

**Hot ticket: Art auction**

First-rate art goes on the block to benefit the University Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive and to celebrate the grand re-opening of the museum following renovation. The dinner gala will include live and silent auctions of fine wines, excursions and artworks by Marion Brenner (a photo from "Plants That Heal" is shown here), Manuel Neri, David Gilhooly and others. [See Eye on Design, page 5]

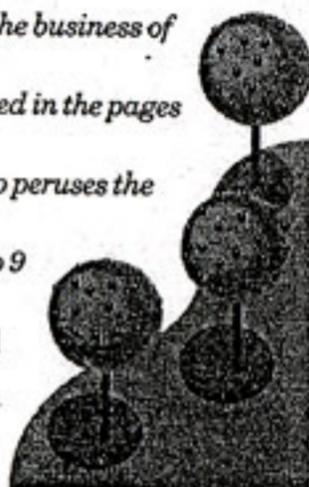


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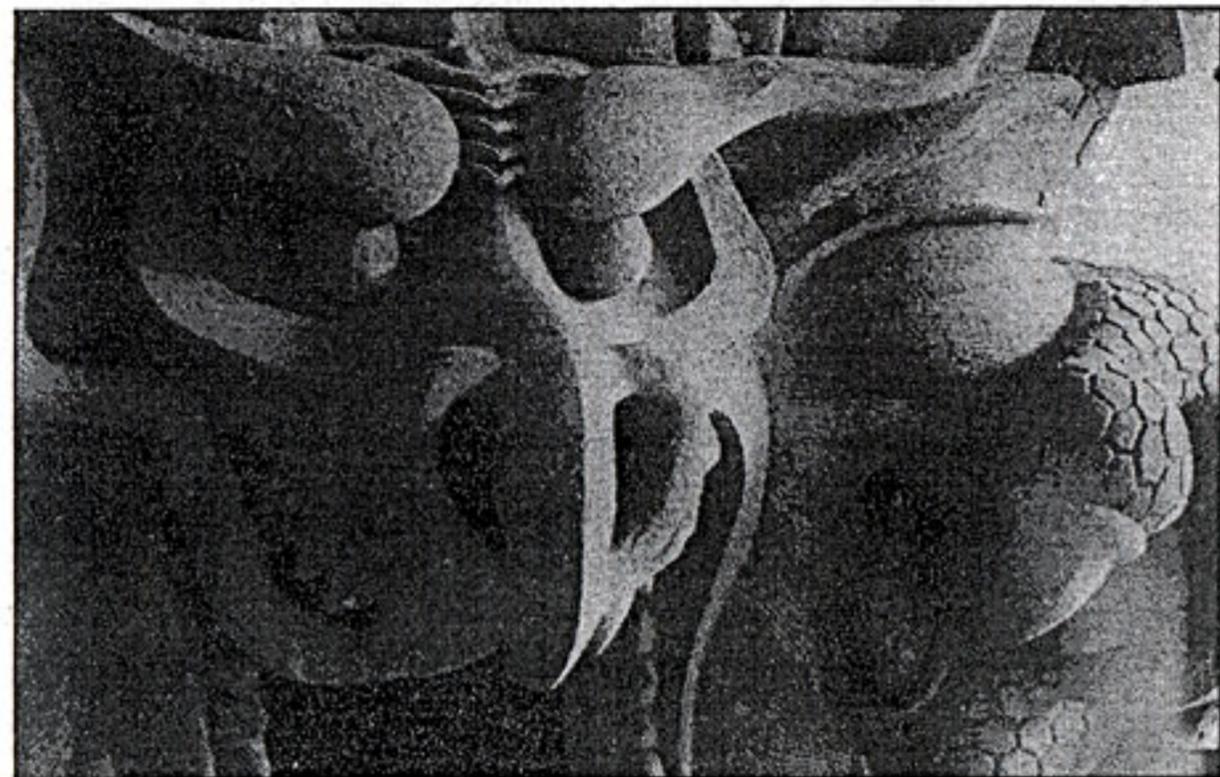
[HOME, GARDENING, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE]

**Yardscapes:** The battle for the business of backyard gardeners is waged in the pages of seed catalogs. Mia Amato peruses the pages of Burpee's, mailed to 9 million customers. [Page 2]

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## The S.F. sculptor who created Nicolas Cage's 'Dreadful Dragon'



By Kristine M. Carber  
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

**I**N AN OLD warehouse in an industrial section of town, San Francisco sculptor Manuel Palos takes the plebeian fireplace and turns it into a monumental work of art.

Plaster molds representing many periods and styles line the walls of his shop. Pinned on one wall is a sketch of a mantel for a restored Victorian house. "I will give the owner two options,"

says Palos, who wears jeans and a black T-shirt covered with white plaster dust. A green beret partially hides his curly, gray-flecked hair. "One will be traditional, the other softer and rounder in scale."



Over the course of his 30-year career, Palos has designed many fireplaces for businesses and private residences. Two are in San Francisco hotels: The Galleria Park has an 8-foot-by-8-foot Art Nouveau style with undulating curves, while the Villa Florence has a traditional European design with medallions, brackets and an egg and dart cornice on top. Another fireplace is in the First Interstate Bank, and he counts among his personal clients the Gallo family and Donald Trump.

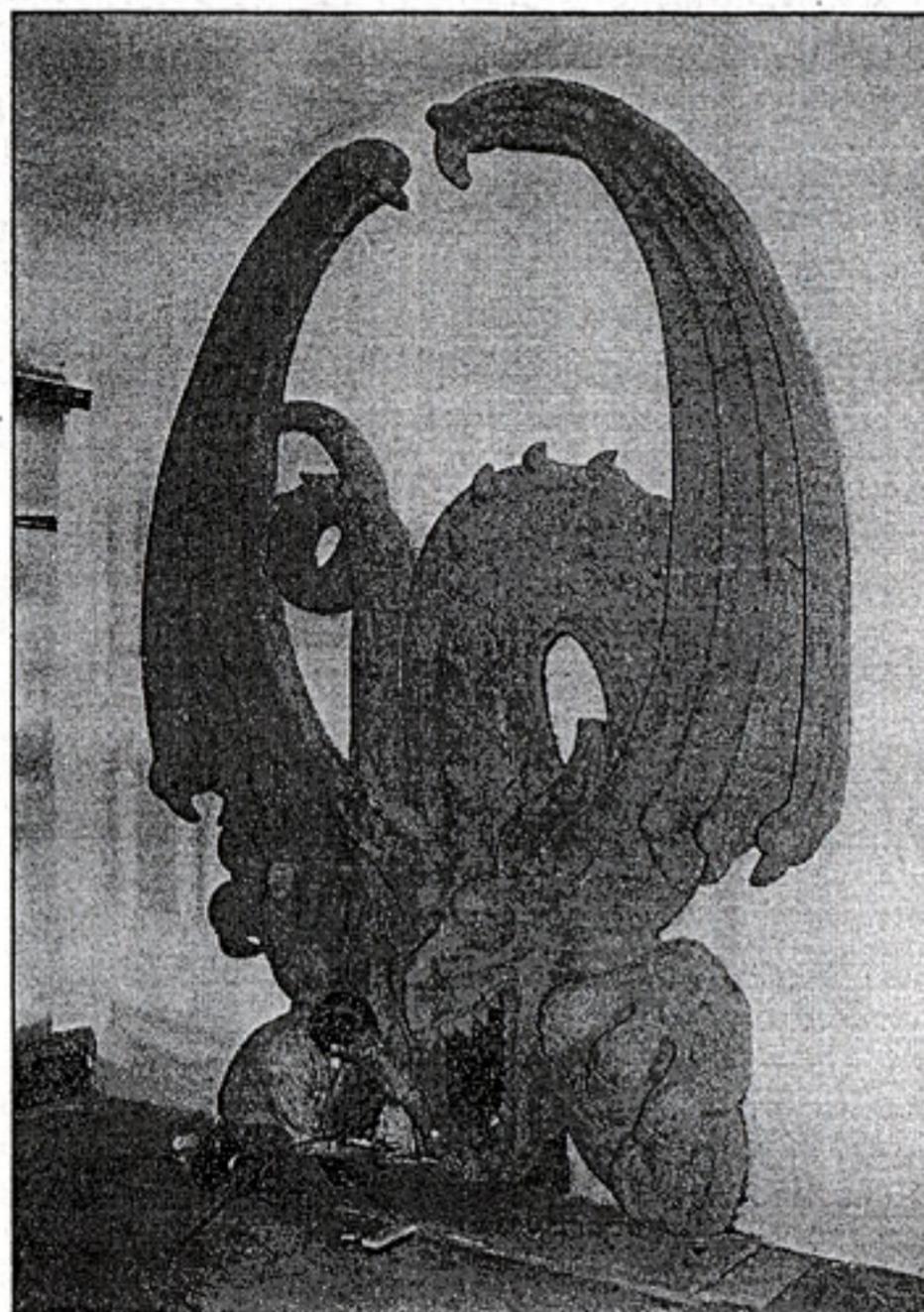
**Worked on many S.F. landmarks**

Palos also has worked on many of The City's famous landmarks. He resculpted six life-size mythological figures at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park and made eight 13-foot-tall eagles for Pacific Bell's San Francisco headquarters. He worked on the old City of Paris building when Neiman Marcus moved in and restored friezes and urns at the Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park. He is working on a

**Manuel Palos** carved and shaped the black limestone "Dreadful Dragon" fireplace sculpture to fit the living room of Nicolas Cage's San Francisco house.

bronze medallion to go outside San Francisco's Hall of Justice.

But it is the "Dreadful Dragon" fireplace for actor Nicolas Cage's Pacific Heights home that is his most memorable piece. "Every time I talk about it I get excited," says Palos. "It [See ARTISTS, Page 3]



PHOTOS BY IGOR S. EVICH

## The sculptor of 'Dreadful Dragon'

was challenging, but it was also a labor of love."

Cage stopped by Palos' studio one morning last year wearing a baseball hat and ripped jeans. "I didn't know who he was," Palos says. "He told me he wanted a fireplace made out of stone."

"I asked him if he had a design and he said he wanted a dragon. I thought he was kidding, so I played along. I told him I could make a huge dragon from the floor to the ceiling with the mouth as the opening. He looked at me and said, 'That's exactly what I want.'" Cage left a deposit and that's when Palos got "scared" — "I had to make the dragon I had proposed."

### By the book

Using a children's book about dragons, Palos sketched a design. When it was approved, he made a clay model before casting the real thing in stone.

For nearly five months, Palos labored over the sculpture. Cage wanted black limestone and the 13-foot-tall-by-10-foot-wide piece required 4½ tons; Palos moved to a studio in Mexico because that was the only place he could find enough.

"Every line had to match," says Palos of the bends and sinewy coils. He chiseled the dragon's nos-

trils to flare and created fiery-looking eyes. He used pneumatic tools to carve the hooked beak, scales and fang-like teeth for maximum control. "If any part of the face broke, I would have to start over." When finished, the sculpture was loaded on a truck and Palos drove it back to the United States himself.

### Heavy-duty installation

Cage's San Francisco house is a Victorian and before the fireplace could be installed, the walls and foundation had to be reinforced to hold the weight. It took a crane to lift the fireplace from the street to the house.

Palos and four assistants rolled it up a ramp and in the front door. It had been shipped in 13 pieces and was reassembled using a special scaffold and pulley system. Stainless steel pins and epoxy secured it while Palos carved and shaped it to fit the entire living room wall. At the end of three weeks, everything was in place.

Palos would not divulge how much the actor paid for the fireplace, but said if someone wanted their own "Dreadful Dragon," it would cost about \$70,000.

The son of a shoemaker, Palos moved to San Francisco from Zatecas, Mexico, while in his early 20s to learn how to sculpt. He took a job making molds and models, studying English at night. "My teachers encouraged me to travel," he says, so he spent several months



EXAMINER/PAUL CHINN

**Sculptor Manuel Palos also does busts, such as these, as well as torsos, fountains, statues and urns.**

visiting museums and galleries throughout Europe. "I learned from the masters, but I developed my own style."

He opened his own studio 18 years ago. Eight people work for him, including his daughter, Alexandria, who helps in the office. He prefers to sculpt on weekends when things are quiet and he can "really

produce."

### 'They think I am Sicilian'

Every year Palos makes a six-week pilgrimage back to Europe to the small town of Carrara, Italy, known for its marble, which Michelangelo used to sculpt the Pieta. "They think I am Sicilian," says Palos, who is fluent in Italian.

A showroom adjoins his studio

where much of his artistic work — torsos, fountains, statues and urns — is on display. Palos is also restoring a 1700s Irish sculpture of the Four Seasons, which he hopes to reproduce.

Not everything is classical in style. A scale model of the "Dreadful Dragon" leans against one wall and a woman's head carved out of sleek black Belgian marble is in the

contemporary mode.

When asked about his favorite, it is still the "Dreadful Dragon," he says. "Cage came to my studio and shook my hand when it was all over," Palos recalls. "He said, 'You are an artist.'"

"I told him it takes two."

*Artists & Artisans appears every other week in Habitat.*