Somewhere in the back of David Turner’s mind is something akin to a video archive. “Fleeting glimpses,” he calls them, vignettes “that go back to my earliest memories – all tucked away back here.” He taps his forehead.

“It really helps capture an essence, and that’s what I strive for – to capture that essence.” Looking at Turner’s bronze sculptures of a blue heron stalking in the reeds, or a red fox about to pounce on its prey, or a river otter gleefully turning somersaults under water, you realize that not only has he captured the animal, he has captured its essence. And then some.

“Very rarely have I observed a river otter for more than a minute at a time,” says this second-generation sculptor and native sportsman of Virginia’s Eastern Shore. “Other times it’s three or four seconds, and sometimes it’s even from a distance, but those things, I think, really add up.” He files those things away until they come swimming to the surface of his consciousness, the seed of an idea for a composition.

His studio, perched like a crow’s nest on the Turner Sculpture Gallery roof alongside Route 13 in Onley, Virginia, is chockablock with clay maquettes and models. No horizontal surface is left unoccupied.
Even the walls are cluttered with everything from photographs to stuffed heads of wild animals.

“It’s a little bit of everything,” responds this artist to the oft-asked but essential question: Where and how does your creative process begin? He mentions observations in the field that will prompt him to “study them live in a zoo or some kind of rehabilitation center.” He even has a freezer full of perfectly preserved game specimens he’s caught or shot. “I’ll try to gather as much information as I can. I’ll take photographs myself. I’ve got thousands of photographic books, and I get all kinds of magazines as well.” But the important part, the composition, the essence, comes from within, “from inside of me – in my head.”

In some ways that’s the easy part. What follows, from idea to finished bronze sculpture, is a long, painstaking process.

A Turner sculpture usually takes physical form first as a maquette, a three-dimensional sketch or miniature model. Turner will look at this from all angles and make changes. From this comes a full-scale model in oil-based clay. Traveling through a rabbit warren of alleys and outbuildings

Father and son sculptors William (C) and David Turner (L) present to President George H. W. Bush one of their wildlife sculptures in the Oval Office. (Photos courtesy of David Turner)

Barbara Bush admires a wind vane with her nickname, the Silver Fox. The sculpture was commissioned as a gift for the former first lady by the Congressional Club.

A signature Chesapeake Bay table by Turner Sculpture Lab on Alert by David Turner stands 11 inches high. (Photo courtesy of David Turner)
behind the gallery, the model is transformed. First, a rubber mold is made to cast a wax replica. That replica is then used to form a heat-resistant ceramic-silica mold from which is cast a bronze sculpture. At a pour, workers dressed in reflective suits gingerly tilt an orange-glowing crucible of 2,000-degree molten bronze into the molds. Once cooled, the ceramic-silica mold is hammered off, revealing the bronze, which is sent to the metal room for finishing.

David Turner prefers three dimensions to two, unlike his father, William, who does it all. The elder Turner not only sculpts, but paints, draws, writes and even builds boats. Today, the son has just put the finishing touches on a work hatched by the father, a pair of diving pelicans. Although father and son have often collaborated, David has had to take this project over because his father has not yet fully recovered from an automobile accident in January. William vents his frustration about “this damn accident. Now everything’s all screwed up; my walking, my talking, and it’s just hard to put things together.”

His frustration is perfectly understandable. He’s the man who hatched the idea of creating glass tables where the support structure is a marine scene, complete with fish, crabs, turtles and reeds. These magnificent tables grace boardrooms and upscale beach mansions up and down the East Coast. One particularly distinctive table actually features a pair of herons fishing through the glass.

The Turners have also won their share of public commissions, 60 or so at last count, from giant herons in Virginia Beach to frolicking dolphins in Mystic, Connecticut. They’ve even shipped a life-size alligator to Switzerland and three Canada geese coming in for a landing at Limerick, Ireland. David goes to some 15 shows annually including the largest wildlife sculpture gathering in the world at Loveland, Colorado, where four of his works reside in the permanent collection.
Private commissions abound as well. The Turners’ scrapbook shows them presenting a fox weather vane, a gift from the Congressional Club, to Barbara Bush. The piece was cast in shiny aluminum because the former first lady’s nickname is the Silver Fox.

The Turners have Eastern Shore roots that go back to the 1620s. William grew up hunting and fishing when his parents moved back to the area after spending World War II working in the Newport News shipyards. Around 1946, the young Turner met Robert Rockwell, a retiree from the Museum of Natural History. He had set up a small taxidermy business. “I’d go to him and get help on how to do a bird or a possum, and he always encouraged me to forget about taxidermy and go into sculpting. So I did,” says the elder Turner.

That was the beginning. Turner went on to attend the University of Virginia (his favorite sculpture of two rutting bucks fighting is on display there). Then, after an eight-year gap and with a wife and three young sons in tow, he decided to enter dental school at the Medical College of Virginia. In his spare time, he made porcelain and ceramic wildlife figurines.

Looking over his shoulder was his young son, David. “I started sculpting when I was six,” says David. “I always pored through nature books and just devoured the photographs before I could read, and was really intrigued with wildlife in general.”

The Turner family moved back to the Eastern Shore. Dr. Turner set up his dental practice, and his son attended William and Mary, majoring in wildlife management and environmental science. But he adds, “I took a lot of studio art courses and did a lot of sculpting there.”
While at William and Mary, David worked with the peregrine falcon reintroduction program, living for weeks on a desolate Bay island. And his contribution to wildlife continues to this day with major donations of sculptures to benefit the state’s non-game endangered species.

By the time the son graduated, his father was casting bronze sculptures at the family farm on the Eastern Shore. In 1983, they bought the building on Route 13, the north-south artery that runs up the middle of the Eastern Shore. As another son took over the dental practice and a third became a lawyer, David and William went into sculpture full time.

Over the years, David has emerged from the shadow of his father to develop a distinctive style of his own. He refers to his father’s work as “more narrative sculptures, telling a story; I concentrate more on one subject, letting the shape be more of the story.” He’s also adding less detail these days. “As an artist, my textures are loosening up,” he explains. “I’m of the theory that less is more now…. I’m playing more on shapes. That’s what it’s all about: shape and then capturing that essence.”

There’s that phrase again, “capturing that essence,” which is tough when you have so much else distracting you. “I have a passion for sculpture, but then I’m trying to keep a business going as well: the combination of things, managing people and doing shows and customer relations.” Turner Sculpture employs 20 people, many of whom have worked here for 16 or more years. “We do it all here,” continues David. “We do all the foundry work here and the marketing, but my strength is in what I can do with clay.” He sighs and adds a tad wearily, “Running the business is a challenge.”

And so to get away from it all, David keeps a small boat that he’ll run down Folly Creek on the sea side “out to the Barrier Islands and I’ll be the only one out there.” Lately, he’s had some welcome company — his new bride. The other day, they came upon a harbor seal basking on an oyster float. David, who has hunted and fished and observed and sculpted the animals of these waters for years, had never seen one in the wild, although he knew watermen who had. “We just drifted and got within 10 yards of it, just being quiet,” he marvels softly.

Is that “fleeting glimpse” his next sculpture?

“It might be,” he hedges with a faraway smile.

Located on Route 13 near Onley, Virginia, Turner Sculpture is open daily, or visit www.TurnerSculpture.com.

Phil Audibert has been writing and shooting photographs since he was 16. Recently, he won several first-place awards from the Virginia Press Association. Phil’s wife, Susie, is also a photographer. Please visit them at AudibertPhoto.com.