

## RUTH ABERNETHY: From Farm Girl to Artistic Visionary

In a world of bronze and brilliance, Ruth Abernethy is reshaping how we see Canadian history—one larger-than-life sculpture at a time. Her latest book, "In Form: Life & Legacies in Bronze," isn't just a chronicle of her artistic journey; it's a roadmap through the complex terrain of national memory, carved with wit, wisdom, and an uncanny ability to make bronze breathe.

Growing up near Lindsay, Ontario, Abernethy's artistic journey began in the most unexpected of places—a tiny farm community where creativity was as essential as daily chores. "I have never imagined grandiose plans for myself, proposing that a career is something you end up with, not something you've hunted down in the workforce!" she quips. Her early exposure to family dynamics—where building and storytelling were dinner table staples—laid the groundwork for her remarkable career. Her grandfather and father, both carpenters, unknowingly sculpted her future, with young Ruth sketching her first portrait of her grandfather in his workshop at just eight years old.

Before becoming a renowned sculptor, Abernethy cut her teeth in theatre production. At 19, she was hired as Head of Props at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre, a role that would become her unexpected sculptural training ground. "Twenty years in theatre was an excellent 'apprenticeship'," she reflects. "It's an applied art that demands flexibility of mind, a touch of humour and some awareness that it's best to 'take every success as a small success!'"

Abernethy's work defies traditional portraiture. Her sculptures aren't just representations; they're conversations. Take her portrait of Lester B. Pearson, where she deliberately depicted him without shoes, sitting casually—a radical departure from stiff, heroic monuments. "Contemporary Canadians want their heroes to be accessible," she explains. "My portrait designs are an invitation for viewers to sit, vent, or join a conversation about how complicated lives leave complicated legacies."

Her Canadiana Collection isn't just art—it's a mission to reframe national narrative. From Margaret Atwood to Queen Elizabeth II, from scientists to human rights advocates, Abernethy captures the nuanced essence of her subjects. "The impact that a character has on their time and place is key," she says, "and sometimes that impact becomes more significant over time!"

In an era of heightened historical scrutiny, Abernethy treads carefully. Her approach to controversial figures like John A. Macdonald is nuanced and thoughtful. "The zeitgeist outside the studio inevitably moves more quickly than I can sculpt within the studio!" she notes. Her work doesn't shy away from complexity but invites deeper understanding.

While embracing new technologies like 3D scanning, Abernethy remains committed to traditional sculpting methods. "Technological methods of duplication will never substitute for original ideas," she asserts. Her philosophy balances innovation with the timeless craft of sculpture.

Abernethy sees her sculptures as "permanent performances" that evolve with public perception. Her Highway of Heroes piece, for instance, involved extensive research and consultation, revealing her commitment to representing diverse experiences.

Her artistic practice is deeply intertwined with family. Collaborating with her daughter-in-law and drawing inspiration from her upbringing, Abernethy's work is a testament to the power of familial support and shared creativity.

Her sculptures have graced international exhibitions, from Dublin to Sydney. She was the only Canadian artist short-listed for the Beijing Olympic Sculpture contest, a testament to her global artistic significance.

Beyond famous figures, Abernethy is passionate about highlighting overlooked stories. "The Untold Stories list has no end, particularly now in the uneven transition to inclusiveness," she says.

Despite her national and international acclaim, Abernethy remains deeply committed to local narratives. "We live, work and share life events with others in a personal network of connections," she emphasizes. With "In Form," Abernethy offers more than a book—she provides a roadmap of artistic evolution, social commentary, and personal reflection.

Her approach to portraiture goes beyond mere physical representation. "Famous faces require some 'staring-down'," she explains, "but it's best to do exactly that, then set all presumption aside and return to the reference material."

Over 90% of her commissions have been supported by collaborative committees, underscoring her belief in collective storytelling. While embracing new technologies, Abernethy remains committed to the core of artistic creation. "Truly iconic artworks integrate craft and content," she notes.

From theatre props to bronze sculptures, Abernethy's journey demonstrates the power of serendipity and continuous learning. Her work actively contributes to a more inclusive representation of Canadian history, highlighting distinguished women and diverse experiences.

"I continue to read, listen, observe and ultimately, do the best I can," she says—a philosophy that extends beyond art into life itself. With a new grandchild and continued passion for her craft, Abernethy looks forward to more time in the studio, balancing personal inspiration with collective storytelling.