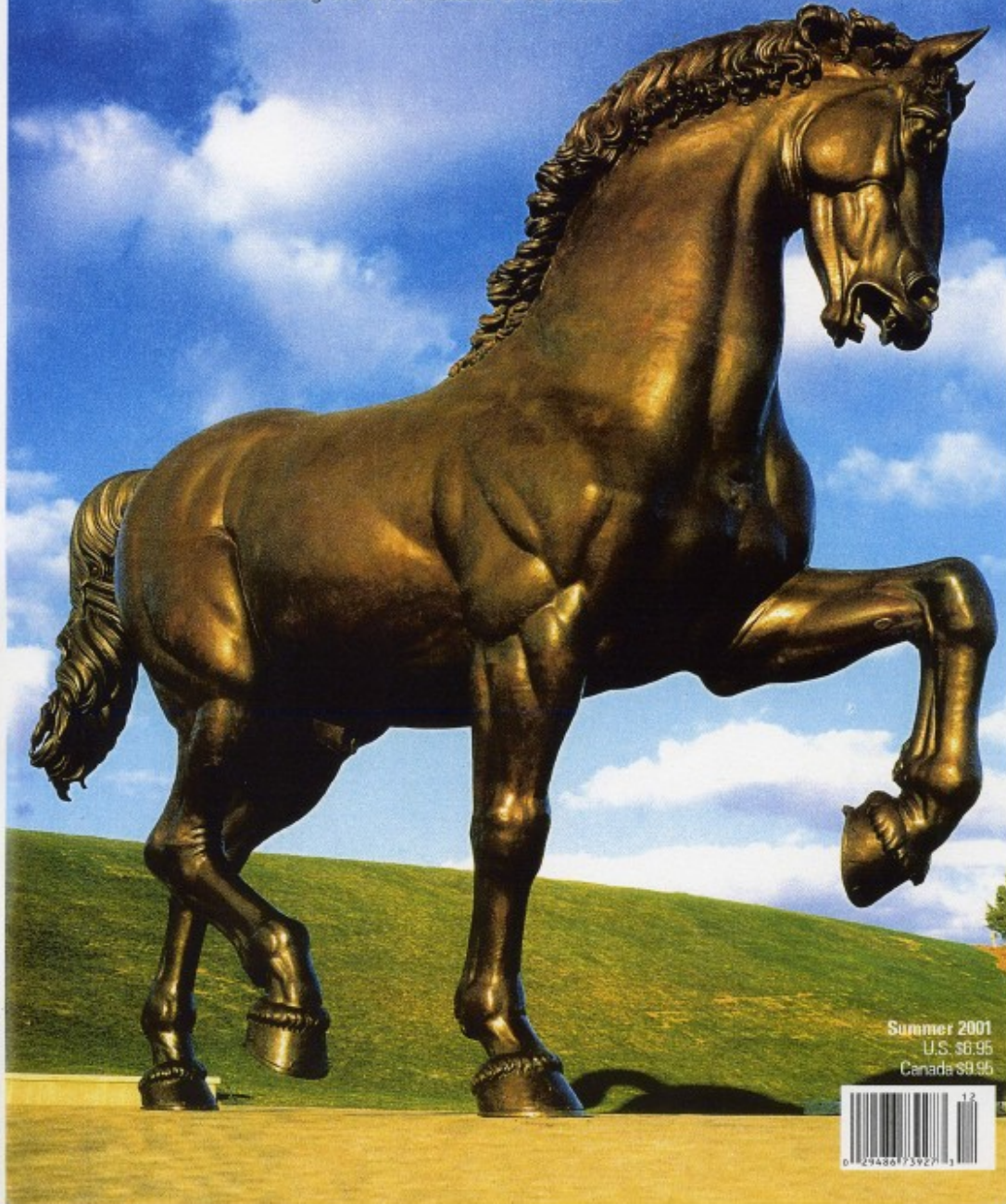


EQUINE IMAGES

Celebrating the Art & Culture of the Horse



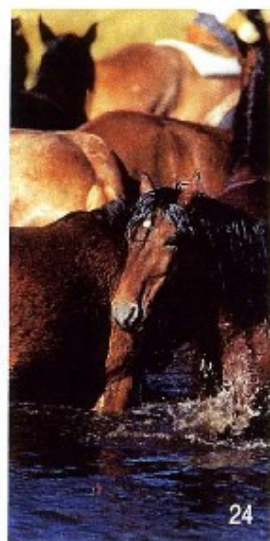
Cover story by Tania G. Evans for Equine Images. Interview with Frederik Meijer, whose patronage allowed the completion of a plan begun by Leonardo da Vinci to create a bronze horse. The 6 million dollar project was finished by sculptor Nina Akamu. The 30-foot American Horse stands at the Meijer Sculpture Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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Frederik Meijer*



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The 125-acre Frederik Meijer Gardens features the largest tropical conservatory in Michigan.

the **GROCCER'S GIFT**

Frederik Meijer Gardens commemorates history, community, and the fulfillment of dreams

By Tania Evans



The 1999 unveiling of *The American Horse* took place in a green bowl surrounded by hills that nine years earlier had almost been turned into a store and parking lot. Instead, the retailer Frederik Meijer donated the 70 acres of wetlands and woodlands to create a botanic garden. He bestowed with it his 40-piece sculpture collection.

The public gift, Frederik Meijer Gardens, now contains more than 100 contemporary American sculptures – including many significant equine pieces – and has been visited by more than a million people since its 1995 opening in Grand Rapids, Mich.

In commemoration of *The American Horse*, Meijer said, “Dreams may appear to die while they are merely being transformed.”

Transformation is a key theme for the Meijer family, owners of the successful chain of grocery/retail stores. In 2001, the Gardens has just finished the first of four scheduled expansions. The additional 65,000 square feet houses a state-of-the-art, 800-seat multipurpose auditorium; a new sculpture complex including galleries and the Snell Sculpture Center, a permanent exhibit; a new library, café, and gift shops; and additional classrooms.

The Gardens’ equine pieces comprise about 10 percent of the world-class sculpture collection. Meijer and his wife, Lena, personally acquired each equine piece in homage to their rural childhood.

Born in 1919 in Greenville, Mich., to Dutch immigrants Hendrik and Gezina Meijer, Fred was 14 when he began working in his father’s one-room family grocery,

Thrift Market. Hendrik Meijer had been a successful barber, but during the Depression no one bought haircuts. So at age 50, he started a store. He purchased stock on credit and took up dairy farming to supply the store’s milk for a time. Hendrik Meijer tried different retail concepts, learning what worked from his customers. The one-room store became today’s 143 stores, employing 85,000.

Lena Meijer grew up in nearby Amble and milked cows after school. When she graduated from high school, she went to work in Meijer’s one-room store. She had dreamed



Nina Akamu, found in Meijer, shown above with his wife, Lena, the support she needed to make *The American Horse* a reality.



Deborah Butterfield's 1999 bronze, *Cabin Creek*, refers to the area where she gathered the original materials. The acquisition was a step into a more conceptual direction for the collection.

of becoming a professional softball player, but exigencies of life in the 1930s led her to work and five years later to marriage and motherhood.

Fred Meijer became interested in sculpture in 1983 after being asked to find a piece that would commemorate his hometown at its Danish Festival. Meijer was intrigued by the work of Marshall Fredericks, a contemporary Michigan-

**"Art cannot be cold," says Meijer.
"It must radiate emotion."**

based sculptor. In addition to funding the Greenville project, he began accumulating the largest private collection of Fredericks' sculpture.

Meijer got involved with the West Michigan Horticultural Society's project to establish a public botanic garden in 1991, and in the spring of 1995, the Frederik Meijer Gardens opened to the public.

"Tomorrow the grocery business may be entirely different," remarked Meijer, "but the Gardens will remain. No one knows who funded the Sistine Chapel, but we all benefit from it."

In 2001, the Gardens' collection has grown to more than 100 sculptures, including works by international artists such as Auguste Rodin, Alexander Calder, Marshall Fredericks, Deborah Butterfield, Kirk Newman, Carl Jensen, and Gary Price.

The Meijers first admired Gary Price's work in Palm Springs, where they saw the girl with the sprinkling can, *Candace*. They liked it enough to travel to Price's studio in Utah and buy it.

The couple ended up getting to know the sculptor and also bought *Wind, Earth, and Fire* from him, the first limited edition of five. Price created the 12-foot equine bronze in 1990, choosing to include three horses for the sake of design and composition. Price said the unusual bond between Arab owners and their animals inspired the piece.

The Meijers came across Carl Jensen's quiet, dignified pieces at the annual Sculptural Invitational in Colorado, and Frederik Meijer connected immediately with a workhouse bronze. "I liked the Jensen piece because it reminded me of my father-in-law. He was in business during the logging era. First he cooked in the lumber kitchen, and then he hauled logs to a mill with horses. Then he bought 40 acres of land full of stumps. In order to farm, he had to stump the land. Jensen's horse in harness reminded me of that farm full of stumps. That's why I bought it... We didn't start out intending to collect equine art, but I like history... *Mac* is a reminder that Michigan was a white-pine state and we (in Michigan) logged it off."

Meijer has commissioned three Jensen bronzes: *Mac*, *Babe*, and *The Horseshoe*. Babe was a Welsh pony modeled on Fred's three childhood ponies. He says, "If you can ride a tricky pony, you can ride anything. We had ponies to pull the milk cart, and I peddled milk then, from five to 12 cents

a quart. We farmed, too, so we had horses to pull the plows...we had so many work horses."

Most of the equine sculptures he collects are representational — keys to concrete memories. The Gardens' first move into more experimental work came in 1999, the same year that *The American Horse* was unveiled. The Gardens purchased a bronze by the contemporary sculptor Deborah Butterfield. Based in Montana, Butterfield is known for using found materials to create her stark and powerful horses. *Cabin Creek* was created from sticks, lumber, and bark and later cast in bronze. Meijer Gardens Curator Joseph Becherer says, "For us the Butterfield is a significant work...it makes the transition from traditional, highly representational sculpture like *The American Horse* and goes for something more challenging aesthetically...there are other ideas at play."

"The name *Cabin Creek*," explains Butterfield, "is a mix of the man-made and the natural. A horse that is trained is such a combination. Horses throughout the years have chosen to link up with man, and, in turn, influence the way we think. I'm kind of obsessed with horses. They're my canvas,

but I'm really dealing with abstract notions."

The Meijer Sculpture Committee chair, Lynn Vinkemulder, liked the Butterfield. "We on the committee have to convince each other to buy a piece," says Meijer. "I didn't see anything good about it. But the Dutch have a saying, 'First you condemn, then you consider, then you praise.' And I've come to like the Butterfield."

*"The Dutch have a saying,
'First you condemn, then you
consider, then you praise.'"*

The American Horse

In 1996, Meijer's son Hank, a partner in his business endeavors, read an article in the *New York Times* about the Leonardo da Vinci horse project and its financial problems. The project began when Charles Dent, an airline pilot and amateur artist, learned about da Vinci's unfinished commission, *Il Cavallo*, in *National Geographic* magazine. Com-



Mac by Carl Jensen reminded Meijer of his father-in-law's farming efforts and of the logging history of Michigan, a white-pine state.

Frederik Meijer



missioned in 1476 by the Duke of Milan, da Vinci built a 24-foot model of the horse and began collecting bronze to cast it. But in 1499, Milan was invaded by France and the publicly displayed model was destroyed by the French army's arrows. In 1982, Dent gathered scholars and artists for research and established a nonprofit organization, Leonardo da Vinci's Horse, Inc., to recreate the horse to present it to Italy on the 500th anniversary of the clay model's destruction. The group ran into one problem after another, and in 1994 Dent died.

The younger Meijer encouraged his father to get involved, and a Meijer group traveled to the studio of Nina Akamu, who had been brought into the project to correct the flaws of the eight-foot Dent model. It would prove not fixable. Technically, the sculpture was inaccurate — bones were the wrong length, muscles had been sculpted where they didn't exist. "It just didn't have the flair or fire it should have," said Neil Estern, a sculptor at the Tallix Foundry in Beacon, N.Y., where the horse was cast.

Ultimately the committee came to recognize the need to discard the Dent model and begin a new one. "The committee gave me the permission, brave on their part, to do it entirely again," says Akamu. "Luckily, Fred had faith in me. Who would ever say, 'We know you can do this 24-foot sculpture'? How would they know? How would I know? I had never even done an eight-foot



Craftsmen from the Tallix Art Foundry in Beacon, N.Y., pour molten bronze into sand molds of sections of the 24-foot American Horse, which arrived in Grand Rapids, Mich., in seven pieces. A crane lifted and placed each piece. Workers then bolted and welded the pieces into place.



During the 17 years Leonardo da Vinci worked on his plans for the colossal horse, he made many small sketches. Although none of the drawings reveal the horse's final position, Akamu studied da Vinci's thoughts on anatomy and art, as well as other visual and literary sources to determine the best interpretation of the 500-year-old project.

“Who would ever say, ‘We know you can do this 24-foot sculpture?’ How would they know? How would I know? I had never even done an eight-foot one.”

one. But I really didn't have any doubt.”

Bogged down by the da Vinci organization's constraints of time, politics, and finances, she found in Meijer the support she needed to finish the project.

“Nina puts her love of horses and of history... in her art,” states Meijer. “The art represents the artist...For example, the Dent group proposed gold leaf. But (Nina) didn't want it. You couldn't see the muscle.”

With a \$2.5-million gift from Meijer, two bronzes of the 24-foot horse were cast. The twin of *The American Horse* was delivered to Milan, Italy, in 1995 — the culmination of the dreams of many.

“The project was so exciting — there were so many techni-



Akamu created Pegasus, a tribute to a small Anglo-Arab stallion, when she lived in Piasanto, Italy.

Frederik Meijer



Bobo, a pony that speaks memories for Meijer, is one of three pieces by Carl Jensen at the Gardens.

cal hurdles to figure out," reflected Akamu. "There was no room for mistake because of the time constraint. We used an enlarging method, which I originated and my assistants developed, called a laser pointer. Imagine (that) one muscle is the size of a person. So I'm on the ground and there are pairs of people working up there on the horse. They were

Meijer hands out ice cream coupons and smiles.
"I hope the Gardens will expose young people to art, to sculpture."

sculpting blindly. I'd have one pair of people on the horse sculpting and another person... about 15 yards back using a laser pointer on a tripod. She would look at sections of my eight-foot model — we had drawings all over the little model — and then follow these with the pointer. The sculptor or the big horse marked the lines on the big horse surface. It was a very efficient technique for colossal sculpture. With

the pointer and headphones, we could do it all."

"Art cannot be cold," says Meijer. "It must radiate emotion." The 24-foot colossus indeed radiates emotion. Visitors to the Gardens are compelled to touch the magnificent bronze on the hoof or the fetlock.

Pegasus by Akamu, now in the Gardens' collection, came through the da Vinci project. When Meijer and his son first visited Akamu's studio in New York, they saw two of her bronzes, *Pegasus* and *Fighting Lions*. In awe of *Pegasus*, Hank Meijer exclaimed, "Wouldn't that be good for the Gardens!" And that's all his father had to hear — they bought them both.

Akamu was living in Piesanto, Italy, when she created *Pegasus*. "It was based on a small Anglo-Arab stallion I was riding. I did it right in his stall with him. He kept trying to bite and... was unmanageable. ... But I had an unusual connection with him. I began to ride him... I would get up early and take him to the beach and ride him bareback in the Mediterranean. With a lot of handling he became wonderful."

Akamu's *Pegasus* and *Fighting Lions* today sit on pedestals in lively public spaces in the newest addition at the Gardens. Meijer, like the grocer he was, walks through the corridor near *Pegasus* silhouetted by the seven-story glass botanical gardens, greeting those whom he knows and introducing himself to new visitors.

Meijer's philanthropy promotes several hopes. One is that family and community history must be remembered.

He believes that people worldwide should see themselves as friends and compatriots. He puts faith in the attributes of the local community — he promotes Michigan talent. The Gardens collection includes a bronze by Kalamazoo, Mich.,



Marshall Fredericks' bronze creatures were the beginning of what is now the Gardens' world-class sculpture collection.

artist Kirk Newman. It is a grouping of children from different races and lifestyles, some with physical disabilities. They form a playful, joyous circle.

To Meijer, education is the key to equality, so he and his wife created the Frederik Meijer Gardens. There, children are free to climb on the first sculptures Meijer commissioned, the Marshall Fredericks animals, including a 12-foot-long dragon, two big bears, and a gazelle.

Meijer hands out ice cream coupons and smiles. "I hope the Gardens will expose young people to art, to sculpture. My grandmother Meijer, my dad's mother, always said, 'The eye wants something, too.'" ♦

If You Go...

FREDERIK MEIJER GARDENS

Michigan Botanic Garden & Meijer Sculpture Park

1000 East Beltline Northeast • Grand Rapids, Mich. 49525

Tel. 616.957.1580 • toll-free: 888.957.1580

Hours

Mon. – Sat.: 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Sun.: noon – 5 p.m.

Admission:

Adults (14 and older): \$7

Seniors (65 and older): \$6

Children (5-13): \$3.50

The Gardens is easily accessible to wheelchairs and strollers.



Gary Price, *Wind, Earth, and Fire*

ON THE MEIJER GARDENS SUMMER CALENDAR:

"Master-Teachers: West Michigan Sculpture Faculty" is the first exhibition dedicated to regional sculptors on the faculty of area colleges and universities. The exhibition profiles a vital strand of the region's rich and diverse traditions in sculpture by many of its leading artists. Through June 17.

"Philip Grausman," an artist and professor at Yale focuses on the human figure, following the classical tradition of figurative art. His experimentation with scale and monumentality, however, is wholly unique. Exhibit features both sculpture and paintings. July 1-Sept. 29.

"Gardens of Discovery – Summer Experience" highlights the Gardens many outdoor gardens in the full bloom of summer. Explore nature trails that lead you along Michigan wetlands, with plant and sculpture surprises at every turn. Through Labor Day.

"Spring Tea in the Victorian Garden" features scones, tea sandwiches, desserts, and English teas. Ladies in Victorian dress describe the customs of the Victorian period. \$15 per person includes admission to the Gardens. July 15, 1-2:30 p.m. Reservations required. Call 616.957.1580.

For more information and calendar listings, visit the Gardens website:

www.meijergardens.org