

# PROFILE OF AN ARTIST

**WALT RICKLI, LOWVILLE, ONTARIO**

By Kate West

*The Hamilton Examiner*

Our artists live somewhat precarious lives, the price they pay for their independence. They are often more attuned to our world than the rest of us have time to be. They must give by the nature of their art, and they need our support as surely as we need their insights to survive.

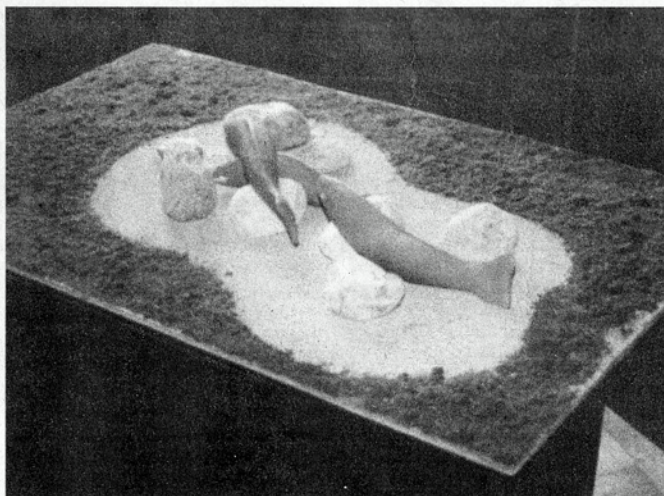
In the great artistic tradition Walt Rickli thinks great things are possible, and occasionally proves it. Four years ago he moved from the successful family business of landscape gardening to the precarious venture of creating stone sculptures. This required learning the technical craft of stone cutting. He understands that it is the actual activity that inspires his artistic ability. The minute decisions he makes as the stone takes shape under his chisel. At first he made exquisite copies - a necessary discipline - now he designs his own, making a plasticine maquette before beginning on the stone detailing.

He has built many gardens, but it was his own that we visited on this summer day of scattered showers. A structured garden it has a lyrical formality about it, made up of sounds as well as plants and sculptures, all waiting for their moment to speak to us, in the sun or in the rain or in the moonlight - such is art. Walt carves stone fountains too, designed to fit into any garden they are subtle, sometimes seem almost natural, and in other cases they stand strong and alone. As we approach, the wrought iron gate, leading into the garden, is open. There are holes to take the latch to hold it closed, but no apparent latch, just the curved iron, reminiscent of vines framed by the outline of the gate, with a few iron sprigs shooting loose over it all. The open gate is not an oversight, this is a form of welcome. If you want your gate to remain open, don't have a latch.

The structure of this garden is made up of the strong pattern of gravel walk ways, a few young trees, stone benches

as sculptures and fountains as sculptures and plain unapologetic sculptures. Both the fountains and the sculptures, large and small, are sequestered in nooks and shadows. You discover them one at a time.

Walt's garden is really a forecourt to the studio building where he meets his clients and displays his work. This day the studio is quiet and shows to advantage a few of his smaller works. Of particular interest is the model he has done depicting the return of the salmon. His property, situated in Lowville, edges Bronte Creek, and overlooks the old mill and dam not far beyond. Walt tells the story of how the salmon once came as far as Lowville to spawn, all the way from the salt water of the Atlantic. Unable to withstand the growing pollution from water runoff all along Bronte Creek they died off. Several years ago it was decided to try and see if the Pacific Salmon could better withstand the pollution, and minnows were set into the creek at many locations, usually near a cluster of rocks which they learned to call home. As they grew they traveled a little farther away until they eventually reached adolescence and took off looking for salt water. They now return each year to spawn near their



*Plasticine Maquette made by Walt Rickli for future Salmon Sculpture in Lowville Park.*

original home base and they have become huge.

Walt wanted to celebrate this achievement of man helping nature. He could see the excitement of the salmon as they raced against the strong spring current and each other in their hard race for survival. He had learned that it is possible to work with nature and make a real difference. A sculpture of the salmon jumping in their swim of a lifetime, appealed to him as a fitting work to enhance the grounds of his neighbouring park. He has a sample of the black stone carved into a tail of a fish to illustrate the finish on the stone he has chosen to use for the trio of fish.

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But to erect a sculpture in a public park you have to have the public's permission. Thus he approached the City of Burlington to obtain permission to place such a sculpture in Lowville Park, and as a committee had to be formed, it took eight months. Eventually permission was granted and now this committee exists for the next artist who wishes to enrich our public spaces with sculptures.

And so the work is ready to begin. The stone has been located and the designs finished but such work is costly. The raw flecked black stone must be transported to his work space, from Nova Scotia, where it is located and it will take him and others many hours to finish the work and see it installed in the park. This requires sponsorship which has not yet been finalized. What an opportunity for an investor to commemorate an artistic celebration of one of the good things we have managed to achieve. In today's world there are few such substantial and appropriate artistic opportunities to support.

Walt, chose a new direction only a few years ago. He had to learn a new skill to be able to be the creative man he wanted to become. Stone carving is hard work but now he can work and live his life with a sense of fulfillment - the reward of creativity. He enjoys the necessity of the precision of his work as an artist, he cultivates his garden and he leaves his gate open to the world.