By Carol Saline

Breathtaking Birds of Porcelain

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Perched on a flower or branch, each bird seems locked for a moment in stone, yet quite able suddenly to fly away. They are hand-painted porcelain birds, flown out of the kiln of the late Edward Marshall Boehm to nest in American china cabinets—or more prestigious roosts. There are three of these sculptures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Queen Elizabeth has several; so does the Pope. President Nixon has ten.

Rarely since the silversmithing of Paul Revere has the work of an American artist-craftsman been so admired, or commanded such prices. In 1969, a set of his Song Sparrows, one of a limited edition of 50, brought $50,000 at auction in New York—25 times its original price. The Boehm Robin, which first sold for $600, now resells for $4000 when available.

Boehm—a broad-shouldered, muscular six-footer—started as a Maryland cattle farmer. After World War II he lived on Long Island and, while showing animals for

Wood Thrush

The male, in a sculpture 16 inches high, pauses on a branch of sweet azaleas to sing
Wood Thrush
The female, feeding her hungry brood; issued with the male (preceding page) as a pair, in a limited edition of 400

Mute Swan
Replica of the sculptured cob, or male. President Nixon presented a life-size pair to Mao and the People's Republic of China

Mountain Bluebirds
High-altitude state bird of Idaho and Nevada—male and female, with flowering magnolia

Blue Jay
The male—a 14-inch piece—in a typical threatening, scolding posture
prizes, also modeled dogs and horses in clay. This interest grew into an obsession. He wanted to give his clay animals permanence and color, and porcelain seemed a natural medium.

Porcelain was first produced by the Chinese more than 1000 years ago from a mixture of special clays and minerals which could be fired at tremendous heat and emerge in strong, delicate shapes. The Chinese formula was a carefully guarded secret, until an 18th-century German potter solved the puzzle. Meissen porcelains soon became world-famous. There were fine ceramic factories in America, too; here they made bone china and other soft-paste porcelains, fired at a lower temperature.

Hard-paste porcelain requires extreme technical skill, and Boehm threw himself into the study. He pored over art books, trudged through museums examining centuries of porcelain art. Weekends he explored the ceramics factories in the Trenton, N.J., area, soaking up whatever knowledge more experienced potters spilled. Then in a dingy Trenton basement he set out to find his own formula for porcelain. After six months of relentless experimenting with various kinds of liquid clay, he had it—a porcelain equal to the finest from Europe.

American buyers weren't the least interested in the vases and ashtrays he started out making. But when Boehm turned to what he knew best, animals, the quiet porcelain sprang to life.

In 1951 his wife Helen quit her job and set out to put a Boehm bull in every china shop. She peddled the pieces to gift shops and fine jewelers. Slowly, dealers who first bought one or two pieces as a favor began reordering. Sales increased. When it became apparent that people liked horses and dogs but bought birds, Boehm agreeably flew along.

In 1954 Helen wrote to the first lady, Mamie Eisenhower, asking her to accept a gift of American porcelain—a Hereford bull—from the Boehm studio. Eisenhower was delighted with it, and became one of five Presidents for whom Boehm sculptures were modeled.

Boehm worked in furious spurts of total concentration, and in just a few days could sculpt a complicated model. Then his busy studio in Trenton began the 52-step process of molding the plasteline sculpture and turning it into porcelain. At each step Boehm's technical knowhow was as astounding as his fanatical push for perfection. He knew the way to turn a wing or place a leaf that meant success or failure in the final casting. He knew the right places to prop a sculpture with clay sticks so, in the kiln, the intense firing...
2400°F heat would not change a graceful piece into a horribly twisted mass.

After sculptures are fired, decorators hand-paint them. Then a second firing at a lower temperature anneals the colors, and the birds are ready. Some 250 Boehm sculptures are made in unlimited numbers. Another 102 are made only in limited editions, of anywhere from 50 to 850 pieces, which may take up to a decade to complete. But once the magic number is reached, the original mold is smashed and the edition closed.

Though flattered by success, art to Ed Boehm was only an expression of his love for nature, a love that blossomed in a lonely childhood. Boehm's parents separated shortly before his birth in 1913. Seven years later, his mother died, leaving a moody, bewildered child with no home but the rigid McDonogh School near Baltimore.

The school boasted a fine farm, and the unhappy orphan found a friendship in animals that eluded him with people. Every day after class he hurried to the barn. Sometimes he took a sketchbook to record the rippling muscles and fine flanks of animals he especially admired.

At 16 he left school to find work in farming. He took university courses in animal husbandry and swiftly gained a reputation as the brash young herd manager with the grand champion Guernseys.

Porcelain eventually earned him the means to buy five acres of land on the Delaware River, and to fill it with flowering plants and an aviary with exotic birds. Each day he sat and watched his 1500 birds soaring in their vaulted habitats, learning the attitudes and patterns he so faithfully transferred to porcelain.

In January 1969, while making his rounds in the aviary, Boehm felt a sharp pain in his chest. Within 24 hours his supercharged, 55-year contest with life was over. However, the artists and craftsmen he trained, and who worked at his side for two decades, continue their work at the Boehm studio.

In 1969, Helen Boehm was invited to decorate the Oval Room in the White House with Boehm birds. Someone noted that among the examples she had brought along there wasn't a single hawk or dove. "No," President Nixon observed wearily, "I'm tired of all that."

"How about a new peace bird?" Helen Boehm queried. She went to work, consulting ornithologists, scholars, statesmen. The final choice was the mute swan, noted for its tranquility and serenity. A 250-pound porcelain statue of these beautiful birds was sculptured, cast and painstakingly finished. But the "Bird of Peace" was destined to fly farther than the Oval Room. In fact, it became the gift which, on behalf of the American people, President Nixon presented to Mao Tse-tung during his visit last February. Thus a magnificent example of an ancient art returned to the birthplace of that art, carrying new promise and meaning.