

BENIAMINO BENEVENTO (BENNY) BUFANO (1890? – 1970)

This month's essay details the life of one of the important Italian-American characters and artists of the San Francisco Bay Area. I have always been fascinated by the unique style of the sculptures that Benny Bufano created around San Francisco, and I thought it would be interesting to detail his life for our October Bulletin. In addition to this, October 15 would have probably been his 125th birthday [see next paragraph about the date of his birth]. Also, there are some interesting connections of Bufano to Il Cenacolo. Cenacolista Alessandro Baccari was a close friend and interviewed Bufano for a television special. Albert M. Bender, an early Cenacolista, was a patron of Bufano's who both financed and purchased numerous works of his. Bender's donation of a painting (not by Bufano) that was auctioned off at Butterfield's became the major investment component for the Renzo Turco Award that Il Cenacolo presents annually. David Giannini, former President and current Treasurer of Il Cenacolo, owns two Bufano statues, one of which is displayed at the Museo ItaloAmericano at Fort Mason.



Beniamino Bufano was born in San Fele, Italy on October 15 either in or around 1890. There is considerable question about his date of birth. In fact, it is difficult to establish the truth about many of the stories about his life. As the artist admitted to one of his biographers, “I just told each person not only what I thought he wanted to hear, but I related it in the way I thought appropriate for him.” (In a biography published by his ex-wife Virginia Howard ten years after his death, she wrote “Benny revived lying, made it an art and a way of life, a way to get along in a cockeyed world. Yet lying is a misleading word to explain the thought processes of the little artist. If he lied, he was not aware of being dishonest—he was non-moral, like a child.”) So, Beniamino was not concerned about establishing the truth about himself and his background.

He came to New York in 1902 with his mother and 15 older siblings (even this number varies in biographies between 11 and 15!) when he was about three years old. When he was six, he began contributing to the family income by shining shoes and peddling newspapers. He dropped out of school after the third grade, but when he was a teenager, he began studies at the Art Students League of New York (1913–15), working there as a janitor in lieu of tuition. At the League, he studied under famous sculptors Herbert Adams, Paul Manship, and James Earle Fraser. Eventually, he became apprenticed to James Frasier, while continuing to work as a janitor. In 1913, he also assisted Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney at her home studio in Roslyn, New York.

In the fall of 1914, the sculptor Paul Manship invited Bufano to work with Robert Treat Paine on a commission Manship had received for the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Bufano rented a room in San Francisco's Chinatown, made some friends there, and became fascinated with Chinese art. He was given additional sculpture projects at the exposition: panels for the *Arches of Triumph* and a festoon over the main door of the Palace of Fine Arts.



After returning to New York in 1915, Bufano entered a nationwide art competition and exhibit on the theme “The Immigrant in America.” Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney funded the contest, and the exhibit was held in the Whitney Studio Club in Greenwich Village, which Whitney established to exhibit the work of young artists.

The Immigrants in America Review administered the contest. Frances Kellor, who had been a top committeewoman in former President Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party, headed the Review. Roosevelt visited the exhibit of the 100 works entered in the contest, which added to its prestige and the acclaim of its prize winners. Bufano, then a virtual unknown, won the first prize of \$500 with a sculpture in tile, granite and steel entitled "Peace." Bufano's theme contrasted with most of the entries, which focused on the immigrants' struggle for survival in their new homeland. *The New York Times* reported on Roosevelt's visit to the exhibit. Roosevelt used the occasion to inveigh against cubist art, which he definitely disliked, but he also singled out "Bennie" Bufano's prize-winning sculpture for praise. "Wonderful work," he exclaimed to the *Times*.

While in New York, Bufano convinced his girlfriend to accompany him back to California, and later in 1917, he returned to California and rented a studio in Pasadena, where he sculpted portrait heads and took philosophy classes. However, he decided San Francisco was where he most wanted to live, and it became his home base for the rest of his life. The couple settled in a cottage in Sausalito, and had a daughter whom they named Aloha, born in 1918.

In 1918 Bufano met Sara Bard Field and Col. Charles Erskine Scott Wood (a wealthy Marin County resident) who became important patrons of his work. They provided him with a studio, commissioned sculptures, and also later funded a trip to China for the artist to study glazes. Col. Wood secured a position for him as an instructor in sculpture at the San Francisco School of Fine Arts. He was extremely popular with his students, but not so with the school's administrators. A free spirit and dedicated bohemian, he had difficulty with rules, paperwork, and bureaucracy, and his teaching career at Fine Arts was short-lived.

Albert M. Bender was another early patron who helped Bufano financially and acquired works by the artist that he later donated to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. A portrait head of Bender by Bufano is also in the museum collection.

One of the legends around Bufano that developed about this time was that he had cut off his trigger finger and mailed it to President Wilson to protest America's involvement in World War I in 1917. According to his wife, Virginia, however, the artist had accidentally lost two joints of his right index finger to an electric saw. Whatever the correct story, the legend established his credentials as a pacifist for the rest of his life. In a televised interview that Alessandro Baccari conducted with Bufano, "he explains 'what a damn fool I was to cut my finger off,'" Baccari said. One of the main drawbacks, he told Baccari, was figuring out how to hold a cup of coffee!

Bufano traveled to China in 1920 on funds provided by Col. Wood. After meeting the poet Witter Bynner, he worked on a portrait head of Bynner en route. He apprenticed himself to a master potter to learn about glazes, as planned, but he extended his stay and traveled around the country, meeting Sun Yat-sen and John Dewey. Although he said he spent much of the journey living in poverty, he was able to return after about two years with a valuable collection of Chinese art.



*Bufano's "Peace" statue,
Timbercove, California*

In 1923, he was hired to teach at the California School of Fine Arts, but he had too many disagreements with the administration about how art should be taught and was dismissed at the end of the semester. He proceeded to open his own art school, the Da Vinci Art School, in the Hawaiian Building on the 1915 exposition grounds, but it closed within months. Also, around this time he created some site-specific art for the country home of Sara Bard Field and Col. Charles E.S. Wood in Los Gatos, California.



*Bufano's
"The Honeymoon Couple"*

In 1925 Bufano had a solo show at the Arden Galleries in New York City, he was featured in *International Studio* magazine, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired his ceramic sculpture "Honeymoon Couple". That year he also met Virginia Howard in San Francisco, fell in love, followed her when she went to Louisiana, and married her in Texas. They spent a few weeks in Pasadena and then embarked on a trip around the world (using money from the sale of the art work he had brought from China), visiting Japan, China, Southeast Asia, India, then Italy and finally France. By the time they arrived in France, the marriage was failing. When Virginia informed him that she was pregnant, Bufano was furious and sent his bride back to California. He had a large project in mind, and no time for babies.

The baby was born on August 16, 1928, and Virginia named him Erskine Scott Bufano after their benefactor Col. Charles Erskine Scott Wood. She later learned that Bufano had earlier had a common-law wife named Marie Jones (née Linder) and a daughter named Aloha M. Jones-Bufano, both of whom he had abandoned earlier. Virginia divorced Bufano in 1932.

Bufano had big plans for his next work. He had discovered and purchased a huge piece of granite in a quarry outside of Paris. From salvaged lumber, he built a crude shelter over the stone. This hut served as his home and workshop for the next four years while he carved his 16-foot "St. Francis of Assisi," which he intended as a gift to the city of San Francisco. When it was complete, he returned to San Francisco to raise money to ship it home. However, the Depression was underway, which meant that money was hard to come by. There were also aesthetic objections raised by influential San Franciscans who saw photographs of the work. "St. Francis of Assisi" lingered in a French warehouse for 25 years before the Church of St. Francis in North Beach undertook to pay its passage and install it at the church entrance. Not everyone was happy with it; parishioners complained that "it got in the way." It was deported to Oakland where it spent some time before finally arriving at its present Fisherman's Wharf location in San Francisco.



*Bufano's
"St. Francis of Assisi,"
Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco*

Back in San Francisco during the 1930s, Bufano received studio space, a salary, and assistants through the Federal Art Project. He created several animal sculptures for the new Aquatic Park.

From the time he first saw her at the age of three and each time subsequently, Bufano had been inspired by the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York harbor, symbolizing freedom and welcoming immigrants. He dreamed of a similar monument on the west coast—a huge statue that would represent peace and harmony.

And who should create it? Bufano, of course. It would be a stainless steel statue of St. Francis on horseback, 156 feet high, and placed at the top of Twin Peaks, visible for miles in all directions.

He drew plans, made a model, and began promoting the project which, he was sure, would gain him immortal renown. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) supported his plan and provided him with workshops, assistants and a salary. All was progressing smoothly until a local columnist, Westbrook Pegler, began to oppose the project with biting satire, calling it a “tombstone cutter’s nightmare.” Controversy followed, and public opinion became polarized. Finally, the WPA withdrew its support, and Bufano’s dream died.

He was commissioned to design a block-long sculptural frieze of athletes for George Washington High School in San Francisco, but then was accused of including likenesses of Joseph Stalin and Harry Bridges in the frieze. He denied this charge, but lost the commission, ostensibly on the grounds that he was taking too long and kept changing the design. He received another federal job in 1940, head of the art division of the National Youth Administration for San Francisco.

Bufano also served on the San Francisco Art Commission from 1944 to 1948. A long-term friendship with author and painter Henry Miller began during this time; Miller would advocate on Bufano’s behalf and wrote an introduction to a 1968 book on the artist. In 1950 Bufano created a large mosaic project for Moar’s Cafeteria in San Francisco (removed in the 1970s for BART construction).

In his final years, Bufano continued to create art. He was also a genuine San Francisco character: he lived rent-free at the Press Club, and ate free meals at Moar’s Cafeteria where he’d created the three huge mosaic murals. Vic Bergeron, the owner of Trader Vic’s, paid the rent on Bufano’s studio and gave him a permanent meal ticket. Bergeron was generous, but objected whenever Bufano would order champagne, pâté, and caviar.



He died in 1970 from heart disease and is buried at Holy Cross Cemetery in Colma.

In his will he disinherited his daughter Aloha M. Bufano-Jones (1918-1991) and did not even mention his son Erskine Scott Bufano, leaving everything to an entity he and patron friends had established called the Bufano Society of the Arts. In a final touch of irony, his son, Erskine, whom he’d seen only twice briefly and never acknowledged, contested his father’s will and became head of the Bufano Society. Erskine died in 2010. It is thanks to this society that so many Bufano works are still in this area.

SOME PUBLIC WORKS

Examples of his distinctive and large-scale work are found throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Some of his best-known works are bullet-shaped monuments, including the first sculpture in stainless steel, a statue of Chinese leader Sun Yat-sen in St. Mary’s Square, San Francisco; the 93-foot “Peace” or “The Expanding Universe” in Timber Cove near Jenner; the 30-foot “Peace,” which was, after nearly four decades at San Francisco International Airport, relocated near Lake Merced in 1996; the “Madonna” at Fort Mason, and the “Madonna” at San Francisco General Hospital.

Animal groups include “Bear and Cubs” sculptures outside the Oakland Museum of California and Kaiser Permanente in Fremont; “Penguin’s Prayer”, originally for the Golden Gate International Exposition (GGIE); and several works at Hillsdale Shopping Center in San Mateo.

The 18-foot statue of “St. Francis,” carved by Bufano in France in the late 1920s, finally came to San Francisco in 1955 and stands at Beach and Taylor Streets.

“St. Francis,” a black and bronze, five-foot tall sculpture of St. Francis currently stands at Grace Cathedral on Nob Hill in San Francisco. It was originally located at the St. Francis Hotel but was moved in 1993 to its current location.

“Saint Francis of the Guns” (1968) stands at San Francisco City College on the Ocean Campus at the entrance to Cloud Hall (the science building) along Phelan Avenue. It is a nine-foot statue of Saint Francis of Assisi made from melted-down guns collected in a 1968 voluntary gun turn-in drive by Mayor Joe Alioto and mixed with bronze to prevent rust from the city’s dampness. This work was inspired by the 1968 assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. On the robe of St. Francis, Bufano created a mosaic tile mural showing the glowing heads of four of America’s assassinated leaders: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy and John F. Kennedy.

Outside California, there is a Bufano Sculpture Garden at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland and a “Bear and Cubs” at Kauikeaouli Hale in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Bufano’s largest extant mosaic ensemble is probably the one on the exterior of the ILWU headquarters in Oakland, commissioned in 1967 and including one he titled “\$Dollarocracy\$.”

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from: George Rathmell in the Nob Hill Gazette (July, 2009) at (<http://www.nobhillgazette.com/wp/2009/07/beniamino-bufano-7-09/>); Mr. SF.com; Wikipedia; and Valerie Schmalz, “The Artist and the Saint “in Catholic San Francisco (October 1, 2013) at (<http://www.catholic-sf.org/ns.php?newsid=23&id=61793>).

