



**Bill Stewart &
A Shaman's World**

Bill Stewart was an extraordinarily dynamic artist who could be both amusing and slyly serious in his critiques of our world. His work became densely intricate over his career, as he took on the role of a mystic, presenting a world of trance-like manifestations in which humans meld with nature's creatures and pop culture's aberrations. They silently embody warnings to prepare for an unknown future. This exhibition celebrates his life with the museum's collection and works from private collections that show the incredible range of his creativity.

Elder's Striped Socks (2013), which stands more than six feet tall, exemplifies the complexity of Stewart's vision. The elder with outspread arms appears as an oracle of nightmarish thoughts about our world that we feel powerless to confront. It was exhibited at the Burchfield Penney Art Center in *Art in Craft Media 2015*, and later in his solo exhibition, *Where I've Been*, at Indigo Art in Buffalo in 2019. For that occasion, Stewart asked me to provide commentary about his work. This excerpt provides some background to his unique, mystical figures:

In cultures all over the globe, people respect shamans as healers and intermediaries who can provide spiritual guidance. The shaman connects with the natural world, often evoking the spiritual essence of the landscape, as well as living creatures and humans. He or she might facilitate a "journey" or out-of-body experience, remove negative energy through incantations, or conjure up animal spirits as human protectors. Every individual receives a unique resolution for the initial problem during the shaman's communication mediation.

Through the ceramic sculpture of Bill Stewart, we can see that the mystical powers of shamans are as complex and unfathomable as they are diverse. His nationally acclaimed work is simultaneously humorous and intriguing, while also being mystifying and daunting. Over the course of his career, Stewart has created playful, expressionistic clay figures which frequently have both human and animal characteristics. Cyclically, they have been monochromatic, then wildly colorful. Either way, they are always texturally intricate and patterned on two- and three-dimensional planes.

Ranging from small, colorful fishing lures of imaginary creatures to pitch-black monoliths, Stewart's sculptures emerged from childhood's imagination and popular culture merged with his knowledge of the history of ceramics; respect for the artifacts and spiritual practices of African, Central American, South American, Asian, and indigenous Native American cultures; and pure improvisation. Each sculpture invites interpretation of its myriad components. We are challenged to find meaning implied in the juxtaposition of disparate parts. Stewart references the rich history of international ceramics, such as Pre-Columbian black terra cotta vessels and figurally ornamented African earthenware ritual vessels and lidded pots. From more recent history, one can discern characters reminiscent of the Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* and Walt Disney animations, as well as the ubiquitous rubber ducky. Colorful embellishments and textural patterns summon striking West African masquerades in which priests and priestesses are transformed into surreal beings that merge plant, animal, and human realms.



Red House, 1981; Clay, wood, and wax, 15" x 20" x 10"

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Mask, 1985; Clay, glaze, 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 20" x 4"

At times Stewart's work is flamboyant, a riotous conglomeration of animals, birds, cars, fish, insects, snakes, toys, and countless other details that are deconstructed, mixed up, and reassembled in uncanny combinations that skew all meaning. Both whimsical and enigmatic, the final sculpture might be a single color, like white or black, or glazed with a rainbow of bright, flashy colors. Either way, we are welcomed into his fantasy world. We see dreams we want to share, like Alice's journey through Wonderland. We also see premonitions of a world in conflict, an endangered environment. Wisely, we seek the shamans who might provide advice to lead us from the nightmares that seem impossible to escape. Bill Stewart wants us to see how we must become better stewards of the world. After forays into the unconscious world of daydreams and fantasies, we might better imagine a homogeneous unity of all living things and navigate the frightening challenges that await deliberate efforts to find solutions.

Nancy Weekly

Burchfield Scholar,
 Head of Collections & Charles Cary Rumsey Curator
 Burchfield Penney Art Center

Exhibition Checklist

All works are by Bill Stewart (1941–2020), listed chronologically. Dimensions are listed height by length by width. All are in the Burchfield Penney Art Center collection unless stated otherwise.

Santa Duck House, 1971

Clay, glaze, decals, 41 $\frac{1}{8}$ " high x 8" diameter
 Gift of Bill and Anne Rock, 2009

Five Fishing Lures, 1976

Clay, glaze, metal hooks
Red-beaked Creature, 6" x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ "
Toothy Insect, 4" x 5" x 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

Horned Snake / Worm, 13" x 5" x 4"

Polka-dotted crab, 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 4" x 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Blue reptile, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 5" x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
 Gift of Bill and Anne Rock, 2009

Pig Canister, 1977

Clay, glaze, 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 18" x 11"
 Gift of Charles Rand Penney, 1994

Red House, 1981

Clay, wood, and wax, 15" x 20" x 10"
 Gift of Bonnie Stewart, 1982

Mask, 1985

Clay, glaze, 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ " x 20" x 4"
 Gift of Charles Rand Penney, 1994

Shaman, 1989

Glazed terra cotta, 85" x 37" x 30"
 Purchased with funds from
 the Sylvia L. Rosen Endowment, 1999

Prototype #6, 1990

Clay, glaze, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 6" x 8"
 Gift of Charles Rand Penney, 1994

Thumper, 2005

Clay, glaze, wood, paint, marker, 68" x 38" x 22"
 Gift of Bill and Bonnie Stewart, 2006

Bird Man and Untitled, circa 2006

Clay, glaze, metal
 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8" x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " and 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 8" x 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
 Private Collection

Shaman, 2012

Terra cotta, glaze, mixed media, 62" x 12" x 24"
 Collection of Elisabeth Samuels &
 Jeff Higginbotham

Elder's Striped Socks, 2013

Terra cotta, glaze, mixed media, 74" x 27" x 16"
 Gift of the Artist, 2019

Storyteller, 2014

Terra cotta, glaze, wood, 10 wall tiles, 7" x 70" overall
 Collection of Elisabeth Samuels & Jeff Higginbotham

From the *Sandman* Series, circa 2019

Clay, glaze, sand, *Striped pants*, 14" x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
 Private Collection

From the *Sandman* Series, circa 2019

Clay, glaze, sand, *Blue limb*, 14" x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
 Collection of Tom and Mary Kozub



Bill Stewart & A Shaman's World is on view in the Sylvia L. Rosen Gallery July 9, 2021 – February 27, 2022. The exhibition, curated by Nancy Weekly, provides a glimpse at Stewart's incredible creative imagination—a world filled with shamans, chimeras, and other beings. We especially thank Bonnie Stewart, who with Bill very generously donated many significant sculptures to the museum. We also acknowledge patrons Sylvia L. Rosen, Charles Rand Penney, and Bill and Anne Rock who donated funds and artwork, and we thank lenders Elisabeth Samuels & Jeff Higginbotham, Tom & Mary Kozub, and an anonymous collector for their loans.

The Burchfield Penney Art Center, accredited by the American Alliance of Museums and member of the Association of Art Museum Directors, is supported in part with public funds from Erie County and the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Additional support is provided by SUNY Buffalo State, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A. H. Rumsey Foundation, the James Carey Evans Endowment, and Burchfield Penney members and friends.

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**Burchfield
Penney
Art Center**

at Buffalo State College

1300 Elmwood Avenue
Buffalo, New York 14222
burchfieldpenney.org

Cover + Backcover *Elder's Striped Socks*, 2013
Terra cotta, glaze, mixed media 74" x 27" x 16"