

Duane Hanson's People

While visiting a local art museum, you decide to visit the museum gift shop before leaving. When you ask for directions from the museum guard standing in the corner, you discover—to your embarrassment—that he isn't a real guard at all. Instead of being flesh and blood, this life-like sculpture is part of an exhibit of the works of American sculptor Duane Hanson. You begin to wonder how many of the other people you smiled at or nodded to during your visit to the museum were also part of the exhibit.

People usually react to Duane Hanson's sculpture with a combination of surprise, disbelief, and amusement. His life-sized and life-like pieces are Americans whom we all know very well—the elderly tourist couple, the corpulent sunbather lying on a chaise lounge, the maintenance man with dirty hands, the housewife pushing a shopping cart at the local supermarket.

Hanson makes molds from living models, covering each body part in turn with silicone rubber and plaster-of-Paris. Each mold is filled with a vinyl casting material, usually polyvinyl acetate, and the cast body parts are joined with hot vinyl. Imperfections can be eliminated with a soldering iron, files, and sandpaper. After being rubbed with paraffin, the piece is painted using an airbrush. Hair plugs are used on the head and limbs to simulate actual body hair. Clothing and personal effects such as glasses and watches are often acquired directly from the model.

Duane Hanson was born in 1925 in Parkers Prairie, Minnesota, a small town just north of Alexandria. All four grandparents immigrated from Sweden in the 1880s. His father's father,



Sculptor Duane Hanson (right) poses with two of his creations.

Alfred Hanson, was born in 1863 at Källunga Gård in Herrljunga. After his arrival in Spruce Hill, Minnesota, he married Clara Johnson, born 1871 in Kvinnestad in Älvsborgs county. Hanson's mother's father, Andrew Nelson, was born near Lund in 1861 and settled in Eagle Bend, Minnesota, around 1890. He had met Hanson's grandmother, Ingrid Olson from Knislinge, on the boat coming over.

After studies at Luther College and the University of Washington, Duane Hanson was graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1946. He earned an M.F.A. at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where one of his teachers was Swedish sculptor Carl Milles.

Hanson began creating his figures in the late 1960s and has been represented by New York's O.K. Harris Gallery since 1969. His work has attracted acclaim throughout the American and

international art communities, with a succession of one-man shows in such prestigious museums as Washington's Corcoran Gallery and the Whitney Museum in Manhattan. In 1986 his sculpture was on view at Stockholm's Millesgården.

Hanson does not do generals, politicians, or super-heroes. Instead he shows us ordinary men and women in everyday situations, people just trying to do their jobs, just trying to survive. By depicting them as accurately and life-sized as possible—the art historians called it “hyperrealistic”—Hanson is not trying to deceive the viewer. His aim instead is to make us aware of the nobility of even anonymous human beings doing the most mundane human activities. Although he has been accused of ridiculing or satirizing his subjects, his attitude is never condescending. All of his pieces, even his sculptures of drug addicts and the homeless, have a private dignity.