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## Driven to Create: Montana's Roadside ARTtractions

By Eric Heidle

Egypt is home to the Sphinx, ancient keeper of riddles and secrets. Rhodes had its Colossus, so tall in legend that ships could sail beneath its legs astride the city's harbor. The stern green gaze of the Statue of Liberty maintains a vigil of its own above New York. And Michelangelo's David stands with lithe angelic grace in Florence, having felled Goliath with a single well-placed stone.

Montana, of course, has a big fiberglass cow.

The first time you zip past it where Highway 200 and the Seeley-Swan meet, you may question why the cow exists, never mind whether it's art. But this is Big Sky Country, and out here a mighty Hereford bull perched atop a tow trailer, lording over his realm, is just part of the deal.

The Clearwater cow, this Colossus of Roads, has been aimed toward different points of the compass over the decades, but whichever way his impassive gaze points, there's great roadside culture to be found. Not too far east, for example, just past the little timber town of Lincoln, is Sculpture in the Wild, a world-class, site-specific outdoor sculpture park making use of the landscape and its resources for art you'll see nowhere else. Head north from there onto the plains along Highway 89, and you'll pass cowboys cut from steel, a trinity of metal crosses atop Priest Butte and downsized T. rexes running amok in Choteau and Bynum.

**Not all of it is fine art:** Some of these sights could easily be called kitsch or camp, interesting or moving or fun, but not Art with a capital A. Yet each hints at something about who created them, what was on their mind, what they valued. All were made with intent and design, whether for commerce or devotion or the simple love of craft. All of which feels quite a bit like art.

There's a fine line, though. Continue north on 89 to Browning, and at the center of town you'll find a two-story, **red-and-white, concrete teepee** spangled with doors and windows. Originally built as a gas station and café, Kramer's Wigwam

served motorists heading between Great Falls and Glacier Park. It's at once a glorious piece of Route 66 nostalgia and a problematic bit of cultural generalization. Smack in the middle of the Blackfeet Nation, it's a cartoonish homage to Plains Indian heritage designed to lure drivers off the road for coffee and Reubens. The teepee's become an indelible icon of the town's landscape, but it's hard to know how to feel about it.



By its nature, though, public art invites differences of opinion. It can't hide in a museum, where only those willing to risk seeing something they'll hate are likely to go. So, when the city of Butte planned to helicopter a 90-foot statue of the Virgin Mary to the top of the Continental Divide, the plan raised eyebrows as well as statuary.

**Our Lady of the Rockies**, as the work is known, was the vision of Butte resident Bob O'Bill, whose wife was battling cancer. O'Bill vowed to build a monument to the Virgin Mary if his wife recovered, and recover she did. The community fell to work, raising funds and developing a site atop Butte's East Ridge for sculptor John Mazzola's epic piece. And that's why, if you happened to be cruising up I-15 on December 17, 1985, you'd have seen a miraculous vision: the gigantic head and shoulders of Mother Mary, ascending heavenward beneath the rotors of a Sikorsky Skycrane.

Once finished, Our Lady of the Rockies became the largest monumental sculpture in Montana; in fact, it's the fourth-tallest statue anywhere in the US. But prior to its completion a bit of tentative dissent was heard, including some from an unlikely source. Edward Hislop, a Catholic priest residing in Butte, cautioned: "Although the statue is on private ground, it is clearly in a public place. The East Ridge has always belonged to the people of Butte, and that might be offensive to some and pose difficulties (to those who are not of the Christian faith)."

Such are the perils of public art; you can't please everybody. But the statue remains a deeply felt expression of its community—paid for with donations, emblematic of Butte's robust Catholic population, made of stone and alloy in a town built on mining, and conceived in a spirit of gratitude and faith.



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Montana Bale Trail photos courtesy of Facebook

Gazing protectively above her town, with its proud architecture and open-pit scars and genuine, generous citizens, Our Lady is rooted, literally and spiritually, in the bones of Butte.

Not all monumental art is so lofty in elevation or purpose. For an example of craft in service of commerce, keep rolling up I-15 to Great Falls. Just off 10th Avenue South, outside his namesake casino, you'll find "Big John." He's a 20-foot colossus mating the rigidly formal posture of an archaic Greek kouros to the iconic look of Burt Reynolds, circa *Smokey and the Bandit*. But don't let his jaunty Stetson set you astray: Big John is a well-preserved example of the Muffler Man, an advertising figure strewn far and wide along America's roads. First conceived as a Paul Bunyan character, Muffler Men were designed with arms positioned to hold an axe; many, however, have since been modified, and Big John is no exception. Hands at his sides, arms akimbo, he looks ready to draw. Which is a shame—he has no guns to draw.

Big John does, however, have a twin. Working for L.P. Anderson Point S Tires in Billings, this **Muffler Man** retains the Paul Bunyan beard and attire, though his wool cap is green, and he's swapped out the flannel for jeans and a crisp white button-down. Oddly, he's holding an actual automotive tire, so tiny in his massive grip. The effect is that of the world's tallest hipster tinkering with a suitably ironic pinewood derby car.

But if that gig doesn't pan out, he can hook a giant thumb for a ride to the far end of the state and try his hand as a short-order cook. Libby is the proud home of **Paul Bunyan's Fry Pan**, a real, functional iron skillet which happens to be 11-feet wide. Forged in the 70s for the town's Logger Days festival, the skillet could cook 75-egg omelets. Who did the flipping remains unclear.

For large-scale art that's a little more homegrown, head back to the middle of the state for the **Montana Bale Trail**. Strung between the towns of Hobson, Windham and Utica, the Bale Trail pairs the locally sourced, ephemeral ethos of Sculpture in the Wild with the wry (perhaps even rye?) humor of rural Montanans. Using hay or straw bales, local farmers' fields blossom into sculpture gardens on the Sunday after Labor Day. From simple constructions made of round or square bales, to elaborate compositions shaped with loose hay contained in chicken wire, the sculptures dotting the roadside exhibit are what could only be called crehaytivity. Shaped, stacked and painted, Bale Trail entries make the most of their raw material. As for subject matter, pop-culture references are prized and above all, the work must have torturously punny names. Past entries, then, have included Looney Tunes' Yosemite-hay Sam, Bugs Bun-hay and Wile E. Coyot-hay; we've seen the droids, wookiees and Jedi from Straw Wars, a few patriotic Baled Eagles and Statues of Libert-hay, megalithic Stonehaynge and Medus-hay replicas from ancient times, a functional lemonhayde stand, more than one ode to the Beatles' Hay Jude, and even, once, a single, forlorn round bale titled simply "We are not crehaytivity."

The Bale Trail's endless sense of reinvention sprung from nominally droll ag producers makes it hard to resist, but it's not the only art that's outstanding in its field. A bit further south and west, where the three

forks of the Missouri converge, you'll find an equally lively but more permanent statement built into the land. Sculptor Jim Dolan's **Bleu Horses**, an installation of 39 larger-than-life ponies, is strung along a hill on land offered up by prominent ag business Wheat Montana. Grouped in small bunches, these mares and colts and stallions rendered in steel spread out into their chosen pasture; each exhibits its own personality. At close range, one would almost expect them to spook or amble over for a handout. The figures of Bleu Horses provide context to their landscape, inviting us to see it as artist Dolan has, while expressing both a sense of permanence and motion—a sense that there's always more just beyond the next rise.

Maybe, at the end of your wanderings beyond the rises of Montana's roads, you'll pull to a stop in Helena, in front of the state Capitol. There, atop a tall granite pediment, rests a classical bronze statue of Thomas Francis Meagher, Montana's first territorial governor. Meagher sits astride his horse, cavalry saber held high in triumph, issuing an eternal challenge to greatness for all Montanans. It's the kind of respectable, laudatory civic art that's perpetually in danger of invisibility due to ubiquity—art that's expected and safe and therefore unsurprising. Sadly, it's also the kind of art whose pomp and gravity are ripe for deflation. Rumor has it that, on more than one occasion, pranksters have purloined Meagher's sword wholesale from his grasp, swiping his fearsome dignity right along with it.

But it could be worse. Sword or no sword, at least he's not riding a fiberglass cow on wheels.

We've barely scratched the surface of roadside art in Montana. **For more, take a trip to [art.mt.gov/roadside](http://art.mt.gov/roadside).**