

Tuan's Dramatic History



As you read about the dramatic story of Tuan, you will probably visualize the outline of a novel or, perhaps, a feature film. Surely, you will gain insight into this artist's passion for love and peacefulness, the core emotions driving his artistic efforts. And undoubtedly, you will also discern the forces that endowed Tuan with the sculptural genius to create masterpieces of figurative expression!

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Most of us could not imagine the experiences crowded into this sculptor Tuan's life. It started in 1963 when Tuan was born into one of the wealthiest families in all of Vietnam – royalty, in fact...

Tuan enjoyed a youth of enviable security. Surrounded by a large extended family and catered to by multiple servants, Tuan grew up in the glow of love. Even though the war grew along with him, Tuan's life was far removed, in both distance and mind. Instead, largely because of the well known success of his father, an architect, Tuan was able to attend a prestigious private school, become a consummate tennis player, and play freely, insulated from the terror ravaging his country.

In 1975, however, all that changed. Tuan's father was removed to a forced labor camp to be "re-educated" by the communists. The compound upon which Tuan so peacefully had lived his first twelve years was suddenly confiscated. After a while, his father returned but was compelled to stay at home. This turned out to be a major factor for Tuan since his father began to intensely sculpt, a longtime passion. Always able to draw, Tuan now paid increasing interest to sculpture. He frequently worked alongside his father. After a time they clashed however - Tuan rebelling against his father's rigid approach to the medium and his father frustrated over Tuan's refusal (or inability) to be "disciplined" in his approach.

His father's fame seemed to form a protective umbrella around the family for a while and they were generally left alone by the authorities. Nevertheless, Tuan needed the freedom he had known. He started to hide in the woods when the authorities came to check on him and his family. He inevitably became scared, however, and returned home. Then, in 1986, he made a momentous decision...to escape by boat down the river. But events would not allow his plans to materialize – his coterie was discovered while en route; Shots were fired, and Tuan was arrested.

Tuan's Dramatic History (continued)

As punishment, Tuan was kept in the harshest of prisons. For 6 months he was held in a windowless room, packed so tight with inmates that sleeping could only be accomplished shoulder to shoulder. In this setting, his sculpting skills were called upon to save him from an even worse existence. Tuan was questioned as to what he did for a living. The only answer Tuan had was that he could sculpt. Nobody in prison knew what "sculpture" was. Fortunately, the floor was made of clay and, when mixed with water, Tuan was able to create a portrait of one of the prisoners. He became an instant celebrity, sculpting for families of captors and captives alike!

In 1988, after a year of captivity, Tuan was freed and returned to his parents.



He was not to stay with them long. More mature and experienced, Tuan made contact with the underground and endured a harrowing 2-month walk through the jungles of Southeast Asia to Cambodia. He and his group were repeatedly chased by the authorities but always managed to elude them until they made it to a waiting boat to Thailand. Out of danger at last, Tuan now faced months of dreary living in refugee camps in Thailand and then the Philippines where he learned English. While in the Philippines, his life brightened when he had his first sculpture show featuring figures of escaping Vietnamese. Once again, he became a celebrity!

Finally, arriving in San Francisco in 1989, Tuan was truly free and, with an excitement that permeates his daily activities even today, he endeavored to undertake his life's work and passion...sculpting.

Recognition for the young artist followed quickly: In 1990, Tuan was the recipient of the Gloria Medal from the National Sculpture Society (New York), an award bestowed upon a young artist for a "meritorious body of work"; He has been commissioned for a number of public and private works, including a memorial bust for the Nicole Brown Simpson Charitable Foundation, and a 15-foot monument for the City of Westminster commemorating the partnership between American and Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam war.

Today, Tuan "works" seven days a week in his studio. Both his parents escaped to the US and live in Southern California with him. He and his father still spar over the sculptural process today. ■