

James Marshall Labor of Love

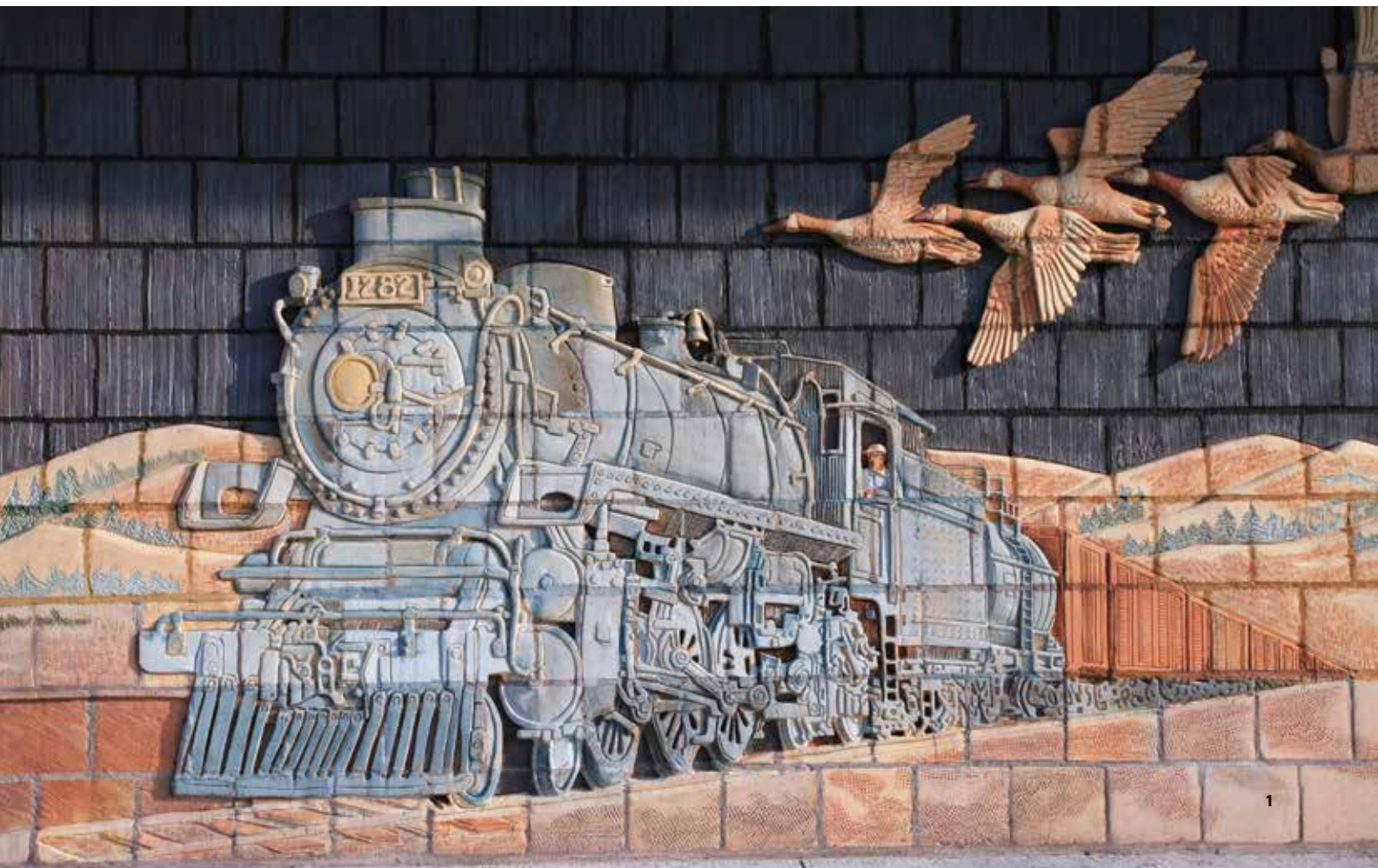
by Heidi McKenzie

I arrived at Medalta's BMO Artist Lodge in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada, for my two-month artist residency in the coldest winter on record. Every morning at dawn in sub-zero temperatures, from my window I witnessed an elderly, surprisingly spry gentleman feeding the lame and underfed local wild deer. He turned out to be James Marshall, a living legend, a mere 200 miles north of Montana's US border.

Marshall is a polymath—his art includes drawings, ceramics, sculptures, and an established career as a brick muralist. Marshall is also an avid archeologist and heritage conservationist. He is a founding member of the Alberta Potters Association, the Alberta Craft Council, and the Friends of Medalta. The latter is the organization

responsible for resurrecting and preserving the abandoned Medalta Potteries and transforming the sprawling site into a world-class museum, educational facility, and flourishing hub of local cultural festivities. In the last decade, Medalta has become the Canadian mecca for international ceramics creation and research through the establishment of the Shaw International Centre for Contemporary Ceramics.

In addition to being skilled in multiple disciplines, Marshall is an autodidact—his mother used to say that he started drawing before he could walk. Marshall headed to Toronto at the age of 17 in order to train as a lithographer—a new technology in the 1950s that he applied in order to help modernize his father's printing shop in Medicine Hat. Twelve years later, in 1968, Marshall was cherry



picked to take over marketing and publicity for the local IX-L Industries Ltd., which produced brick, stone, and building products. Soon after, Marshall wed his love for art with his new profession, and began carving display bricks at trade shows. His creative flair attracted a growing fleet of architects, inspired by the artistic possibilities of brick murals. The architectural community promoted a newly formed international brick association of Canada and the US, and Marshall's brick mural practice took flight.

Nurturing Skills

Marshall never set aside his passion for creating and nurtured his skills in pottery under the guidance and mentorship of Luke Lindoe, all the while keeping up with his first love, documenting local historic buildings and heritage landscapes in pen and ink. By 1977, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary invited Marshall to present his first solo exhibition of pen-and-ink drawings of heritage buildings. It was a sold-out show. The following year, he mounted another sold-out show in Medicine Hat. These successes buoyed Marshall and his wife, Lorine Dederer, to go it alone as a full-time artists. They founded their own studio, Grassroots Studio, in 1978. Just over four decades later, Marshall has two sons, a daughter, eight grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. He has designed and sculpted over 300 brick murals around the world, and continues to draw, throw, and sculpt.

Standing in Marshall's live-work space, I was moved by a composite photograph that depicts the Elders of the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Nation telling their story to the next generation. It shows the creation of the people and the animals, the dog days, buffalo hunting techniques, the introduction of horses, and the end of the buffalo on Chief Mountain. Marshall worked closely with the First Nation Community Elders to translate their vision onto this 10x50-foot mural, which is situated in Standoff, Alberta. It is a powerful and moving piece, and one I hope to behold in person on my next trip to Alberta.

Perhaps the most well-known of Marshall's murals is a 17-panel installation that depicts the Stations of the Cross. It was commissioned by Garden Park at St. Joseph's Home in Medicine Hat. Having taken eight years to produce, this work continues to draw tourists from around the world. Today, Medicine Hat promotes walking tours of Marshall's more than 30 local and regional brick murals made for the private and public sector alike as part of its tourism strategy.



1 Mural at a water park, built and commissioned by the Wainwright, Alberta Rotary Club, 2014. 2 A test mural, trying different clay bodies from Plainsman Clays Limited. The buffalo is projecting out of the scene four feet, to test this new, more refined clay material.

Design and Process

Each mural is a distinct labor of love. Marshall finds the design to be the most difficult part of the process. Working with, pleasing and appeasing clients, and meshing their expectations with realistic outcomes requires a rare blend of diplomacy and negotiation, both traits that seem innate to this artist. Once the pen-and-ink sketch receives a green light, Marshall sets up the required number of bricks for the commissioned piece on a large easel. This is a makeshift wall in the IX-L live-work studio, which Marshall has called home for the past four years. Each brick is numbered corresponding to the grid on the blueprint of the approved design. The sheer scale of each work requires Marshall to mount scaffolding to work effectively above a 4-foot level. On average, Marshall estimates that it takes him about 6 weeks to carve an 8x8-foot mural and get it into the drying racks. If the mural is larger than his 12x20-foot easel, he builds in sections. These days, Marshall uses old-school overhead projection technology to guide the first



3 Murals start with a design, drawn to scale with cross hatching that depicts varying depths of the carving process. **4** Setting up clay blocks from Plainsman Clays on the large easel. **5** Carving a brick mural depicting a buffalo jump in Havre, Montana. The mural was installed in Havre near the 3000-year-old historic site and tourist attraction. **6** After completing the carving and coloring process, the mural blocks are spread out in these drying racks where they remain for about a month. When completely dry, the blocks are loaded onto the kiln car, which can fit a 10x12-foot mural. The firing starts with a night of candling with pilots only, and then continues for 42 hours with six burners gradually bringing the final temperature to 2160°F (1182°C). It takes four days for the kiln to cool enough to open. Then the blocks are loaded into special boxes with liners, giving each block its own space. The boxes are stacked on a pallet, bagged, shrink wrapped, and ready to be shipped or sent by trailer to the job site to be installed.

pass of roughing in the design onto the bricks. Then he sets about carving and sculpting in a bas-relief style, periodically carting out the trimming debris in his trusty wheelbarrow.

Marshall used to source bricks directly from IX-L, but tragically in 2010 the plant closed its doors after irreparable flood damage destroyed its kilns and recently automated systems. Since that time, Plainsman Clays Limited (conveniently located just down the road) has been manufacturing purpose-built, solid, carvable greenware bricks. Each brick weighs 35 pounds. Handling in the range of 192 bricks for an 8-foot square mural, to mount, dismount, place on the specially rigged drying rack for a month, then load and unload from the kiln, and ultimately pack for transport keeps Marshall in top physical condition. Marshall uses a large gas car kiln to fire the bricks. He candles the kiln overnight and then fires to 2160°F (1182°C)



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7 Riverside School Medicine Hat mural, 1993–94. The school, which started as two small buildings and was rebuilt in the 1940s, is located on a flat plain along the South Saskatchewan River where the Blackfoot Tribes camped and hunted buffalo. In the early days, ca. 1940s, some kids played hookie and went swimming, and the silk trains roared through the city in a non-stop dash to the factories in Ontario. **8** Marshall remade the earlier test mural (see 2) with the preferred clay body. The finished mural was sold to the new hotel built on the site of the *Buffalo Jump* mural in Havre, Montana. This latest addition mural depicts the hunt after the hunter-gatherer plains people got the horse in the late 1600s to early 1700s, dramatically changing their way of life for the better.

over 2 days, and allows 4 days for cooling. At times, Marshall works in color and applies engobes to the greenware bricks to achieve specific effects.

Marshall likens sculpting clay to the decisiveness of pen and ink: there are no do-overs. “Once you’ve made your mark,” he says, “there’s no changing it. What you’ve made is there forever, just like a brick wall.” Sometimes the chemistry of clay itself causes mischief and mishap. Marshall describes a near catastrophe in the early 1990s where an architect in Camrose, Alberta, Canada, insisted on red brick, as opposed to the usual yellow/gray-hued carvable bricks. The project entailed a 38-foot mural that detailed the fauna of a host of creatures set in a large nature park. Marshall decided to move forward by adding 3% iron oxide to the gray brick body. Instead of the moisture leaching out from the inside to the surface as anticipated, the iron oxide migrated to the center of the brick. When the kiln reached 700°F (371°C) the center of each brick liquefied. Marshall vividly recounts, “it started to sound just like popcorn. There was no way to stop it, no matter what I did.” Marshall’s tactic was to continue to let the bricks blow up at 700°F (371°C), stop the firing, cool, then open the kiln, pull out all the broken shards, set them aside, and clean up the burner ports and debris from all over the kiln. He placed the shards in buckets, resealed the



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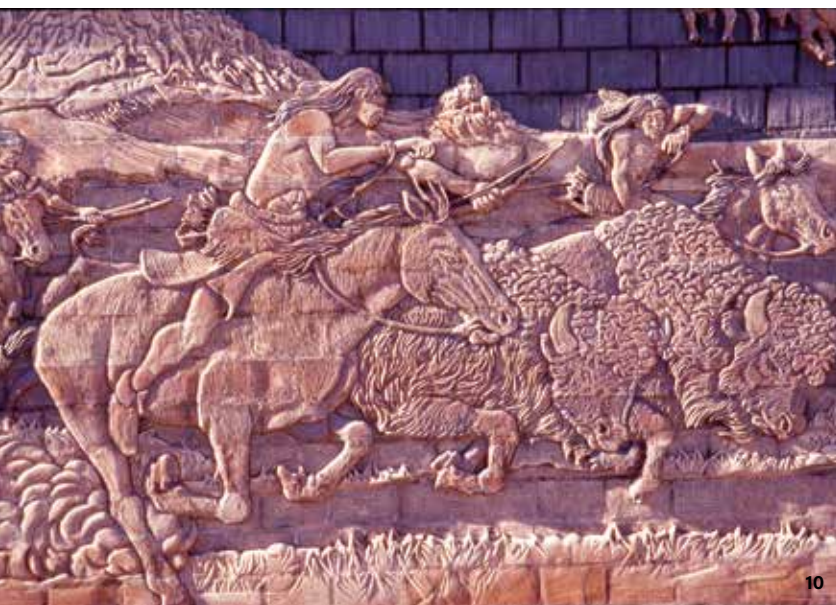


kiln and finished the firing. He then had to lay out the whole mural to identify which bricks were lost and recarve all those that were lost, adjusting for 10% shrinkage. He repeated the process until all the holes were filled.

Accomplishments

Marshall considers himself a lucky man. When he started carving bricks, he thought he was a lone trailblazer. Later he realized there were others doing similar work in the US. He travelled to meet, befriend, and share technologies with his fellow muralist and contemporary, Ken Williams, whose family continues the tradition in Pueblo, Colorado. Still later, Marshall realized that the Babylonians and Egyptians had beat him and his contemporaries to brick carving by nearly five millennia. Marshall reflects that creating over 300 brick murals is quite a “neat thing” to have accomplished thus far, adding that, “I’ve had a good time making art out of the earliest and probably the best building material known to man.”

As I was standing in the doorway to take leave after my interview, Marshall launched into his plans for the future. He turned 80 in April of this year, and it seemed natural for him to chart out the next two decades of his life: he plans to retire from mural making soon (with three projects on the go before year’s end) and travel in his new camper van to parts of the continent he has yet to explore. Keep your eyes peeled for a sure-footed cracker-jack of an octogenarian, easel or sketch pad at the ready, as he continues to document the world as we know it today for generations to come.



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9-12 Mural, 50 ft. (15 m) in length, on the Blood Indian Reserve High School in the southeast corner of Alberta. The Bloods are part of the Blackfoot Federation. The mural depicts their history: from left to right, the Creator, creating the people and the animals of the earth; the dog days when the people moved and hunted on foot, using dogs to pull their lodges and belongings from place to place; skinning and tanning hides; and making tools and points. Late in their history, their lives were changed dramatically with the horse’s introduction and the hunt, finally the spread of the white culture, the end of the buffalo, and the Elder telling the stories of the people and the past.