

Honouring the Spirit of the Moment

by Brian Rusted



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Shapeless clay, as much as cupped hands hold, clings to a pipe armature. Jay Contway faces it with something in mind. Across the workbench in his Great Falls studio, I am posing—posing questions, that is. More than fifteen years ago, I had travelled there to learn about Jay's bronze sculptures and his connections with The Calgary Stampede and to glean his views on the Stampede's tradition of bronze sculptures as rodeo and chuckwagon trophies. With each question, Jay would work the clay, making it into something more than it was. His answers came as words and gestures. I scribbled words as his hands worked utterances from the clay, his hands conveying skill and memory.

My connection with Jay came from his activity in The Calgary Stampede's Western Art Show, the Quick Draw portraits he sculpted each year for its Western Art Auction that funded scholarships for high school

grads. This visit though, was a starting point for research that culminated in an exhibition about the first hundred years of The Calgary Stampede's engagement with Western art, from murals and public sculpture to displays, competitions, trophies, youth scholarships, and collections.¹

I had travelled south to Great Falls along the Rockies' eastern slope, crisscrossing ancient trails that linked different nations—the Old North Trail, the Riplinger Trail, the Macleod-Benton Trail, the Whoop-Up Trail. Jay had followed a similar route back and forth to the Stampede's Western Art Show and had done so as long as any other participating artist. Even before that, he came to Calgary in the mid-1970s during Stampede to exhibit at the Calgary Galleries, one that championed work by Indigenous artists.

¹ The exhibition, "The Art of The Calgary Stampede," was organized by the Nickle Arts Museum of the University of Calgary and was on display from June through August of 2010. Portions of this foreword have been adapted from the essay that accompanied the exhibition.