

{view}



## The Bronzed Surfer of West Cliff

Meet Thomas Marsh, the sculptor who created a Santa Cruz icon

By Terri Morgan

Santa Cruz's iconic surfer statue, which stands tall on the bluff along West Cliff Drive, pays homage to everyone who ever has experienced the thrill of riding a board along a moving wall of water. The 18-foot-tall bronze statue depicts a muscular, bare-chested, trunks-clad young surfer standing tall with his even-taller surfboard at his back. Gazing inland, as if he had just climbed up the cliff from a session at Cowell's Beach, the surfer is mounted atop a brass pedestal.

The sculpture, which was installed in 1992, is entitled "To Honor Surfing" and is dedicated to all surfers — past, present, and future. It was inspired by some of the original members of the Santa Cruz Surf Club, which dates back to 1936. Harry Mayo said the idea for the statue was raised after another member, Bill Lidderdale, passed away. Bob Rittenhouse, another original member, recalled that the idea came up after the club held its 50th anniversary celebration at the nearby Coconut Grove ballroom.

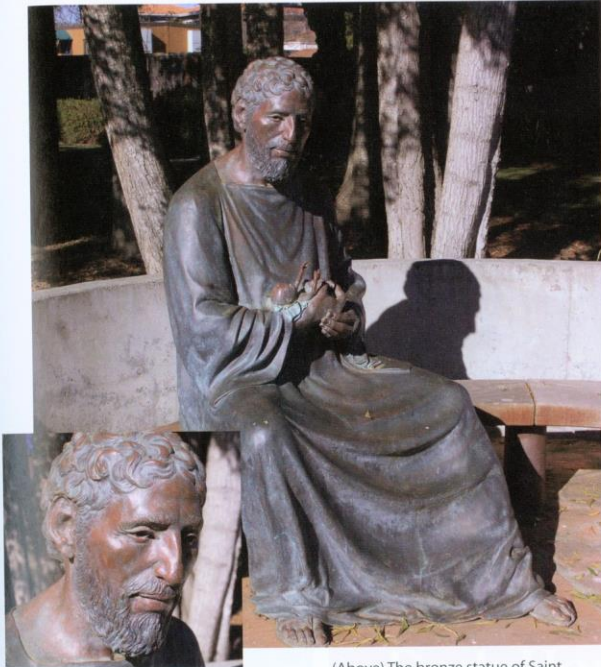
Ironically, the artist who created the timeless young wave rider isn't a surfer.

"I'm not a surfer in the sense that I have only tried once, and failed miserably in Hawaii, to surf on a board," admitted Sculptor Thomas Marsh, whose work is on display in a number of public places around the United States. "However, when I lived in Long Beach in 1974 to 1977, I loved body surfing — riding and tumbling and crashing on the sand with medium-sized surf."

Despite that admission, Marsh was an excellent choice to craft the lifelike sculpture. Well respected in the art world as a realistic figure sculp-

(Left) Installed in 1992, Thomas Marsh's sculpture "To Honor Surfing" on West Cliff Drive quickly became a Santa Cruz landmark.

PHOTOGRAPHS MICKEY CARROLL



tor, Marsh studied anatomy as a special graduate student at the Medical College of Wisconsin after he got a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Layton School of Art. After that he moved to Southern California, where he studied with several master sculptors before moving to Italy in 1977 to learn bronze casting.

"Being in Europe allowed me to research and draw from many of the great sculptural and architectural masterworks of Western Civilization," Marsh said, noting he was fortunate to work with so many mentors. "I could not have asked for a more thorough training in the methods, processes, materials, and aesthetics of classical sculpture."

Marsh moved to San Francisco in 1978 and commuted by air to Cal State Long Beach, where he taught sculpture classes. Just before the Loma Prieta Earthquake one of his former students,

(Above) The bronze statue of Saint Joseph, Patron of the Unborn, by sculptor Thomas Marsh, located in the gardens of Oblates of St. Joseph. (Inset) Detail of Saint Joseph.

Santa Cruz surfer Brian W. Curtis, contacted him about a competition to create a surfing monument near Steamer Lane. Curtis, a third-generation Santa Cruzan born in the old Sister's Hospital on West Cliff Drive, suggested the two collaborate as co-designers. Marsh was to design the figure and Curtis the pedestal.

"I thought it would be a good marriage for us," said Curtis.

The selection committee agreed. The pair entered three different designs, Curtis noted, and two of them were selected among the top five. The winning design was chosen through the Santa Cruz Museum Association, Marsh recalled.

"It was done very professionally, so neither Brian nor I knew who the voting

members of the selection committee were," he said. "Once we were notified as winners of the competition, we met regularly with a committee composed of local surfers."

Along with members of the original Santa Cruz Surf Club, the committee included contemporary surfers. To ensure their design captured the roots of surfing in Santa Cruz, Marsh and Curtis asked two original club members, Bill Grace and Buster Steward, to shape a redwood board they could use as a model for the monument. The surfer, however, was meant to represent surfers of all eras.

"Being in Europe allowed me to research and draw from many of the great sculptural and architectural masterworks of Western Civilization," Marsh said.

"It was forged not on any particular person," Mayo said. "We wanted it that way."

The Santa Cruz Surf Club raised \$75,000 to pay for the statue and solicited in-kind donations for materials and labor. Local surf shops sold special edition T-shirts designed by the club to help fund the project. Despite all the support, however, city officials initially balked at the idea. Club members recall the city was hard to work with, and that led to costly delays.

"It took over five years to get it done," said Mayo. The delay was costly. "We had to dig up another \$20,000."

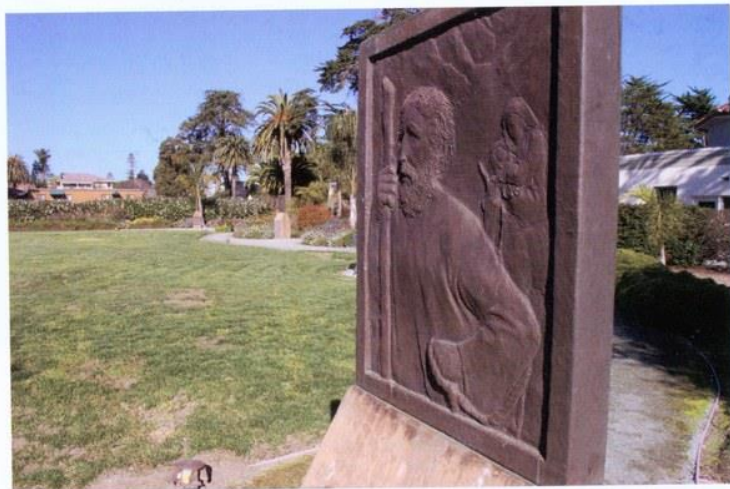
The sculpture was completed in 1991 and erected on the site in 1992. Vann Slatter (of Slatter Construction) donated about \$20,000 worth of labor to install the piece. Club members and the artists were pleased with the final result and the enthusiastic reception the statue received.

"It turned out really well," Mayo said. "You see it everywhere on ads, and people are always taking pictures of it."

Curtis, who says he is stoked every time he drives or walks by the statue, isn't



(Above) Marsh's sculpture of Saint Joseph Marelli, Bishop of Acqui and founder of the Oblates of St. Joseph.



(Above) The gardens at Shrine of Saint Joseph include bas-reliefs Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys of Saint Joseph.

surprised.

"We knew it would be iconic from the start," he said.

Marsh, who has lived and worked in the small town of Orange, Virginia, since 2006, has a number of other public sculptures on display around the United States. One of his best-known pieces, St. Joseph, Patron of the Unborn, is located across the street from the surfer statue on the grounds of the Oblates of St. Joseph. Nearby, Marsh's bigger-than-life statue of John the Baptist stands on the grounds of Mission San Juan Bautista.

"I dedicate my work to the glory of God," Marsh said. "And I thank Him each day for having blessed me with sculptural gifts to reach others for His sake."

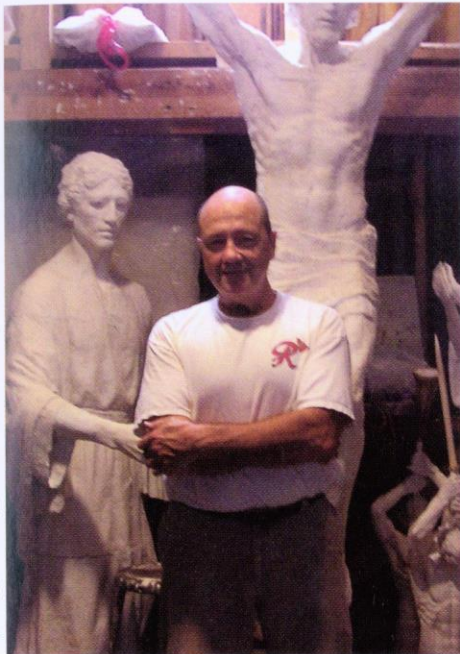


Photo: © Courtesy Thomas Marsh

(Above) Sculptor Thomas surrounded by his work in his studio in Orange, Virginia.

### Find the Sculptures

#### **"To Honor Surfing"**

West Cliff Drive and Pelton Street,  
Santa Cruz

#### **Saint Joseph Sculptures**

Oblates of St. Joseph  
544 West Cliff Dr.  
Santa Cruz

#### **Saint John the Baptist**

406 2nd Street, San Juan Bautista

#### **Goddess of Democracy -**

#### **Chinese Rebel Statue**

Portsmouth Square, San Francisco