

that his mother "had been praying for me all those years that I would come back to God." And so, "The Holy Spirit blew on me and I fell over. I was ready." Still, Thomas Marsh spent his 40th birthday alone...no cards, no friends, no family. "Something is dreadfully wrong here. This is not what it's about," he remembers muttering to himself.

And then one day he saw a fresh new face at Bible study, "the woman of my dreams." He invited her to a church dance. Thomas and Siobhan (an Irish name, pronounced Shih-vahn) were married a year later. He was 43 years old at the time. When Benjamin was born, they fled San Francisco and settled in Sonoma. "We wanted to be in a conservative, family-friendly environment." But skyrocketing real estate prices, particularly in California, put the American dream of owning their own home out of reach.

And then, you might say, divine providence stepped in. At the very least, a lot of good things fell into place at just the right time. Thomas was going back and forth to Washington, D.C. to put the finishing touches on his Victims of Communism Memorial. He and Siobhan had independently taken an internet survey, and Culpeper "came up as the number one town for both of us." He rented a car, drove south on I-95, then west on Route 3 "and just little by little it opened up," he says of the farmland and rolling hills of the Virginia countryside.

He called Siobhan on the cell phone. "You won't believe this. This is more beautiful than western Wisconsin," he remembers saying. "It was late April; everything was blossoming and bursting..." "You won't believe it, they don't have fences in their back yards," he marveled. "Neighbors talk to each other."

But the dream was still out of reach until, by divine providence, two sizeable commissions came his way, enough to put a down payment on a house, and then some. They settled on a modest frame dwelling on Peliso Avenue. Their next door neighbor was the late great Susie Miller. "Of all the possibilities that were open to us, this house in Orange, just opened up completely for us...so many things that might not have happened, did."

The Marshes moved here in July 2006. They chose Orange partly for the vineyards and wineries in the area; Siobhan is "well trained in viticulture and oenology." Besides, Thomas adds, "I liked Orange, the beauty of its Main Street, the hilliness of it." Two days after they moved in, he walked into the Arts Center on Main Street. "This is a very



Photo by Phil Audibert
The Marsh family made the decision to relocate here from California because Orange provides "a conservative, family friendly environment." From tall to small, Thomas, Siobhan, Benjamin, Thomas (junior) and Cecilia.



Photo by Phil Audibert
Sculptor Thomas Marsh seems to be having a conversation with a recently completed sculpture of Mary which will be displayed in a cemetery in Sperryville.

special place," he realized. When he told Arts Center Director, Laura Thompson of his university level teaching background, she reportedly said, "I think we have a place for you here." He's been teaching drawing classes with an emphasis on anatomy ever since.

The Marshes are devout Roman Catholics. For that reason they home school their three children. "Public schools are basically hostile to religion," says Thomas adding, "we feel very strongly that we want religion to be part of our children's education." The other day, the family went to the National Gallery of Art in Washington on a field trip. While they were away, a bronze arrived from the foundry. "It's so safe here," says Thomas in genuine wonderment. "We were gone all day yesterday and the bronze was just left on the porch and it's not been disturbed." Welcome to Orange, Virginia, not California.

Thomas' studio is located in a glorified storage shed in the back yard. A lone space heater struggles in vain to get ahead of the frigid air seeping in through the cracks in the plastic curtain that serves as a door. Examples of Thomas' work are everywhere in this cramped and cluttered place.

He points to a series of statuettes of a woman holding a torch. They are based on a student-built statue in Tiananmen Square that was toppled by Chinese tanks in the infamous massacre of 1989. "I was deeply moved by that," says Thomas, who dedicated the next five years to promoting the China democracy movement and recreating the Goddess of Democracy. In fact he even learned to speak Mandarin. In 1994, despite intense political and economic pressure by the Chinese government, Thomas' statue was dedicated in Portsmouth Square in San Francisco. Today, statuettes modeled on this work are awarded to individuals who promote democracy worldwide.

Closer to home, he unwraps a work in progress, a statue of another Goddess, the Virgin Mary. It is ready to go to the foundry. It will grace a cemetery at St. Peter's Catholic Church, between Sperryville and Little Washington. He tells a story. Just as he and the priest were trying to figure out how to raise the money for the commission, a parishioner donated a small inheritance to the church that happened to be the exact amount needed to create the work.

Just another example of divine providence.

Divine Providence

The first *Star Wars* movie had just come out. George Lucas needed designers. He had a contact at the fine arts department at Cal State-Long Beach. "Do you have any good graduates who might come work for me?"



Lucas reportedly asked. The professor referred the producer to Thomas Marsh, "and basically I had a job offer," says Marsh, speaking, not from a mansion in Burbank but from a couch in his modest home on Peliso Avenue. He leans forward slightly and adds, "At the same time I got an offer to become an apprentice to the sculptor, Milton Hebal... in Italy."

So, what did you do, Thomas, flip a coin? Here you have a chance to come in on the ground floor of this budding Hollywood special effects studio or go work for a year with Europe's pre-eminent classical figurative sculptor. What do you do?

"There was no question in my mind what to do," he protests. "I went to Italy." No internal debate here. "Here's the funny thing," he leans forward on the couch again. "Nearly 20



Above left, the sculptor's hands at work. Thomas Marsh has extensively studied anatomy to improve his figurative technique. Above, you don't even have to read the title to figure out that this is a sculpture of a California surfer dude. His name is Eric Lilot. At left, The oldest motorcycle cop in Long Beach, California is now immortal, thanks to Thomas Marsh.

Photos by Phil Audibert



Photo by Aine Farrell

First and foremost a figurative sculptor, Thomas Marsh found an intellectual home at the relatively conservative Academy of Art College in San Francisco.

years later, I got a call from Industrial Light and Magic, 'would you come and lecture to our animators and modelers on anatomy?' and I did that on four different occasions over the next eight years. So, it came full circle." He sits back and smiles. "One looks back and says, 'did I make the right decision?' Most certainly I made the right decision, but furthermore that door was never closed."

Thomas' kids are currently enamored by the whole Star Wars mystique; they marvel that their Dad could have been part of all that. But Thomas gently points out to them that if he had taken that job, "I would never have met the woman of my dreams," which means that they would never have been born. Sobering thought.

"I make no secret that I'm a religious man and I see that as the hand of God. That's providence. I have no regrets whatsoever," he says of the decision.

That decision, not to go with Lucas, speaks volumes of the measure of the man that is Thomas Marsh. It shows that he heeded a higher summons that had been calling him literally since he was eight years old, to become a figurative sculptor and not a Hollywood special effects guy.

"I had a very serious interest in doing art, especially figure sculptures," remembers this man who grew up the son of a steakhouse restaurateur in Sioux City, Iowa. Asked if he has any Native American blood (his eyes are slightly almond shaped) he shakes his head good naturedly in the negative, adding that epicanthic fold may have come from his mother's side, going back as far as the Magyars and the Mongol horde. His Dad was a mixture of everything else, including possibly slave blood, prompting him to remark, "I'm an American mutt."

Growing up within earshot and nostril flare of the largest stockyards in the country was not exactly conducive to following a career in fine art. "No one had any idea what a sculptor was even about," he laments. In that environment, an artist had two choices: teach at a high school or become a commercial artist.

Instead, he studied architecture at Iowa State, primarily because he was both left and right-brained; he was good at both math and drawing. Luckily a retired art professor took him under his wing and taught him classical drawing and watercolor in the fine tradition of the 19th century. Finishing up his bachelor of fine arts degree in painting from the Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, Thomas Marsh might not be with us today if a mugger had pulled the trigger one night on the

seedy side of town. Thomas was making pretty good hazard pay delivering pizzas. "The guy was ready to kill me for \$54 in my pocket. I was watching his trigger finger, my hands were up and he decided at that moment, praise God now, he said 'Okay pick up your pizza and get outta here.'" Talk about divine providence....or was it divine intervention.

Actually, if he had been killed that night, he might have wound up on a slab at the Medical College of Wisconsin, a place with which he was already quite familiar. "I studied anatomy very seriously when I



Contributed photo

Just back from a year's apprenticeship in Italy, Thomas Marsh settled in San Francisco as a working sculptor, teacher and lecturer.

was an undergraduate," he says. And you can see it in his work today.

Next stop...L.A., to earn a master of fine arts degree in his original passion, classical figurative sculpture. His professor there at Cal State-Long Beach, was "a student of a student of Rodin...he had reinstated a program with classical underpinnings where studying the figure was important." Thomas leans forward again, to make a point. "Keep in mind, this was 1974 when I started at Cal State-Long Beach, which was the depths of avant-gardism, where anything representational or figurative was scoffed at and jeered at and ridiculed."

It was here that Thomas started teaching undergraduates, and it was here that the anatomy classes paid off as he picked up extra work for bio-medical companies making models and sculptures of

internal organs. And it was here that he turned down the offer from George Lucas and went to Europe instead to be Hebald's apprentice.

"The time in Italy was absolute paradise," he says dreamily. He lived in Hebald's country studio just outside of Rome, apprenticed under him, and managed his property while the sculptor took his works on tour. Her learned to speak Italian, won an Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation fellowship, traveled through Greece, then Yugoslavia and all of Italy, absorbing "as much as I possibly could from that culture which is so filled with great sculpture and painting and architecture." He also visited many churches, which, for an avowed atheist since age 15, proved somewhat disconcerting, considering he was living and working literally at the epicenter of the Catholic Church.

The year was 1978. Thomas, his apprenticeship completed, settled in San Francisco, to be a professional sculptor. The move from L.A. to the Bay City was "an eye-opener for me...There's an entertainment industry tone to Los Angeles which did not feel disturbing, but there was something dark about San Francisco, even though it is one of the most beautiful cities in the world."

Nevertheless, Thomas set up shop, complete with "the proverbial warehouse studio, living in a loft." He found, what he calls "an intellectual home," at the Academy of Art College (now University), which was sympathetic to classical realism. A long-term relationship with this institution endures to this day; he is a board member emeritus and teaches an online course there from his home in Orange.

And so, Thomas Marsh, age 35, successful classical figurative sculptor and respected teacher and lecturer is leading a spiritually empty life. He claims there was no epiphany. He didn't wake up half dead in a gutter some place; it's just that a lot of things came together. San Francisco's turbulent times, the hedonistic life style, the "rationalizing of immoral behavior," made him realize that "something's not right here." He remembers telling himself, "I really need to focus on traditional values."

And so he embarked on what he calls "a very gradual shift from looking at God more abstractly into embracing God as personal." The anatomy classes had something to do with it. "I had looked at, viewed, studied, drawn, even had my hands in hundreds and hun-

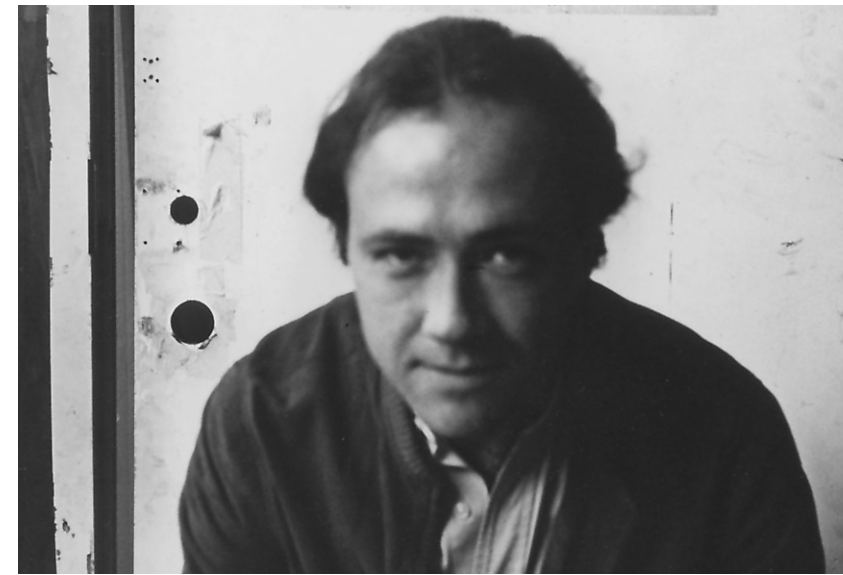


Photo by Thomas Marsh

A self-portrait taken in 1983.

dreds of cadavers." He pauses to make his point. "You're looking at death. You're touching death. And you cannot help but think about mortality and the meaning of life."

During this period, his father died. Thomas, the atheist, learned

Of personhood and Grandfather Pruitt

When you first meet Grandfather Pruitt, you feel like you've known him all your life. With his dented helmet, faraway squint and sun-creased face, he is the very picture of the independent oilman, the Wildcatter.

That's quite remarkable considering he's made out of gypsum cement. What is even more remarkable is that Thomas Marsh never met the man. He based the sculpture solely on a few photographs and words provided by the subject's grandson. Grandfather Pruitt was already dead. So, just how did Marsh capture this "big, tough, golden-hearted guy with a great sense of humor and great love for his family?"

Ahhh, therein lies the essence of sculpture...to not only endow a hunk of clay or wood or stone with a reasonable likeness, but to give it life, to give it personality. Grandfather Pruitt is gushing, like an oil well, with personhood.

Thomas refers to this concept of "personhood" that Pope John Paul championed. "It is possible to embody the work with the human spirit," he says thoughtfully, "not literally of course, but figuratively." He's made that connection when working with live models "on a very intimate yet detached level. And you see them as persons and recognize that we are all alike in that way." The same connection can be made with the dead.

"That is one of my aims as an artist, to draw the viewer's attention to human personhood, for the glory of God. I make no bones about it. No pun intended," he pauses, figuratively winks and refers to his days teaching. "When you're dealing with anatomy students, you're inevitably dealing with bad puns. Want to see my body of work?" Big laugh.

Speaking of bodies and personhood, Thomas Marsh is no stranger to the figurative nude. But in case you haven't noticed it, nudity in art is having a tough time keeping itself from being lumped in with erotica, which is the antithesis of personhood. "The idea of pornography is that it de-personalizes and trivializes the beauty and the nature of the human body, contrary to what God intended, and that is very disturbing," shudders Thomas. "It completely has ruined, for the time being, the idea of nudity in artistic subject matter."

Thomas Marsh usually works in clay. Gradually he builds each figure until it changes from a lump of moist dirt into a person of sorts. Once the clay figure is complete, he will make a mold out of it in something called black rubber, and from this mold eventually will come a bronze sculpture. He also has it cast in gypsum cement, a plaster-like substance that you can pour and which hardens to stone. This is the "back up," in case something happens to the bronze.

Currently, Marsh is working on a bust of the oldest motorcycle cop in Long Beach, California. It's taken him all of nine months to complete, but for a piece of mute metal or silent stone, it fairly bursts with personhood. You can just see that crusty old cop handing a speeding ticket to the likes of, well, George Lucas.

Many of Thomas Marsh's subjects are religious in nature. Perhaps his most famous is a seven-foot tall sculpture of John the Baptist that was commissioned by the famous Old Mission, in San Juan Bautista, California. The priest there may have been the first to notice, in modern times anyway, that the historic Spanish mission was aligned in such a way that on the winter solstice, the rising sun shone through the lone front window above the door and cast a pool of light right on the tabernacle.

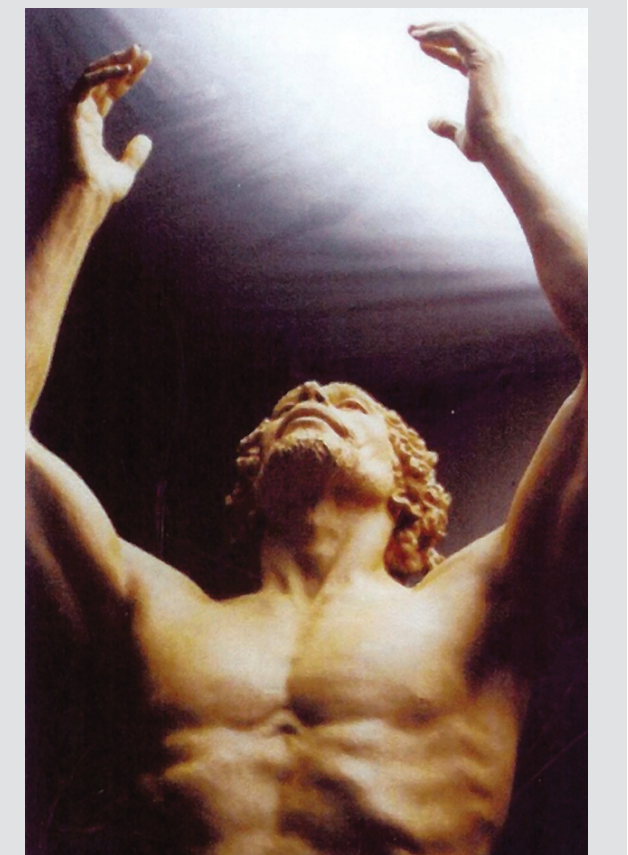
The mission priest wanted the sculpture to, among other things, appear to be holding the sun in his outstretched arms on December 21. So, on that day in 1999, Thomas Marsh stood on a ladder and outstretched his arms, while Siobhan took photographs. Lucky thing the sun was shining that day. Luckier still, that exactly a year later, during the installation ceremony of the completed work, "the sun blazed right through John's hands."

Now that's what you'd call, divine providence.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Commissioned by his grandson, this bust of wildcatter oilman, "Grandfather Pruitt" fairly oozes personality. Yet, Thomas Marsh never met the man. He created this likeness from photographs.



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Thomas Marsh's statue of John the Baptist at the Old Mission at San Juan Bautista, California is positioned so that it looks like he is holding the sun in his hands at sunrise on the winter solstice.