



This page: Joyce Turvey holds two sculptures that were done by her father, John L. Clarke, in front of the John L. Clarke Western Art Gallery and Memorial Museum in East Glacier. Facing page: A mountain lion sculpture by Clarke.

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY TONY BYNUM



EARLY-DAY MEMENTOS

In the 1960s, when Montanan Betsy Griffing was 8, her grandparents took her to Glacier National Park. In the town of East Glacier, they wandered into an art studio, a log cabin on the main street of town. For not much, her grandparents bought two small wooden carvings, a buffalo and the bust of an Indian man in full headdress. On the front porch, the sculptor, a lean, elderly but still handsome man with cloudy eyes, kindly reached down and shook Griffing's hand.

John Clarke was well known to East Glacier visitors, and many bought his quick-carve, affordable souvenirs. In cabins and homes across Montana like the Griffings', his small ▶

East Glacier gallery retains the spirit and the art of its founding sculptor



Mary Roberts Rinehart, an early advocate for the Blackfeet and Glacier Park, was a collector of Clarke's sculptures. Rinehart is pictured at a Blackfeet gathering in 1914. | Photo courtesy of Glacier National Park Below: One of Clarke's sculptures. Facing page: Turvey has expanded the gallery to include contemporary artists.

bison, "Indian heads," and mountain goats occupy places of honor on mantelpieces and shelves. But presidents and millionaires also purchased Clarke's work; museums have mounted exhibitions of it; artist Charlie Russell admired it and was a friend. John Clarke became known



nationally and internationally as a foremost sculptor of wildlife. Clarke's original studio-home is gone, but in 1977, his daughter, Joyce Turvey, built the John L. Clarke Western Art Gallery and Memorial Museum on the site. The gallery, which retains the feel of a cabin and incorporates some of the original studio's wood,

showcases Clarke's life and art. Turvey has widened its scope to include contemporary regional artists, many of them Native American.

Clarke's personal history, from 1881 to 1970, is quintessential Montana. His grandfather, Malcolm Clarke, was a West Point graduate who came to Montana as a fur trader, married Kakokima,

a Blackfeet woman, and ranched north of Helena. He was killed in 1870 in a dispute with Blackfeet relatives, which brought about the army's retaliatory Baker Massacre in which 173 Blackfeet, mostly women and children, were killed. Malcolm and Kakokima's daughter, Helen, John's aunt, became the first woman elected to public office in ▶



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Joyce Turvey, on her father, John L. Clarke

Montana, and later worked as an allotment agent with the Blackfeet and in Oklahoma. A mountain and a lake in Glacier Park are named after her and another aunt, Isabel. John's mother, First Kill, also Blackfeet, had eight children, five of whom died of scarlet fever. Two-year-old John survived, but lost his hearing. For the rest of his life he communicated through Indian and American sign languages, limited writing and of course his art. A prodigious letter writer who loved people, he drew a good portion of his letters. One still hangs over the fireplace in the gallery, depicting "my home at Glacier Park."

When Clarke was 7, his family moved to Midvale, as East Glacier was first called. As a child, he fashioned figures from mud; later, at Montana's School for the Deaf in Boulder, he took up woodcarving. He attended subsequent schools for the deaf in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Milwaukee, as well as the Art Institute of Chicago, which he didn't like. He stayed in the Midwest into his early 30s, then moved back to Midvale. Aunt Isabel had married a packer and wilderness guide there; Aunt Helen had moved in with Clarke's dad, and brought her library, her taste for art and music, and her friendships with notables like writer-journalist Mary Roberts Rinehart, an early advocate for the Blackfeet and Glacier Park. In Midvale, Clarke fell in love with Mamie Simon, who cooked for hunting parties. With Mamie as his right hand, Clarke began a life of constant carving supplemented by

hunting, fishing, and guiding in the park. "I grew up on venison, elk and fish," Turvey remembers. Her dad hunted and fished into his 80s. Time in the wilderness also allowed him to observe animals.

Clarke's favorite medium was cottonwood—its texture was perfect for fur—but he also carved in finer, harder woods. His larger pieces are often complex. Two are still on view in the gallery. In one, a mountain goat charges an eagle making off with her kid. In another, a mountain lion spills down a rock face after a deer and fawn. Both pieces convey the true drama and emotion in wilderness.

In 1916, Clarke's career took off. One sculpture was exhibited in a prestigious Philadelphia show; others won recognition and cash awards, traveled to shows abroad, and were purchased by President Harding for the White House, the Rockefeller family and Swedish royalty. Clarke guided railroad magnate Louis Hill on hunting trips; Hill commissioned carved bear lamps for rooms in East Glacier Lodge and based the Great Northern mountain goat logo on Clarke's signature goats. Other commissions came. In dark imported wood, Clarke carved tall friezes of Blackfeet life for the hospital in Browning, still on view flanking the TV in the waiting room. Another frieze weighing 1,800 pounds resided at Boulder's School of the Deaf, the University of Montana, and finally the Montana Historical Society. Sadly, his smaller panels over the doors of Browning's Museum of the Plains Indian are

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disintegrating, exposed to weather.

At Charles Russell's recommendation, Clarke signed many pieces with a Blackfeet name, Cutapuis ("kuh-TAY-pway," according to Turvey). It means "Man Who Doesn't Talk." Clarke also painted and drew; a true artist, he experimented into old age, even testing out plastic as a sculpting medium. Today, the pieces he sold for small amounts or even gave away cost thousands of dollars.

"Each of his animals has so much personality," says Kirby Lambert, who curated an exhibition of Clarke's work at the Montana Historical Society in 1993.

From a daughter's perspective, in the quiet gallery in

East Glacier, Turvey says, "He made a living from his art, which is really something. I took his work for granted. I wish I'd asked more questions."

She continues, "He was nice to everybody." That kindness is what Betsy Griffing remembers most about her childhood encounter with Clarke. The small carvings in her cabin are more than souvenirs. Yet John Clarke would probably be happy with that designation. After all, souvenir means "remember." **M**

Beth Judy is a frequent contributor to *Montana Magazine*.

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