

## Art Spotlight

# BLESSED BY THE CREATOR

## An Interview with Artist R.V. Greeves

BY THE RT. REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

*On November 19, 2021, Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler had the opportunity to interview the celebrated sculptor of the American West, Richard Vernon Greeves (aka R.V. Greeves) at his studio and home (a former Trading Post) in Ft. Washakie on the Wind River Reservation.*

Born in 1935 into an Italian neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri, R.V. Greeves first visited the Wind River Reservation at the age of 15. He has lived in Fort Washakie, Wyoming since 1951. R.V. Greeves is known for capturing in bronze sculptures the spiritual essence of the Native peoples of the Northern Plains, as well as the animal life of the West. As a boy in St. Louis, he studied the journals written by Lewis and Clark during their famous expedition, giving him a life-long fascination with the West. A self-taught artist, his work is found in museums and prominent collections nationally and internationally. He has also won numerous prestigious awards. An avid student of Lewis and Clark's expedition, in 2006 he held a large solo exhibition at the Autry Museum titled *Lewis and Clark Among the Indians*. It entailed twenty-nine bronze sculptures, depicting every Native tribe the two explorers encountered on their historic trek across North America.

### Tell us a little about your growing up, and what brought you out to the Wind River Reservation at age 15?

Well, my dad, a tile layer, was an Irishman who married an Italian. And like he said, "If you marry one, you have to become one." I thought that all people spoke Italian until I went to high school and got away from it. The way you learn a language is around the kitchen table. Italians are as thick as honey; they stick together. It was just like the movies. I grew up like I was in a movie. The Italian community in St. Louis was founded because of the Louisiana Purchase. They hired all these artists from Europe to come in and build. Forest Park, in the center of St. Louis, is the city's cultural center



Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler with R.V. Greeves  
in front of his sculpture of *Chief Washakie*

– where the zoo, museums, opera house is. It was all built by Italians from the community I grew up in. So, I grew up around museums. For some reason I have always had a fascination with history. And St. Louis had a lot of history. It was the “Gateway to the West.”

I’ve been blessed. **Creator has always watched over me.** Even as a little kid the Creator put me in a position where I would be taken care of. The zookeepers took me in. They would take me around and let me feed the tigers and hippopotamus. Then with the museum people, I became their gofer. They gave me free run of everything. St. Louis had the largest depository of Louis and Clark memorabilia in the world. Back then, they didn’t think of antiques and artwork like we do now. You didn’t have to wear gloves. I’d sit at Lewis’ desk and draw pictures. A lot of the equipment from their historic trip was just lying around. When I got a bike, I could go all over the city. Your parents never worried about you back then.

One summer, St. Louis had a big sport show, and in it Wyoming had a booth. At the booth there was a young Shoshone girl about three or four



*Chief Crazy Horse*

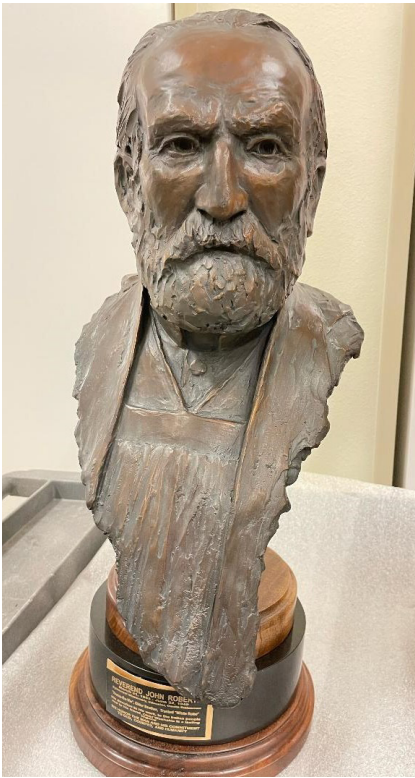
## *Creator has always watched over me.*

years older than me who invited me to come out and visit her. So, that summer when I was 15, my high school let me out early so I could come to a ranch out here in Wyoming for the branding season. I came to Ft. Washakie by bus. I stayed the whole summer and when it got to be fall, I figured I better go back and finish up my schooling.

When I graduated from high school, I met a girl my age from the Kiowa tribe - a tribe down in Oklahoma. I guess it was fate. We got married when I was 17. I remember telling my wife that while I didn’t know what I was going to do the rest of my life, that I wasn’t going to do it in St. Louis, but that I was going to do it in Wyoming. So, we moved to Wyoming. I hadn’t seen the family I’d stayed with since I was 15. I pulled into town and out in front of the old trading post there was the old man named Herman from that family. He was standing in front of a building and we greeted each other, and he asked me, “What are you doing here? You finally came home.” And I said “Yeah, I did. I want to live here.” He asked, “What are you going to do for a living?” I responded, “I don’t know.” He said, “Well, I just won this building at a poker table and I’ll sell it to you cheap.” The old trading post had a café and a meat processing plant. We got together and I bought the place, and I’ve been driving nails into it for near 60 years now. We do everything in this building. We live here, we work in it, everything.

## *You didn’t go to art school. What led you to start creating?*

I’ve always done artwork since I was a little tiny guy. People ask me where I studied all this. I didn’t study it. It was in my gene pool. I was really lucky that way. If there weren’t Italians on the earth, then 95% of the art would have to go away. My dad came out of a family that did ornamental plasterwork. My grandfather was an ornamental stonemason - marble cutter. And I



John Roberts

grew up around my uncles' marbles shops. My mom's godfather, an Italian, we called him old Caesar, claimed me as his grandson. He was an ornamental stone caster. When he emigrated from Italy he brought all his molds with him.

Back then the Catholics had a lot of statues around. I used to love going into churches and seeing all those sculptures. But

they were all made out of plaster. Fingers would break off. Noses would break off. And then they found out that I could re-create them. I was just a boy and I was creating parts on saints for the churches. So, it all just fell in place.

## So how did you get started here in Wyoming?

Well, out of necessity. I had two people, my wife and our adopted son, depending on me to feed them and put clothes on them. And I just had to do. I've done any thing you can think up. But this was kind of an ideal situation because I had public coming through the front door [of the Trading Post] and this was the main road into Yellowstone. I mean it's ideally set up. **When you do artwork, you can't shut it off.** You do it. And so, I'd work all day trying to make a buck and then from about midnight to until 3 or 4am I'd do artwork. I had all these people coming in, and I'd hang my work on the wall and they'd ask me what I wanted for it, so I started selling it.

## Were you selling sculptures at the Trading Post?

Let me give you a lesson. The word "sculpture" is an Italian word. But, it's one of those words you

can't quite convert over to English. So, the best you can say is it's someone who does everything. If you study Michelangelo, he was the master. He wrote music. He wrote sonnets. He painted. He sculpted. He did everything. And I try to live up to it. **If I'm going to say I'm a sculptor I have to try to live up to it.** So, I've done everything. Most of the people coming through were tourists. In Wyoming, you get to know most everyone in the whole state pretty quickly. So, over the years I've kind of developed a reputation. It's been a lot of years.

## Who or what inspires you artistically?

**My inspiration comes from inside.** I have idols. But I'm pretty choosy on them. Michelangelo is up at the top. Raphael, and Titian. **Like I said, I've been really watched over by a power much**

*When you do artwork, you can't shut it off. You do it.*

**bigger than I know about.** My intake was limited to the best. I didn't get enchanted by any of the artistic fads that were coming through. My choice in music were the old classics out of Europe, because in the neighborhood I grew up in, you'd just as soon hear your neighbor playing an opera, Pagliacci or something like that. So, my intake was limited to good stuff. When I was a kid, we were too poor to have a library, so the few books we did have around I wore the ink off the pages looking at them. All the artwork in them was all classical work. That's what I had to study to learn how to do it. I've been blessed.

## Did you feel adopted by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho community?

Oh yeah, that is the way it is. My first wife she was a full-blooded Kiowa Comanche down from the Southern Plains. My wife now, though she doesn't look the part, is an enrolled Arapaho.

## Has there been much of an artistic community on the Wind River Reservation beyond their handicraft and beading work?

The Native American has art in their gene pool. Almost everyone I see here has good eye and hand coordination. Actually, most people can do a pretty good job. **It's something that the Creator put in the human.** You can see it in little kids. The best way you can keep a kid happy is to give them some paper and pencils or crayons and turn them loose. But something goes on in their development where they start losing that. I don't know what that is. I think they start getting self-conscious in the teenage years. When they're little kids they're not a bit self-conscious.

Native Americans have a real natural gift. They are different than the European. They have never left the earth. The earth is still part of them. I think it's their salvation. They've been through a lot of crap with their land being taken away from them and everything, but they never left the earth. They still have their roots in the earth.

I kind of wonder. I don't think it physically happened like this, but at some point, maybe the Creator created this wonderful world we live in, and then he decided it needed people, and he took the Natives and brought them here and sat them down on this continent, and said "There it is; it's yours." I wonder what that would have felt like?

## Are there sculptures that you have created that really speak to you?

Oh, I have one in the garden that I told my wife to put on top of my grave. It's the same sculpture that I have, at the Center of the West in Cody, but it is albeit 14 feet in size there. It is titled "The Unknown." I wouldn't mind having it on my grave here in the Indian graveyard.

***My inspiration comes from inside.***



*Bird Woman - Sacagawea*

Each one of the figures [depicted in the sculpture] are buddies...old Richard sitting down in front was an old blind Shoshone man. We were good friends. He thought we had something special because we had the same first name. Chester, the guy pointing, was in the invasion force at Hiroshima and several of the other islands. The guy up on the left was a good friend. We did a lot of Native ceremonies together. The guy Lewis in the middle, he still had bullets in his back from WWII when fighting against the Japanese army. Manford, he was just a young teenage renegade. And that little boy Buck; he used to hang around in my studio when I was working on this. So I told him, "You're going in this piece."

I don't tell people what to think when they're looking at my art.

**There a profound sense of spirituality in your work, whether it is people or animals.**

Well, you gotta put marrow in the bones. If you don't have any marrow it isn't gonna work.