. He doesn't even mind if they have come to copy his work. "I was the leader; now people copy my work and it's really an honor to me."

A person who believes that "If you're going to create for the money, you'll never find satisfaction." Nelson has been an Auction donor since 1989. As this year's Commemorative Artist he is donating 21 metal sculptures. Each of the sculptures, unique and signed by the artist, is fashioned to resemble the heron-like bird known as an egret.

