

Keeping up with the St. Johns

By **Bob St. John**

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I suppose with some stretch of the imagination you could classify it as irony, but **John St. John**, the local sculptor-painter I sometimes have found myself mistakenly associated or confused with, lives across the street from my old high school, North Dallas. It was indeed in one of the pictures of the baseball team in a North Dallas High School annual that I once was mistakenly identified as **John St. John**. And my girlfriend was one of the editors of the annual!

So it is nothing new when somebody calls me John. I'm sure **John St. John** wishes they wouldn't and so do I. Not long ago somebody even thought he was my son, which does hurt a little because, hey, John is 62 now. Anyway, we are in no way related. I had never met him, nor even seen him, but decided the other morning that I must locate this person after a friend left a message on my recorder which began, "John . . . uh, Bob, give me a call."

I found him to be a very nice guy, who lives in a small downstairs apartment in an old sandstone-colored brick building with a bigger-than-life sculpture of a nude woman, numerous figurines and busts of famous people, the basics of furniture, another artist named Chris Vonwollenberg and a Christmas tree. "I like the tree here year-round," he said. "I like the feeling it gives, the color it adds." "John," said Chris, "is, well, very eccentric." John, a small, wiry, soft-spoken man, looked at Chris and shrugged. Loving his work John's work has been very diversified and he's certainly been more than generous with it, which probably helps explain why he has not always done well financially. He has donated his work to auctions by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, the

Blood Center at Wadley and KERA-TV (Channel 13).

So many times over the years he has been close to gaining more notice for his work. He has a 1981 Life magazine, which seems to contain a prime example. There's a picture of Nelson Bunker Hunt in the magazine and hanging behind him on the wall of his office is an oil painting of H.L. Hunt, playing checkers with some of his pals. Neither the picture nor artist are identified, although it was, indeed, a painting by **John St. John**.

"I've been around a lot of artists,' said Chris, "but never anybody who works as long and as hard as John. John needs money but does art for art's sake. I'm doing my work on T-shirts now because I can make money.' Chris looked at John, shook his head slowly and added, "Literally, he'll be pushing a cart down the aisle of a grocery store and be working on a figurine at the same time.' John said he loves his work more than anything, although he admits that it would be nice to make money for art supplies and other needs. "I look forward to painting and sculpturing,' he said. "It's like forming an alliance with myself, to have the thoughts and produce the work. Everything I do is worth the time it takes to finish it.' The price of his art. Actually, John once was a successful women's hairstylist in Dallas. He won a number of awards, including a first place at the National

Hairdressers All-State Convention, and has written manuals on the trade. He liked the work, the pay was steady and good, but deep down he always wanted to be an artist. In the early 1970s, he set out to do so. He said his devotion to work cost him two marriages, both to the same woman. He estimates that he's done 3,000 paintings or drawings of various subjects, although he no longer has any in his possession. He has sculpted chess sets, wildlife and famous people, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

John's now concentrating on sculpting and looking for a sponsor. But the guy has great faith that his time in the limelight will come soon, if not today, then tomorrow. And he has found some success in the past. In fact, I can remember in the mid-1970s he gained some fame over paintings of the Dallas Cowboys. I was covering the Cowboys in those days and a couple of readers called and said they'd seen my paintings and just loved them. I modestly accepted their praise and thanked them very much for calling.