

## Sculptor Beniamino Bufano at Pebble Beach

by Neal Hotelling

The Monterey Peninsula made national headlines in the summer of 1942 with a still unsolved beheading – a crime of art to a masterwork created by controversial artist Beniamino Bufano.

The New York Times of July 28, 1942 reported: “Police examined fingerprints on a stainless steel torso of Johan Sebastian Bach today for clues to the whereabouts of its 200-pound, blue-granite head. The head was attached to the fifteen foot torso until Saturday when it disappeared from Devendorf Plaza a few hours before celebration of this art colony’s annual Bach Festival in the Carmel Forest Theater, where it was to have been unveiled [on July 24]. Beniamino Bufano, the sculptor, could offer no clues to police or Federal agents, the latter joining the inquiry because [National Youth Administration] students had aided Mr. Bufano.”

The diminutive, five-foot tall artist was born in San Fele, in southern Italy, and immigrated at a young age with his parents and siblings to New York City. His 1917 WWI Draft Registration gives his birth date as October 14, 1890; his grave at Colma, California shows October 15th. Other sources have wider variances. The 1900 U.S. Census shows he was born in February 1889 and that the family came to America in 1898, while his 1938 Naturalization papers show him as age 40, indicating an 1898 birth, a year commonly used in his biographies. He listed “sculptor” as his occupation on the 1910 census, showing age 21, so he committed early to his favored art form, but experimented with his media.

He first came to California for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exhibition to work on sculpting details in several of the fair’s features, including the “Panels of Art” at the Palace of Fine Arts. At the exhibition he became fascinated with Chinese glazes and a few years later traveled to China and worked with potters for a few years about 1920 to study and learn their ancient methods. Glazed pottery was his most common medium in the 1920s, sometimes combined with sculpting in stone.

In addition to studying glazes in China, Bufano was befriended by revolutionary leader Sun Yet-sen, who set up a military government at Guangzhou in 1921, placing a young Chiang Kai-Shek as commandant of his National Revolutionary Army. Returning from China, Bufano settled in San Francisco and was briefly an instructor at the San Francisco Institute of Art. Embroiled in controversy for his teaching methods, he was fired after only a few months. Encouraged by his students, he briefly operated his own school, the “Da Vinci School of Allied Arts,” which he set-up in 1923 in the Hawaiian Building built for the 1915 PPIE, but his school soon closed after creditors attached his limited assets. As he said to friends, “I have no money. I know nothing of business. What am I to do?”

A series of exhibitions in San Francisco, New York, Chicago and St. Louis in the mid-1920s resulted in a sale to the Metropolitan Museum and netted enough to afford travels and exhibition in London and Paris. *Continued on page 3*



Bufano's Peace Obelisk at  
Timber Cove near  
Jenner-by-the-Sea

During his two years in Paris, 1927-1929, he sculpted his first St. Francis of Assisi out of a 32-ton block of black Swedish granite. Many years later it was moved to San Francisco.

Back in San Francisco, Bufano embraced creating public art through WPA projects, and dreamed big. In 1935 he announced plans for a 180-foot high St. Francis statue he designed to stand on Twin Peaks, made of a new art medium, stainless steel, with copper face and hands. Bufano created an 8-foot model and with WPA support it eventually gained approval by the Arts Commission, but the controversial statue was defeated by the Parks Commission in 1937, arguing it would be too expensive to maintain.

Bufano's first piece created with stainless steel was a statue of his former friend, Sun Yat-sen, which has stood in San Francisco's Chinatown since 1938. He sculpted the head from granite to go with the stainless steel torso. In 1937, he was already planning a similar statue of Bach – with indications it would be placed somewhere in San Francisco. The growth of the Carmel Bach Festival, begun in 1935, altered the plan.

Bufano's life, including his time on the Peninsula, is shrouded in mystery. When was he here? Where did he work? Biographers reference a studio at Carmel, and later at Big Sur. Did he envision other projects? A recent discovery in the Pebble Beach Company Archives raises more questions. A series of memos and letters from 1944, including three in Bufano's own hand, evidence that Bufano was living and working in Pebble Beach at the former studio of artist Jo Mora—the same year that Mayor Roger Lapham, a founder of Cypress Point Club, appointed Bufano to the San Francisco Arts Commission.

Mora had acquired two lots in 1927, about 4.7 acres along Del Ciervo, on which he built a studio and stables. In November 1942, Mora exchanged those lots for the former Carbery home along Sunridge, near today's Mora Lane. We now know the studio on Del Ciervo was leased to Bufano. Was it there that Bufano worked on his Bach? We don't know when the lease began.

Bufano clearly wanted to stay, but by mid-1944, Morse wanted to upgrade the hillside and a studio no longer fit in the plans. After getting his initial

request to vacate, Bufano met with Morse in early August and followed up with a handwritten note: Dear Mr. Morse, The drawing that you saw in my studio yesterday will make a beautiful monument commemorating world peace or humanity united and I am sure that you saw a great possibility as a peace monument in it and to place it on some beautiful spot on the grounds close to the sea that will give grace and a place in history... I will make the statue for the use of the studio. Very sincerely yours, Beniamino Bufano.

Over the next four months they met and wrote; Bufano looking for every avenue to stay, and Morse reiterating he had to vacate. In November, Bufano delivered a check for \$3,000 to purchase the property. Morse returned the check as he had already made arrangements to sell the sub-divided one-acre lot with the studio to Gladys Johnston for \$4,000. Bufano moved out in early December.

His Bach was re-released with a new ceramic head and exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum from 1956-1965, and later at the United Nations. After returning to California, it was loaned to the Mondavi Vineyard at Oakville for display. While Bufano's time at Pebble Beach did not result in a Peace monument here, he did create others, including those on display at San Francisco and near Jenner-by-the-Sea. 🌀



Reproduced from the magazine "What's Doing," August 1949. (Original source unknown.) Only known photo showing the face of Bach in granite. Here Bufano prepares his Bach for the July 24, 1942 unveiling in Devendorf Park.



"...[Bufano] examines the massive head of Sebastian Bach which, atop a 10-foot stainless steel body, is expected to be placed in Stanford's music building". - San Francisco Library Historic Photo Collection, Photo #AAC-9165; Portraits-Bufano, Beniamino-1955