

From legendary athletes to historical luminaries, Zenos Frudakis has created some monumental works of art.

By JoAnn Greco

Sculpting a Life Story

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Muhammad Ali was always larger than life, but encountering him in the middle of a sunlit barn in the Philadelphia suburbs is especially startling. That's partly because he's split in half.

Head slightly tilted, his gloved fists are poised to sting like a bee. The elastic waistband of his boxing shorts, clearly marked by the Everlast logo, rises above the table upon which his torso rests. On a neighboring wood plank, planted in a wide stance, his boot-shod feet seem antsy, itching to dance in the ring. Adding to the late boxing champion's presence: he's flanked by a modestly

Previous page: Frudakis in his studio.

Below: detail of Muhammad Ali's boot, with reference photo and sculpture tools.



halves are destined for Lewiston, Maine, where “The Greatest” famously knocked out Sonny Liston in round one of their 1965 heavyweight championship rematch—they’ll join Frudakis’s oeuvre of 100-plus figurative works.

Over four decades, the sculptor has earned commissions to capture many sports luminaries in action (including a quartet of Philadelphia Phillies Hall of Famers—Mike Schmidt, Steve Carlton, Robin Roberts, Richie Ashburn—that greet fans outside of Citizens Bank Park), as well as historic personages like Clarence Darrow, Martin Luther King Jr., Frederick Law Olmsted, and Nina Simone. It’s a prodigious output that reflects his diverse interests. “I have an intrinsic desire to learn,” Frudakis says. “And I’ve gotten to the point where I can be picky about what I take on. A lot of these people are personal heroes.”

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Dressed in a black polo shirt and black pants, Frudakis weaves through the other nearly completed statues positioned around his studio. There’s Thomas Paine (eventually headed to the National Mall) and teen idol Bobby Rydell (making its way to Wildwood, New Jersey). At the far end of the studio, a life-sized form of a stalking jaguar waits patiently to move on to the Elmwood Park Zoo in Norristown, Pennsylvania. The Ben Franklin sculpture? “That’s not a commission,” Frudakis says. “It’s for me, for now. He’s important to me. He’s part of America’s Enlightenment age.”

He continues his tour, pointing to some of the dozens of bronze and plaster artist’s proof casts that rest on top of the bookshelves, crammed with art and history tomes, that line the walls. “There’s

attired Benjamin Franklin and a confident Thomas Paine, holding a quill pen in one hand and a copy of *Common Sense* in the other.

The three 10-foot-tall pieces occupy center stage in this huge studio, where sculptor Zenos Frudakis FA’82 GFA’83 spends most of his waking hours. Here,

over the next few weeks, just steps away from his clapboard home, Frudakis will add textural details to the statues before workers from Laran Bronze, a fine art foundry in Chester, Pennsylvania, come to collect them for casting. After they’re completed and settled in their new homes—Ali’s soon-to-be-joined

From top: Benjamin Franklin in fur cap and bifocals, life-size portrait in the round of Frederick Douglass, portrait relief of Charles Darwin, and a rough study for a bust of Don McLean.

Payne Stewart—I do a lot of golfers,” he says. “Here’s an RBG that I gave to Hillary Clinton. That’s [’70s balladeer] Don McLean, he’s become my best friend. There’s our dog.”

Pausing his stream-of-consciousness chatter for a minute, he peers down at his hand. “What am I doing, walking around with this thing?” he says of the pointy chisel he’s holding. “Your tools become an extension of your fingers and thumb.” Over the years, he’s acquired vintage tools like this one from the estates of sculptors who have died. “You don’t see many of these anymore—they have handles made from ebony and other exotic woods. And look at this,” he adds, stopping to grab a small chunk of what looks like dark gray putty from a larger ball. It’s an oil-based clay from Italy that’s about 100 years old and valued for its ability to stay moist and



Bust of Ruth Bader Ginsburg flanked by Mark Twain and two casts of Ulysses S. Grant, and a photo of Frudakis at five or six in a traditional Greek military uniform.



be reused. “I have some of this stuff that was used for the Lincoln Memorial and the sculpture of Ben Franklin at the Franklin Institute,” Frudakis says. “I love those connections to history.”

Before he even raises antique chisel to pre-loved clay, Frudakis’s preparations include—depending on whether the subject is a historical hero or a living legend—sifting through books, articles, and photographs for information and inspiration; interviewing the subject’s peers or family members; preparing a series of sketches and/or painting a portrait and sourcing the props that will help enliven the sculpture. Forming the piece involves dozens of additional steps, with hundreds of modifications and course corrections along the way.

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Growing up in an Indiana household where his Greek-American parents didn’t speak much English at home, Frudakis says “my first language, in a sense, was visual. I remember a babysitter who liked to sketch, and she drew a profile with two noses. I thought, *that doesn’t match the reality I see*, so I redrew a face with one nose. I remember a little later taking a test at school and when I was done, I flipped it over and drew the teacher. Drawing was a way of learning and understanding reality for me.”

He would go on to study painting with his much older (by 30 years) half-brother EvAngelos Frudakis, an accomplished sculptor, and eventually follow in his footsteps by coming to Philadelphia to attend the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In the mid-1970s, he began producing his first sculptures, including a polychrome bust (featuring a glass eye) of his father, Vasilis, and one of his new-



Cast of seven-foot figure, *Flying*, outside Frudakis's studio, which is also part of a three-figure work, *Dream to Fly*, located in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.



lywed wife Rosalie Gluchoff. (Even though they've been divorced for nearly 30 years, she still visits his studio every day to help run his business.)

In 1977 he enrolled at Penn to study art history with the renowned scholar and critic Leo Steinberg. "I was very excited to be around great professors like him and to learn about the humanities," Frudakis says. "Sculpting was always people-centered for me; it's just a medium to understand the measure of a man or woman. I like to think that I'm going to grow in making a piece, and that hopefully the viewer will too."

Soon after earning his master's degree, Frudakis received one of his earliest commissions to fashion a bust of the newly elected mayor of Philadelphia, W. Wilson Goode. That gig eventually led, some 15 years later, to the unveiling of a much larger sculpture of an even more contro-

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versial Philadelphia mayor, Frank Rizzo. "I arrived in Philadelphia in 1972," he says now, "and I was very aware that he was polarizing then and became even more so after he died [in 1991]. But when you want to make a living in monumental sculpture, you need to have some of men in suits and at the time I didn't have many. This was a big commission in a prominent place that would make it possible to really showcase my work." The sculpture stood for two decades on the plaza of the Municipal Services Building but was removed in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protests and placed in storage.

While his career has emphasized portrait sculpture, Frudakis has occasionally dipped into the allegorical, including his personal favorite, *Freedom*, which was installed in Center City in 2000 and depicts four bas relief figures in various stages of breaking free from their bronze encasement. Currently, he is working on a piece about the persistence of time, inspired by *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot's classic meditation on the subject.

"I've always thought a lot about death, mutability, and loss," the 73-year-old sculptor says. "But as I get older, now seems the right time to explore these ideas through sculpture. Context, and being a different person in a different time, has always guided my work and kept me from repeating myself."

JoAnn Greco is a frequent contributor to the *Gazette*.