

Nearly five centuries later, a 1977 *National Geographic* article entitled “The Horse That Never Was” caught the attention of retired airline pilot, amateur artist, and art collector Charles Dent. Until his death in 1994, Dent dedicated his life, in his words, to “give Leonardo back his horse.” He founded Leonardo da Vinci’s Horse, Inc. (LdVHI), a nonprofit organization, to raise funds for the project. The first 24-foot plaster cast of *Il Cavallo* was completed a few years ago but failed to meet the expectations of LdVHI board members. They decided that a new sculpture was needed and engaged Nina Akamu as lead sculptor to execute an 8-foot master model in plaster, which she and a team of seven assistants enlarged approximately three times in clay.

For Akamu, it was quite a challenge to be entrusted with the master’s vision and with transferring, in only two years, his sketches into a colossal three-dimensional horse. Understanding the impossibility of replicating Leonardo’s horse exactly, especially since there are no drawings of the finished Sforza monument, Akamu



*Nina Akamu, a Fellow of the National Sculpture Society, was born in Oklahoma City and attended the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she received a BFA in painting. She worked as a sculptor for five years in Florence and seven years in Pietrasanta, Italy. She believes that sculpting her interpretation of Leonardo’s *Il Cavallo* was a unique experience as well as a turning point in her life.*



*Page 16: Nina Akamu working on the clay model of the modern *Il Cavallo* with two of her assistants, David Frech and Aaron Sykes, at Tallix Art Foundry. Page 17: Detail from Leonardo’s sketches for the Trivulzio Monument (c. 1517-1518). Top: Akamu’s 8-foot model of *Il Cavallo* in bronze (1998). Bottom: Akamu working on the mane of the enlarged clay model of *Il Cavallo*.*

sought to produce a commemorative sculpture in tribute to Leonardo’s genius and creativity. She stresses that “*Il Cavallo* is not and never could be a recreation of Leonardo’s lost sculpture, nor is it a Renaissance horse, which could only have been created during the Renaissance. It is a contemporary interpretation, which has been very strongly influenced by certain works of art and writings from that time and most specifically Leonardo’s works and thoughts.” Her hope is that the information she gathered and studied would “coalesce into a suitable and harmonious wholeness of a sculpture.”

As Akamu’s studies progressed, she realized that the horses drawn by Leonardo

had some common characteristics—a vividness of action, an intensity of being, and a directed, purposeful way of moving. They had exaggeratedly arched necks, with heads in vertical or nearly vertical position, and sometimes open mouths with snarling expressions and wrinkles over their flared nostrils. They also had smoothly rounded torsos with large and powerful hindquarters. The same drawings showed thin imperfect legs, swollen joints, and some proportional distortions.

Determining that Leonardo had conceived a war horse, Akamu set out to develop the grace of forms and to emphasize the areas under stress, without overarticulating the piece, in order to express power, energy, and perseverance. In fact, it is evident that everything in the horse—whether it is the perfect (continued on page 23)