

# TURNER CARROLL

## **Calyxte Campe**

Calyxte was born in Munich in 1972 to a French American mother, Marie Claudel, and a German father, Joachim Campe. At five years old, Calyxte, his three older siblings and his parents left Munich and began a sailing trip that lasted for eight years.

Sailing around the world and visiting over 60 countries may sound idyllic but the reality was very different. Long sea crossings meant intense sea sickness and regardless of the rough conditions, all the family were put to work on deck. Food was often limited, and they frequently survived on a staple diet of canned food, with very little fresh food.

The happy memories are of constant adventure, fascinating scenery, and the places where wildlife was abundant, but it is not an easy thing for a child to live without routine or possessions, continuously moving from place to place with no roots and no consistent schooling or friendships.

One thing that the boat trip brought to the family was an incredible set of practical skills, such as balance. If you know any member of the Campe family, you will know their extreme capability in constructing or fixing things.

As the youngest, Calyxte did not receive any formal education until the age of thirteen. This meant that his creativity could flourish from a young age. On a boat, there was limited space to be creative, but watercolour painting was encouraged as his father painted throughout the trip.

The children grew up deeply connected with the natural world, living amongst a diverse range of places that included the Amazon rainforest, the Antarctic, Alaska and the Galapagos. Throughout their travels, they were always studying, filming and sketching wildlife.

Although the constant movement may not have given the children roots in a typical sense, what was rooted in them deeply was an innate sense that they could trust and follow raw instinct, unpolluted by society or social expectation. To this day, all the Campe siblings retain this confidence to follow their hearts in whichever field they work.

The children might have forgotten their European roots all together, but every summer they left the boat to travel to a family house called Brangues in a rural region of France between Lyon and Geneva. This was the home bought and lived in by their great grandfather Paul Claudel, a French writer, poet and playwright, and brother of Camille Claudel, Calyxte's great aunt. At Brangues, the cousins from America, Paris and Switzerland would meet in a beautiful, French chateau, rather rundown, but still running and providing a romantic setting for the extended Claudel family to reunite each year. What Calyxte remembers vividly is the presence of the sculptures of his great aunt Camille around the house. He recalls running his hands over one, in particular: 'The wave' – a sculpture in bronze and marble of three small, identical female figures, each bending their knees at the sight of the huge wave of onyx marble about to break over their heads. It might be seen as an image of destiny.

Although Calyxte knew from a young age that he wanted to be an artist, he did not have an easy time persuading his mother, who insisted that, upon finishing school, he should continue his academic studies at Bennington College, Vermont. Calyxte studied pure maths and economics, perhaps more to appease his mother's wishes than anything else, but his only memories of those years are the times he spent in the art department creating huge, colourful landscapes and portraits of his fellow students.

At the age of 22, Calyxte arrived in Florence, where he had been recommended to look at a small art school run by an American called Charles Cecil. With only 28 students, the school focused on teaching the methods and techniques of painting and drawing from life that had been practised by the great masters of the Renaissance. Calyxte greatly benefited from the community life of the school, and the dedication of the group he studied with, nearly all of whom have gone on to become successful artists. Charles would take the school on landscaping trips, and on several occasions, they stayed at the Claudel family house in Brangues, where the surroundings lend themselves to landscape painting.

It wasn't until Calyxte had studied painting and drawing for two full years that he attempted his first sculpture. This had been encouraged by Charles, who knew that his great aunt was Camille Claudel and who suspected that a gift for sculpture might well run in the family.

Charles was quite right: Calyxte fell in love with clay as a medium. He used the same sight-size method that Charles teaches and which he had previously used for painting, which involves a live model and measuring from a distance the proportions of the subject.

Calyxte's first works were a series of nudes, but he soon ventured on to portrait busts of his fellow students. He began at the sculpture department at the Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence and went on to teach at the school for a further three years.

He began to accept commissions for sculpture busts and at a family party he received his first serious commission from the Rockefeller family, who recognised his talent and flew him to New York to paint and sculpt the entire family. This led to other commissions in New York, including many prominent figures, and his work started to become part of private collections. His love of Italy and Florence always brought him back to the country, and after several years of travelling and exhibiting in America he saved enough to settle in the countryside of Tuscany in the hills, half an hour South of Florence.

Ten years ago, Calyxte met his wife, Decima, in Florence, during her training at the Charles H. Cecil Studio. Together they renovated a farmhouse in the hills south of Florence. The house is now home to their four small boys who are growing up in the freedom of the surrounding olive groves.

Calyxte works for many families in Switzerland and the family travel to the Alps every year, to Gstaad, where Calyxte has sculptures permanently exhibited in The Urs Von Unger gallery. His work is continuously exhibited on a public roundabout in Geneva and his works form part of many private collections.

Calyxte's love for the natural world made animals an obvious subject. Although animal sculptures have been popular throughout the history of art, Calyxte has the unusual ability to bring real life and character to his pieces. He can sculpt a human figure as well as he can sculpt accurately the proportions of a life-size racehorse. He can also combine the human and then animal, as seen in his most recent work of his five-year-old son riding a mare in full gallop.

At every opportunity, Calyxte will sculpt from life, meaning that he really gets to know his subject. For his monumental pieces he amasses clay on giant metal armatures attached to a wheeled base, so that he can constantly move his work to assess all angles and to keep a fresh eye. A great personal touch is his love of texture: Calyxte likes to leave the rough markings made by his sculpture tools and by his own hands, meaning that his finished pieces are still alive and fresh, refined, but rough, rather than mannered and piecemeal.