

MAY 1998

This Old House

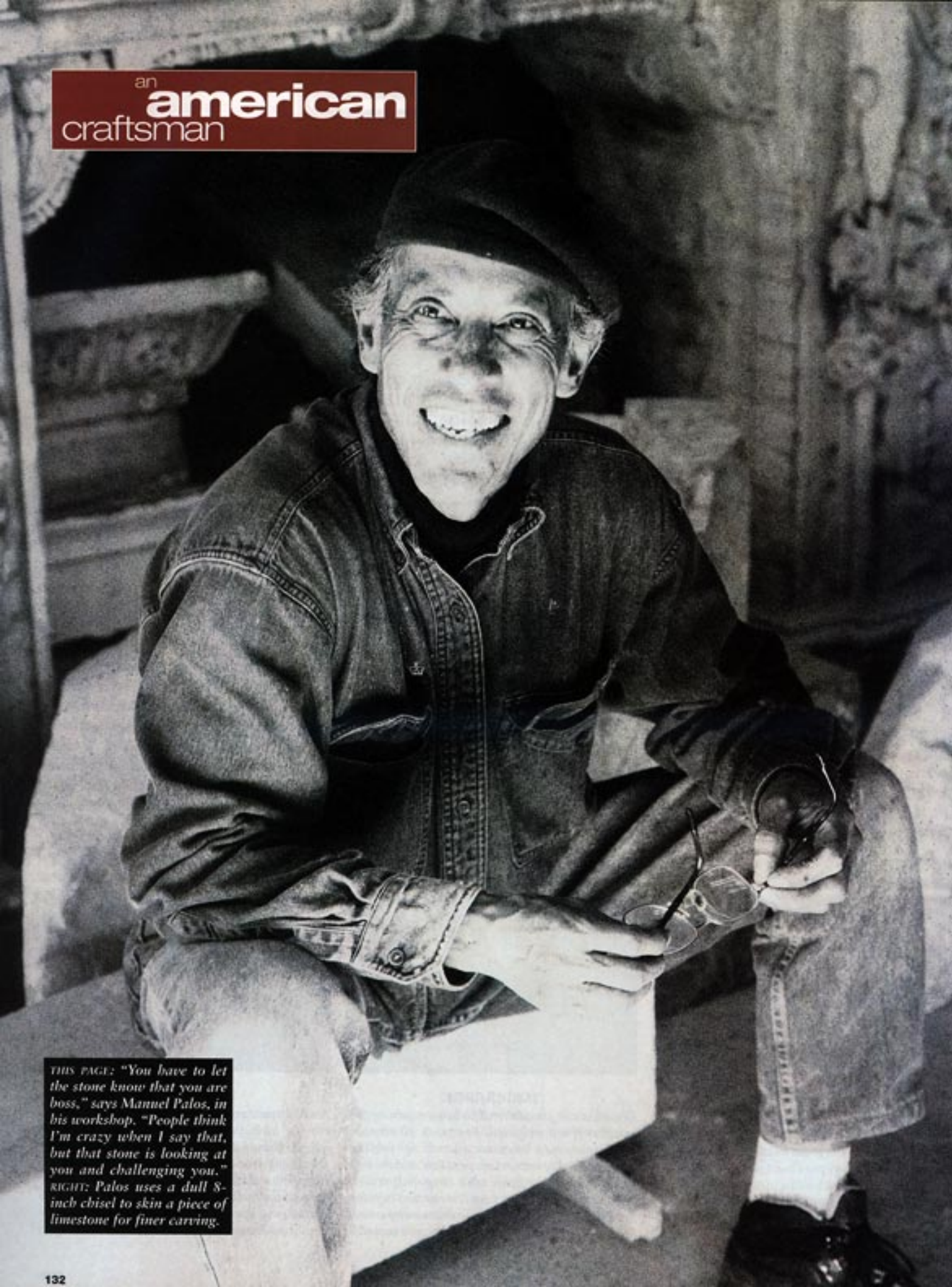
WEED WHACKERS • CONCRETE BY THE BAG • CAN A DISHWASHER BE WORTH \$1,000?
KITCHEN CABINETS THAT LAST • PLAYHOUSES • YOUR OWN BOCCIE BALL COURT



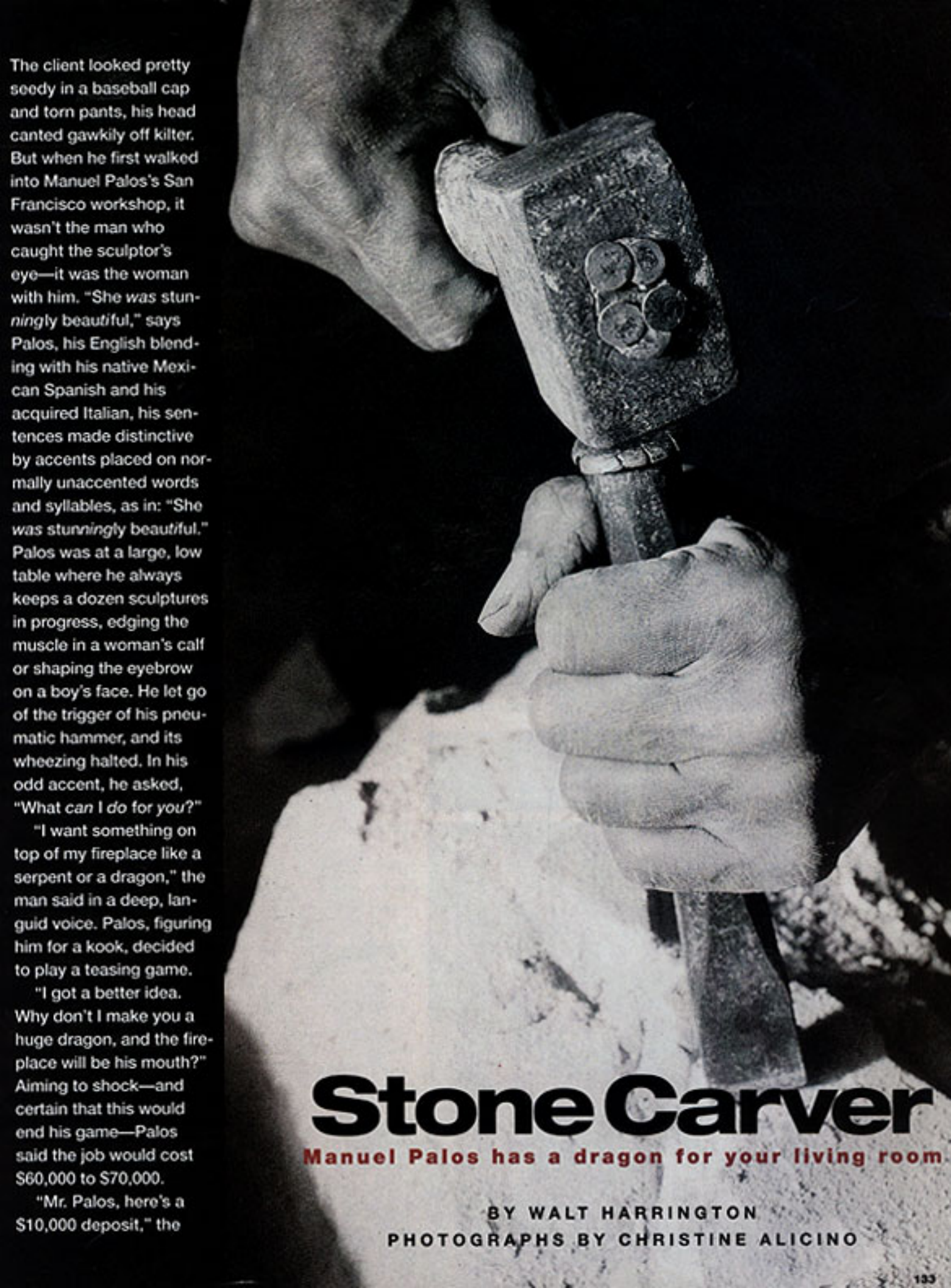
Secrets of a Great

Lawn

an
american
craftsman



THIS PAGE: "You have to let the stone know that you are boss," says Manuel Palos, in his workshop. "People think I'm crazy when I say that, but that stone is looking at you and challenging you."
RIGHT: Palos uses a dull 8-inch chisel to skin a piece of limestone for finer carving.



The client looked pretty seedy in a baseball cap and torn pants, his head canted gawkily off kilter. But when he first walked into Manuel Palos's San Francisco workshop, it wasn't the man who caught the sculptor's eye—it was the woman with him. "She was stunningly beautiful," says Palos, his English blending with his native Mexican Spanish and his acquired Italian, his sentences made distinctive by accents placed on normally unaccented words and syllables, as in: "She was stunningly beautiful." Palos was at a large, low table where he always keeps a dozen sculptures in progress, edging the muscle in a woman's calf or shaping the eyebrow on a boy's face. He let go of the trigger of his pneumatic hammer, and its wheezing halted. In his odd accent, he asked, "What can I do for you?"

"I want something on top of my fireplace like a serpent or a dragon," the man said in a deep, languid voice. Palos, figuring him for a kook, decided to play a teasing game.

"I got a better idea. Why don't I make you a huge dragon, and the fireplace will be his mouth?" Aiming to shock—and certain that this would end his game—Palos said the job would cost \$60,000 to \$70,000.

"Mr. Palos, here's a \$10,000 deposit," the

Stone Carver

Manuel Palos has a dragon for your living room

BY WALT HARRINGTON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINE ALICINO

man said, handing him a check, and left. Palos, taken aback, hurried to his office and asked his secretary to see if the man had that much money in his account. She glanced at the check.

"This is Nicolas Cage," she said. "The famous actor."

The teasing had turned. "Oh, no," Palos thought. "So now I have to come up with my joke."

Years later, as Palos tells this story on a Sunday morning, the pneumatic hammer wheezes and stone dust billows around him in his 7,000-square-foot workshop. The dragon that now frames Cage's fireplace—a fierce and magnificent 10-by-13-foot creature carved from 4½ tons of black Mexican limestone—is only one of many monumental Palos stone carvings and cement castings in San Francisco. His eight 13-foot-tall eagles look as if they might fly off the top of the Pacific Telephone building. His 9-foot-high Greek gods—Zeus and Medusa among them—adorn the Palace of the Legion of Honor. His fountains and fireplaces decorate the lobbies of the Villa Florence and Galleria Park hotels.

"I am so lucky," says Palos, who at age 60 works alone in his shop every weekend, away from the distractions of running one of the nation's most respected architectural sculpture businesses. "Very few sculptors have the satisfaction to have their work in public and lit up all night like my eagles. Even the Greeks and Romans didn't have their sculptures lit up all night—no electricity! I really enjoy my life. There are people who are born to be something and who find out early enough to enjoy the rest of their lives doing what they want. That's the trick."

Palos is seated before a chunk of French limestone he is carving into a noble lion that will sit as one of the

pedestals beneath the jambs of a 1,500-pound \$25,000 fireplace in a house on San Francisco's Postcard Row. In his right hand, he tightly grips the air hammer's nozzle. The fingertips of his left hand hold the pencil-size chisel bit while he turns the bit like a spindle to etch the loops of the lion's billowing mane. Palos leans into his work, his weight on the toes of his right foot. His right arm, which has carved stone for 30 years, is much stronger than his left. He wears a teal beret.

"This is how it is done, and—oh, God—it is fun!" Palos says, leaning back and letting the air hammer whine down. "I love to work. What a gift! It's bringing life to the lion. My father used to say, 'Do your best.' He didn't know anything about art, but he was an artist. He was the best shoemaker in Tabasco, Mexico."

Palos immigrated to San Francisco as a young man looking for work. He became a U.S. citizen and began laboring in an architectural ornament company. He met old men—of Irish, German and Italian heritage—who had spent their lives sculpting clay models for castings and carving stone window and door arches, cornices, corbels and columns, fountains and fireplaces. In the old days,

the sons of these men would have learned their fathers' craft, but no more. "They wanted to go to college, go work in a bank," Palos says. "The men had so much to teach and didn't have anybody to teach it to."

The old men taught Palos. They taught him to stand back from a stone as he carved to better see the grand sweep of his work. They taught him to work on one piece, then another, then return to the first. The lapsed time let the work simmer in the mind and eye, revealing flaws more readily. They taught him to lean on the toes of his right foot as he carved and to swing the hammer not only with his arm and wrist but also with his whole body, like a boxer who throws a right hook from the balls of his feet through his torso and arm and out his fist, hitting his mark 2 or 3 inches from his arm's full extension.

It drove Palos crazy that the old men insisted on listening to classical music while they worked. "Well, in



Palos conjured up an ancient archetype of terror in his original design sketch for a massive fireplace in actor Nicolas Cage's house.

A 13-foot plaster-of-paris eagle that Francis Ford Coppola used as a prop in his 1988 film, *Tucker*, now stands guard in front of Palos's workshop in San Francisco. Eight copies of the magisterial eagle, cast in fiberglass and reinforced with stainless-steel frames, grace the top of the city's Pacific Telephone building.





Cage's 10-by-13-foot dragon fireplace belches flames on command and is easily tamed by a poker. A more relentless demon stalks Palos when he works. "I have a fear inside me all the time—a fear that somebody better than me will find me out," he says. "The master carvers in Italy and Greece were probably driven by the same fear."



With air hammer in hand, Palos carves a pendant into the side of an Irish warrior perched atop a lion pedestal for a fireplace. "I work for four or five hours on a piece, every other day. And my mind gets busy," Palos says. So he moves on to another project.

about two months," he says, "I couldn't work without classical music. And now I know why. It relaxes. That music has been created with discipline. It is so well done that it lasts forever. Anything well done lasts forever." The old men convinced Palos he had to study in Italy, famous for stone carving. So Palos began spending two months every summer in Carrara, where Michelangelo cut the marble for his Pietà. Palos's first wife couldn't abide his obsession, thought he was crazy. She wanted him to work on a city garbage truck. Why not? Good pay, insurance, vacations, retirement. Instead, at 33, Palos quit his job and launched his own casting and carving business. Even the old men told him it was too risky.

"I was starving," Palos says, "but I never thought about doing it to make money. It was something in me waiting to come out. I felt compelled to let it go." By then, work had become his life. "Having your work under control, the rest of your life falls into place. Your friends and family have respect for you. And then you feel that respect too."

All around him in his workshop this morning is proof of respect deserved: the fireplace he is carving with its roaring lion pedestals and its ancient Irish warriors standing erect, carrying the mantel upon their heads; castings of the giant eagle and the Greek gods; a bowl-shaped mold the size of a spaceship that will be cast as a mansion's oval ceiling; Doric columns, cornices and capitals. In the center of the room, on the large, low table, sit the marble busts and bodies he carves just for pleasure.

"I am so, so lucky," he says.

The air hammer wheezes, and Palos leans on his toes and into his work. He is refining the lion, working with a three-toed $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch chisel bit and gentle air power, digging between the curls of the mane to make the tresses jump out in relief. Later, he will run a sharp, delicate bit over the sculpture's entire surface to remove the crosshatching toe marks left by the rough-cutting chisels. Except for the air hammer, which has cut carving time 10-fold over hammer-and-chisel work, stone carving is much as it was centuries ago.

The rough stone must be skinned by driving a 2½-pound hammer onto the head of a 10-inch carbide-steel-tipped

chisel held loosely so that it will ride with the natural grain. After skinning, the carver draws in the stone, starting with bigger chisels and more air power to rough out his design. He then progressively works his way down to smaller bits and less force, until he's where Palos is today. The fireplace—with its lion manes, snarling mouths, paws, muscles and sinew; its warrior faces, beards, teeth, eyes, ears and helmets; its garlands, acanthus leaves and flower buds—has taken two months of work. Smoothing its surface and sharpening its details will take him two more weeks.

"It's not all inspiration," Palos says. "It's work, dedication."

Palos works on a 6-by-6-inch square of mane for an hour, getting it perfect. Then, still following the advice of the old men who taught him, he leaves the lion to simmer in his mind and eye, moves across his workshop and leans into a small marble bust of a young girl that is emerging from an 8-by-8-inch block of pink marble that Palos shipped home from Italy. "You'll think I'm crazy, but I look at her, and I see a smile, a little smile." The stone only hints at the girl's face now, as if it were shrouded in tomb cloth. But in a few minutes, Palos has drawn a chin and shaped a cheek. He then works on the smile that only he can see.

"Three hundred years ago," Palos says, "there was no room for sloppiness or 'that's good enough.' Well done was perfect." And that is what Palos hopes to achieve, although he believes that many clients don't know the difference between mediocrity and perfection. And, Palos says, the financial pressure to cut corners is great. He once took a job carving a monument for a California town and underestimated the time it would take. He told the town fathers that he would end up losing \$20,000 because of the extra time needed to finish the monument to his satisfaction. "I will have to do it for free," Palos said, "but I will have to do it." To his relief, the town fathers paid the extra money.

He spits on the girl's marble cheek, rubs off the gray dust with his fingertips—and suddenly her skin shines pink and bright with a subtle white grain radiating through it. Palos is elated. It is a thrill that, even after 30 years of carving, is fresh every time. He believes it has something to do with touching the wonder of creation. A decade ago, he was in Italy, working on a woman's torso in Portuguese marble. As he carved, he realized he would not have enough stone for the left breast. In an instant, without conscious thought, Palos dug into the stone and indented the breast as a reverse image, to the later amazement and awe of his fellow carvers. "I felt like I had an



For the crowning touch on a garden fountain that Palos carved from marble, he sculpted a 14-inch-high cherub holding a water-spouting fish. "I brought something alive—creating, creating, creating," he says. "What a gift!"

extra gift that God gave me to create that beauty," Palos says. That wonder has never faded and, when he looks at the torso today, he still thinks, "How did I do that?"

Palos feels the same awe about Nicolas Cage's dragon. He went to Mexico to select 13 giant pieces of limestone. He drove the truck that carried the stone back to San Francisco, where he began carving the dragon's fiery mouth and fangs, then moved up to its flared nostrils and evil eyes. It took six months. But, as Palos says, anything well done lasts forever. And sometimes he ponders a time 200, 300, 1,000 years from now when San Francisco may lie in ruins, and rising forth will be his dragon. What will they make of it? A giant talisman? A rendering of God? Or the devil? An altar for sacrifice? Perhaps Cage's fancy and Manuel Palos's joke will turn out to be a mysterious Stonehenge from our time.

This morning, Palos will work on the girl's face a while longer, until anyone who looks will see her smile. Then he will return to the lion's mane or to the faces of the Irish soldiers of his fireplace—or to the sitting woman, the turbaned head or the muscled back he sees in several pieces of still uncarved marble. "I want to someday die happy with my sculpture and remember how I did it all," Palos says. "Resting is not enough for me.

"I have to keep carving, keep carving." ■