A Scrap of Lead, A Life's Work

Sculptor Nic Fiddian Green recently took museum patrons on a personal guided tour of his magnificent work.

Still Water graces the front lawn of the museum.

Photos by Stefan Schetsellar

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There's no lead dust here, no hammer marks on a bench, no marble chips on the floor. Nothing but the National Sporting Museum's polished floors, and good lighting.

Directly inside the entrance stands the nine-foot horse head Nic Fiddian Green created called Still Water, bowed low as if drinking. Fiddian Green himself positions himself nearby, and given two minutes of talking, you'd swear the acrid smell of hot metal was in the room. That's the thing with him. He spins a yarn the way he shapes lead, and before you know it, you're standing in his shop in Sussex, England, not a museum gallery at all.

"We all know about fast food," he said, picking up his very first creation, a much smaller and rougher version of Still Water. "Things that aren't made by a particular chef who's standing there, who cares whether it's good or not." He set the piece down. "I stand for the opposite of that. I don't believe our hands will ever stop being necessary. Not for the things that matter."

For more than four decades, Fiddian Green's hands have worked lead, copper, gold, and silver into hammered sheets. They've cast bronze into shape, carved marble and semi-precious stone, and drawn charcoal across paper. But it is lead, hammered thin and pieced together with copper rivets, that made him famous. And it's this piece, standing at the museum's entrance since 2012, that brought him to Middleburg.

That single obsession, the horse head, traces back to a school assignment. Fiddian Green was born in Ireland, but as a student at Chelsea College, he was sent to the British Museum to sketch selections from the Elgin Marbles. He found himself standing in front of the Horse of Selene, a battered fragment broken from the pediment of the Parthenon.

The Roman Horse

Something in its proportion and quiet dignity never let him go. He's spent the decades since chasing that same balance in every scale imaginable, from small studies you could hold in one hand to a Still Water in London's Hyde Park that rises 33 feet into the air.

His horses now stand in Russia, Kazakhstan, the Middle East, Australia, and the United States. But of all those places, he says, it's here, in the small museum in Virginia horse country, that he's gotten the warmest welcome of them all.

"How did we get to where we are today?" he asked. "We had ideas, we had the thoughts, but we end up where we end up. And I suppose the part where I'm privileged is being here."

His retrospective exhibit opened May 1, the first comprehensive exhibit of Fiddian Green's work ever mounted, and it was supposed to close at the end of September. Instead, the museum extended it through next February, 2027.

It's the largest gathering of his work ever assembled: a run spanning from 1983 to today, 18 sculptures and seven drawings inside, with five more pieces standing in the yard for anyone who wanders past. Some of it has never been shown before.

"This work is small and intimate, and complicated, actually. Although maybe my view of it is quite simple." He shrugged. "It's an exploration in different materials. And these are what we call the pieces that stand inside."

Then, almost as an aside, he explained how it all began. The first piece he ever made wasn't grand. Just scrap lead that happened to be sitting in a wheelbarrow.

"I haven't told them that," he said, laughing. "Don't tell them either. That's not the point anyway."

So, what is the point?

He took his time answering. "My search is to do something where I can express something of my humanity. There's a desire in me to be still. To be patient. Silent." He paused. "To be better, by not saying anything else."

Then he laughed at himself, catching the contradiction as it left his mouth. "I've said far too much already," he said. "But you can tell I enjoy talking."

That's the truth of Nic Fiddian Green. A man chasing stillness with hands that won't stop moving, describing silence in a room that, by the time he's done talking, feels nothing like a museum at all.

"What we could do is just gently filter through," he said, gesturing toward the galleries. "Anyone's very welcome."

It sounded like an invitation to see the work. It sounded like an invitation to slow down too, in a world that rarely lets you. And upon taking him up on the offer, for a little while, standing in front of that first scrap of lead pulled from a wheelbarrow, the room went quiet enough to hear exactly what he meant.