

## THE RESTORATIONISTS

# CASTING THE PAST: The sculpture of Manuel Palos

By Thomas W. Sweeney

**SAN FRANCISCO**—After reaching the peak of the 25-story Art Deco-style Pacific Telesis building, Manuel Palos ignores the mesmerizing panorama below and instead focuses on the massive cast eagles perched along the parapet.

He eyes the octet with concern, smoothes his hand over their stone plumage and then breaks into an exuberant smile. As one of the nation's most adept architectural sculptors, Palos has a proprietary, almost fatherly concern and pride for his completed work.

Designed by architect Timothy Pfeiffer, the almost cathedral-like tower was the largest and tallest commercial building in the west when completed in 1925. Its terra cotta eagles, filled with concrete and weighing 2,600 pounds each, were inspired by the eagles that glide around Sierra Nevada crags. At 13 feet tall and eight feet wide, the cast eagles were an imposing but relatively brief sight on the building. After a piece of one of the birds fell into the phone company parking lot in the 1950s, all eight were removed for safety reasons.

Lee Eckles, who was project manager for Garcia Wagner architects during the eight-year restoration of the building and its four acres of terra cotta facing, says as soon as he started talking with Palos about the possibility of replicating the eagles he knew he had found the right

sculptor for the job. "His approach was a combination of creativity and historical authenticity. It was obvious he was adept at both modes."

Because the eagles were long gone and the only records of their existence were an aged photograph and an original one-half-inch scale shop drawing without details, Palos created one-quarter scale models with the help of numerous books depicting eagles. Eckles recalls. After close examination by telephone company executives, architects, structural engineers and others, it was agreed full-size models would be cast according to the scale-model design.

Palos filled his large studio in San Francisco's industrial Bayview area with the eight massive birds replicated in high-resistance polyester over fiberglass reinforcement and a stainless steel frame. The result is half the weight of the originals, an important quality in surviving constant gusts of ocean-driven winds.

Whenever Palos, a 52-year-old native of Zacatecas, Mexico, is asked if he is descended from an artistic family, he replies "Yes, my father was the best shoemaker in town. That was his art and I am proud of it." He says people traveled great distances to have his father craft special orthopedic shoes. At his father's bidding, Palos joined the shoe business but soon knew his heart was not in it.

When his brother Frank, also a sculptor, needed help in meeting a deadline on creating a seahorse relief for a dead-line on a new building at San Diego State University, Palos joined him despite having little experience beyond their childhood pastime of molding clay into figurines. "Without having used any tools, I knew I could do it. Thanks to my brother and father, I'm now in this business," Palos says.

"I was one of the luckiest ones," he says, still obviously grateful for the opportunity. While working with skilled European artisans on reconstruction of the 1915 Palace of Fine Art, originally a temporary plaster architectural creation for the Panama Pacific Fair, "they told me all their secrets and I absorbed it all. I not only learned the trade and the art, I also learned from them good music, good manners and culture. All that is an important combination."

Palos still adds to his knowledge of sculpting and art through annual summer visits to Carrara, Italy where he joins an international conclave of sculptors. "You get to know the best in the world," he says with obvious excitement. After renting studio space and buying marble, Palos says he is free to concentrate on sculpting because he is away from the daily demands of conducting business. He raves about the creative atmosphere in Carrara and finds this inspirational. The sculptors also organize tours to the region's museums and inspect each other's work in progress. Palos always adds the museums of London and Paris to his itinerary. "I'm always the last guy there," he says of closing time at the Louvre. "They have to kick me out."

A recent commission from the Palace of the Legion of Honor, a city art museum housed in a near-replica of the original in Paris, demonstrates how Palos approaches his work. His task was to replicate eight mythological statues that adorn



The rear facade of the Palace of the Legion of Honor with Palos' replicated statues.

the curved rear roof line the 1924 Classical-style museum. Because the nine-foot-high concrete statues, subject to more than 50 years of salt air driven by ocean winds, had networks of cracks and missing pieces, Palos was charged with recreating them.

To begin, he returned to Paris to study the original statues on the Palais de la Legion d'Honneur. Palos memorized and photographed the graceful poses and drapery of the figures, including Medusa, Zeus and Neptune. After returning to San Francisco, Palos oversaw the arduous removal of each of the 3,000-pound statues to his studio. The job was further complicated because each statue was anchored into the roof with rusting one-inch steel bars. After repairing the statues, Palos cast each one with a rubber mold used to replicate the original in his trademarked "Decocast" process.

This method requires a combination of modern epoxies that are mixed with the appropriate matching material such as granite or marble chips. Depending on the required finish, the surface can be left rough or sanded and polished to a smooth, high gloss. Palos says fiberglass reinforced works of art have the advantage of being relatively lightweight, less expensive and quite durable.

Through experimenting with the ingredients—"making samples and mistakes"—he finally discovered a successful consistency. "And I'm still improving it." In earthquake-prone San Francisco, the process is helpful in replicating heavy decorative trim, such as terra cotta, that could break away and fall during a tremor. The material's strength also resists the Bay Area's ever-fluctuating weather, which Palos describes as "being in the middle of the ocean where the weather is changing every minute. There are so many buildings that need this kind of work. But they often don't know who to find to do it."

After clambering over the skylight-covered roof of the Legion of Honor, Palos finally reaches the new statues. Once again, he inspects them carefully and beams. "These are my babies!" he

exclaims. He pounds and pats the surfaces of Diana the Huntress and pronounces the statue's condition as "fantastic," while pointing to the patina the weather is creating on the surface.

After the new statues were installed, Palos received a letter from the Arts Commission of San Francisco praising his "passion for excellence and attention to detail manifested itself in every one of the finished sculptures. The works were even more like the originals than we had ever hoped for, and we cannot thank you enough for having gone 'beyond the call of duty' to complete this project in such a professional and artistic way."

Another historic site Palos takes delight in revisiting is the former main Crocker Bank where he restored and replicated various decorative elements. The corner banking temple was missing its original cast-bronze doorway so Palos was commissioned to cast a replica using his trademarked bonding process. Inside, he replicated coffered ceiling panels, a decorative grille and a delightful bronze squirrel that sits mischievously atop a newel post.

Laurie Petipas, a Genesler & Associates architect who worked with Palos on the Crocker project, says the sculptor has an extraordinary talent for understanding



Palos replicated this bronze squirrel at the former Crocker Bank.



A new cast column is displayed by Palos.

the essence of a project. "He understands what you're trying to do." Petipas currently is working with Palos on his largest commission, a new textured, granite-like wall that will be the focus of the lobby at the Moscone convention center addition now under construction.

Because of the weight and cost of real granite, Palos was hired to create his lightweight substitute to achieve "the look of a Japanese garden wall." An exhibition hall will lie directly under the lobby so the weight of granite for the 180-foot-

long expanse was out of the question.

It's another one of Palos' contribution to the new and old architecture of San Francisco, a city that he says has given him "good teachers and good opportunities." Palos seems ever-cognizant of his good fortune and hopes to share it by starting a sculpting school and shop in Zacatecas, which recently honored him for his successful career. Establishing the craft school and workshop "would be a fantastic way of bringing art here and helping the people there." PH



The massive eagles, replicated by Palos, dominate the tower's peak.



A bird's eye view on top of the Pacific Telesis building.



"These are my babies," Palos says of the completed work.