

# THE KING AND I

*Whitefish artist gets honor of a lifetime to sculpt Thai King*

By Lynnette Hintze, Daily Interlake  
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It all started with a smile. Three years ago, internationally acclaimed sculptor Sunti Pichetchaiyakul, a native of Thailand who now owns Sunti World Art Gallery in Whitefish, felt compelled to sculpt the likeness of His Royal Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The king, known as Rama 9, was getting on in years, and time was of the essence for Sunti to show his gratitude for a king who had served his people so well.

Sunti was well-known for the hyper-realism he brings to sculpting, a style that makes his subjects look stunningly life-like. He brought that same style to his sculpture of the king. The project began with a pilgrimage to Mt. Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Rama 9 was born, as a way to honor the king.

He sculpted the king's likeness in clay in Cambridge, returned to shape the statue in wax at his Whitefish studio and then cast the work in bronze in a foundry in Thailand.

"I wanted to start in the United States and end in Thailand, just like the king," Sunti said.



Sunti's bronze bust of King Bhumibol Adulyadej

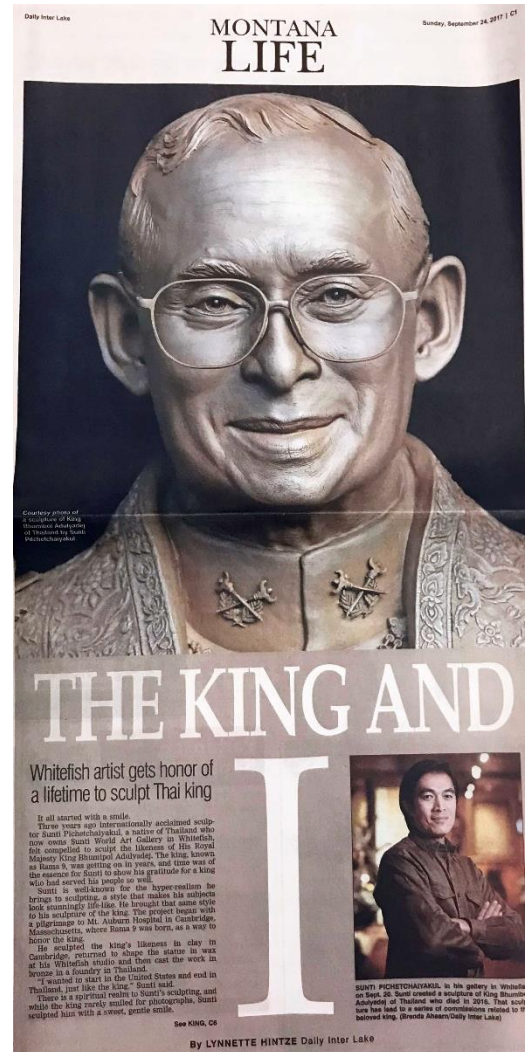
There is a spiritual realm to Sunti sculpting, and while the king rarely smiled for photographs, Sunti sculpted him with a sweet, gentle smile.

"It was the way he wanted to portray his king," Sunti's wife Erica explained.

The king embraced Sunti's sculpture with such zeal he declared it would be the only likeness of himself he would accept.

"That sculpture was his pride and joy," Erica said.

A beloved ruler who helped unify the Thai people, King Bhumibol Adulyadej died in 2016 at age 88 after a 70-year reign. He was the world's longest-reigning monarch.



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Sunti had no idea the aftermath of the king's death would bring him back to Thailand and back into the royal circle.

When the king's son, His Royal Majesty King Vajiralongkorn, Rama 10, went to the palace after his father's death, he saw Sunti's lifelike sculpture for the first time and was overcome with emotion. He got goosebumps and wept.

"Who is this sculptor?" he asked emphatically.

That simple question set in motion the next leg of what became not only a sculpting commission, but also a spiritual journey and tribute to the king Sunti remembered as a young boy growing up in Thailand.

King Vajiralongkorn summoned Sunti to Thailand last month.

After Sunti bowed to the new king he was able to share the story of how he came to sculpt the late ruler known as the people's king.

How did you capture my father's spirit?" King Vajiralongkorn implored. "That smile isn't in any photographs."

Sunti responded, saying, "That's who your father is to me... I loved him so much. He did so much for his people."

King Vajiralongkorn explained to Sunti that each Thai king chooses an artist to sculpt the king who reigned before him, a final tangible act of respect. He insisted that only Sunti would sculpt for him and his kingdom, and then commissioned Sunti to sculpt his late father for the Royal Pantheon in Bangkok.

Additionally, the king requested that Sunti create a double life-size monument of his father to be erected outside of the palace. He also has requested full-body life-size statues of his father for all 77 states in Thailand.

Sunti said he's humbled and honored by the extraordinary project that lies before him.

A year of mourning for beloved King Bhumibol Adulyadej has been underway and will be completed Oct. 13, the one-year anniversary of his death. At some point after that the coronation for the new king will take place.

Sunti hopes his forth-coming sculptures will be a comfort to the Thai people. Once the statues are erected, they'll see the image of their revered king once again. And the king will be smiling.



*Sunti Pichetchaiyakul with sculpture, Chief Sitting Bull, at his gallery, Sunti World Art Gallery in Whitefish*

*Features editor Lynnette Hintze may be reached at 758-4421 or [thintz@dailyinterlake.com](mailto:thintz@dailyinterlake.com)*