

Victor Issa's "Come Unto Me" comforts patients at Loma Linda University Medical Center in Loma Linda, California.



# CREATING LIVING BRONZE

*Victor Issa's sculptures move, inspire*

**by Susan Diemont-Conwell**

**F**rom his studio nestled in the foothills near Loveland, Colorado, Victor Issa stands before a mound of clay. Wielding many of the same tools used by Michelangelo and Rodin, Issa deftly transforms the lifeless clay into a form that appears to move and breathe. The process is painstaking with days that extend long into the evening. Issa admits he could spend an entire week on a single finger. "To create a fine art sculpture, the artist must be uncompromising and unrelenting in the pursuit of truth and beauty," he says.

That pursuit to capture the human spirit and form in such exacting detail is what makes Issa one of the foremost figurative sculptors in America today. Heralded for his

remarkable ability to make bronze appear alive, Issa's sculptures can be found in public and private collections across the U.S., as well as Japan, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Canada and Brazil.

## **CORPORATE, CITY COMMISSIONS**

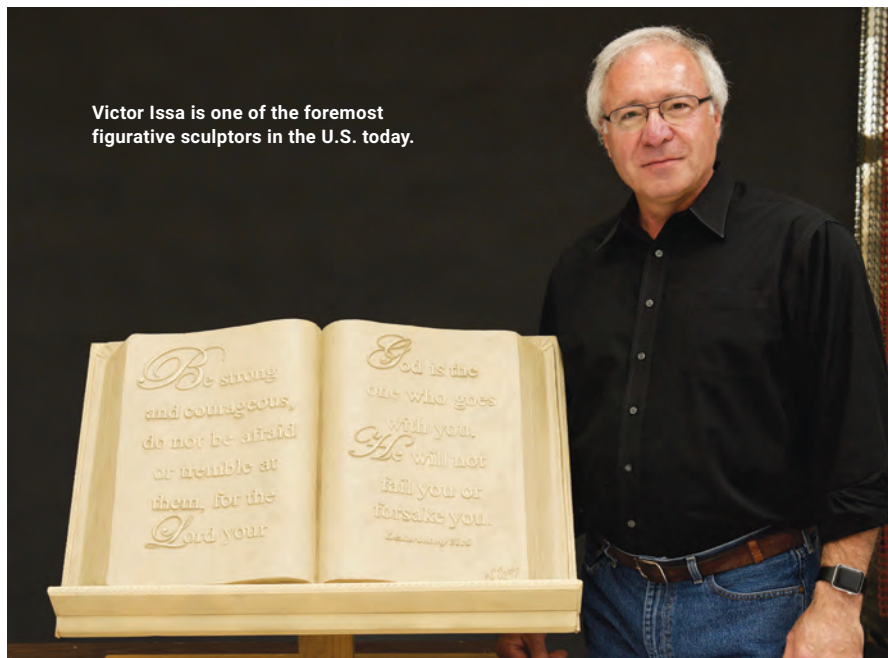
Issa is frequently commissioned by companies, builders, cities, universities and hospital systems. "Clients seek to make a space distinctive. You can do that through décor and architecture, but nothing focuses the attention better than a striking artistic representation of an organization's mission or a piece that simply brings beauty into a space," Issa says.

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With more than 200 sculptures on display, Issa's work makes an impact. One of his compositions, "Come Unto Me," can be found at Loma Linda University Medical Center in San Bernardino County, California. The 10-piece work shows a seated Christ inviting children and adults to come forward in welcome. "I worked to convey the joy of this message of hope through the work of art," Issa says.

A nearby plaque displays the name of the piece, as well as a phone



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Victor Issa, Owner, Victor Issa Studios

number for Victor Issa Studios. "Ten years after it was first installed, patients and family members still call me in tears to tell me how much the sculptures touched them. Some are cancer and heart patients who are at the hospital repeatedly. They sit on the bench, hold Jesus' hand and find comfort," he says.

## COMMISSIONING A PIECE

Issa says there are typically two beginning points for a commission. "Some clients know exactly what they want, and others are looking for a visual representation of their organization's mission," he says. The sculptor begins with a trip to the campus or location of the final piece. He peppers

the client with a host of questions to help him get a feel for what the organization is looking for.

With a general understanding and an initial honorarium, Issa travels back to his studio where he creates a pinch-clay sculpture or study. "I have never spent much time drawing my sculptures," Issa explains. "For me, the pinch-clay better captures the movement and elements the client wants included."

Once approved and commissioned, Issa sets an agreed-upon schedule for the piece. "The entire process—from the initial meeting to installation—can take a year or two, depending on complexity and scope. I encourage clients

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**My focus is to make the face and body come alive with emotions and expressions.”**

**Victor Issa**

to think about artwork early in the design phase of a new or remodeled building or space,” he says.

With the sculpture’s elements established, Issa sets to work on a piece that is a quarter size of the finished work. With the use of a live model, the detailed representation captures the figure’s proportion, expression and the nature of the folds in the clothing. “The movement and detail in this smaller piece is then translated into the life-size work,” he explains.

Though Issa uses many of the same tools as the early masters, he does not eschew 21st century technology. “The enlarging process is now digitized. It allows me to work more efficiently,” he says.

To capture breath and movement, Issa’s live models move in and out of a pose. “No pose can be held for any amount of time without it losing some life,” he says. When using video of a model, Issa often studies the movement frame by frame.

Clients often describe Issa’s works as having life. “My focus is to make the face and body come alive with emotions and expressions,” he says. This talent for capturing the life of an object has given Issa the reputation as a creator of living bronze.

## **HONING HIS CRAFT**

Though he has served clients for 37 years, Issa still practices his skills at capturing the life of an object. “I’ll take a hike out into the woods and see a leaf on the ground. I spend 10 or 15 minutes studying the object from all angles, imagining the plant peeking out from the soil, how the breeze touches the leaf and makes it move. I become aware of the object on a different level. Then I set out to draw the object. Though I put my pencil down to draw, my eye stays focused on that leaf,” he says.

Victor Issa’s dramatic sculptures appear to move and breathe. Shown, “Freedom.”



**Victor Issa captures the life of an object in "Grandpa, the Storyteller," making the face and body come alive with emotions and expressions.**

Born and raised in Lebanon, Issa never knew it was possible to make a living as an artist. "I was always drawing in my textbooks and notebooks in school, but I never knew any artists," he says. When Issa came to the U.S. in 1973, he first thought about pursuing a degree in music education, but soon switched to art education. "Until college, I had never taken an art class," he adds.

While in college in Lincoln, Nebraska, Issa earned money selling his watercolor and oil paintings. "I had an agent who handled my work in galleries and art shows," he says. At The University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), Issa took his first sculpture class. After graduating, he returned

to a sculpture he had begun creating during that class. "My agent saw that piece and told me that I'm a better sculptor than painter."

Issa returned to UNL to take a second sculpture class before his teacher and mentor retired. Soon after, Issa moved to Loveland to be close to the city's bronze art foundries. "Sculptors need to be near a production facility, which is how Loveland grew into an art colony. The city has been called the sculpture capital of America and has one of the top sculpture collections in the U.S.," Issa says.

The artist spent seven or eight years creating enlargements and reductions

of other artists' work. "It was like an apprenticeship of sorts. I'd study the use of clay, texture, surface treatment and composition of each piece. It was a second college degree, you could say," he notes.

Issa soon became known around the country for these painstaking reproductions, and it wasn't long before he received his first two original commissions. "The first commission was to create 11 life-size religious sculptures for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists—the church headquarters building—in Silver Spring, Maryland. The second was a piece that needed to be reproduced for three branches of Centura Health in Colorado," Issa relates. "Both commissions amounted to 20 pieces in two years. I worked 10- to 12-hour days on those projects. Today, I pace myself a little more."

Issa typically takes on six to seven projects each year, including one or two commissions. Most come from word-of-mouth and repeat customers. "I have so many pieces out in the world today that clients will come across my work and track me down."

## MENTORING EMERGING ARTISTS

Over the years, Issa has worked to give other sculptors opportunities to showcase their work. In 1992, he co-founded the Loveland Sculpture Invitational Show, which became known as the largest sculpture event in the U.S. "The show ran for 23 years and gave hundreds of emerging artists the opportunity to showcase their work and establish a following in the marketplace," he says. Proceeds from the annual show were used to support art in schools, with



With 200 sculptures on display, Victor Issa's work can be found in public and private collections across the U.S., as well as Japan, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Canada and Brazil. Shown, "The Master Healer."

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contributions totaling more than \$270,000, and the show donated more than 30 sculptures to the city of Loveland.

Today, Issa continues to foster emerging artists through mentoring. "When I moved to Loveland back in the 1980s, I tracked down famous sculptor George Lundeen, who became my mentor. I remember during our first meeting, George spent an hour and a half answering questions of mine. When I offered to pay him, he said I owed him nothing. He told me instead to pass that knowledge on. So that's what I do," he shares.

Issa says that his talent is a gift from God. "I work 50 to 60 hours a week, but I love it. The fact that my work has touched so many lives is so meaningful to me," he says. 🙏

*With more than 20 years in the communications industry, Susan Diemont-Conwell works with companies, nonprofits and individuals to produce stories and publications that move and inspire.*



Victor Issa captures breath and movement by having his models move in and out of a pose. Shown, "Ascension."



Often working long into the evenings, Victor Issa is painstaking and uncompromising in capturing the human spirit and form.