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What's Your Passion? – Artistry That Goes with the Grain

We all want balance in our lives. Eric Saperstein (right) finds it by living in two worlds. While at MetLife, as a member of ESS Enterprise Technology Solutions, Eric is immersed in the hi-tech, highly team-oriented world of a senior software deployment engineer. But on his own time, he practices a more ageless and solitary pursuit: the fine art of hand-carved, custom-made furniture, including reproduction period furniture, original designs and antique restoration and conservation.

Eric is no dabbler in his craft. Today, he runs Artisans of the Valley in Pennington, NJ, a woodworking establishment begun by his father in the early 1970s. About two-thirds of the shop's business consists of restoration and conservation of antiques and collectibles. The rest is commissioned work, which is Eric's favorite. Projects in the shop range from an intricately carved safari chest to a Gothic dining room table set and even a Gandalf doorknocker for a Hobbit house.

"I like the fact that you get to physically create something from start to finish," says Eric. "You have control. In my corporate life, that's not possible – because you're part of a team and projects are compartmentalized. So woodworking gives me my own little world where I can be the eccentric artist."

But while Eric appreciates the creative freedom woodworking gives him, he also appreciates the fact that his MetLife career actually augments that freedom. "If I had to do woodworking full-time, I'd have to take on more projects I don't want to do. Then it becomes work. But because of MetLife, I can pick and choose my woodworking projects. Then, it's fun."



Of this safari chest, Eric says that when you add in a full-length panoramic wildlife scene, "it becomes more of an art piece than a period reproduction."

You might say that, for Eric, developing a passion for woodworking was simply a case of "going with the grain" – the natural outcome of his upbringing. His father learned the craft from Clarence Grinnell, the last master craftsman of the well-known Grinnell family that dates back to 1614. "So, as I grew up, it was around the house," says Eric. "I was just normal for me to build stuff."

Eric's father "retired" from Artisans of the Valley several years ago ("Though he still pokes in and out," says Eric) and, currently, Eric is the main proprietor. His fiancée, Teri, works with him. "Teri was introduced to furniture restoration when she met me," says Eric. "She says that, if you asked her before we met whether she'd ever be involved in this stuff, she'd say you were nuts! But she's a great partner because she finds different things relaxing than I do. You can set a highly carved piece in front

of her to clean up and she'll sit there with dental picks and wire brushes for three days, picking at it, and be very content and satisfied. I eventually get bored doing that, but I can see her sense of satisfaction. In the end, you have something that was covered with who-knows-how-many layers of paint and broken chips – just a mess – and then, it's back to what it was originally."

Eric's greatest satisfaction comes from those times when he's commissioned to do highly creative projects. But, again, his sense of balance comes through in how he approaches his woodworking activities. "There are two ends of the business," he explains. "There are the projects that are highly profitable and easily feasible to do, and then there are the ones that – given the time it takes to do them – you know we'll end up billing at \$5 per hour but they're super-creative. It's the difference between plying a trade and doing art. The idea is to break into the art world. But until you really do that and make a name for yourself – at which point you're getting paid for a reputation – the trade is what sustains you."

One of Eric's more creative projects in recent months was a commissioned Gothic piece. "We've gotten into a lot of Gothic furniture lately because nobody else in the area is doing that. So, an interior designer might come in and say, 'We have a client with a Tudor-style house and we want their dining room to feel like you're sitting at King Henry's feast.' That's the kind of project I'm doing now: a solid walnut dining table with two matching server corner units. By the time we're done with it, that's the feeling you're going to get when you walk in the room."



A detailed look at Eric's hand carved artistry from his safari chest.

Another recent and memorable project that benefited from Eric's artistry was a gorgeous safari chest. "It's a very simple, classic solid cherry chest," says Eric. "But when you add in a full-length panoramic wildlife scene that's carved, burned and painted, it becomes more of an art piece than a period reproduction."

That said, Eric's artistry is clearly based on classic woodworking styles that meld perfectly with the task of period reproductions and antique restoration. "We don't get into what's called 'art furniture' – all that weird, bent stuff," Eric says. "A lot of what we do is because baby boomers are downsizing and passing on their furniture to their kids. So our job is to take something that was originally beautiful, but now may be falling apart, and bring it back to where it blends with the client's décor."

Will Eric's artistic reputation ever grow to the point where a signed Saperstein original is worth more than the piece's trade value? Only time will tell. But, for now, his craftsmanship is bringing him that balance he seeks – as well as the admiration of not only his clients, but of one particularly noteworthy old master. "His furniture will last 400 or 500 years," says Eric's father. "I'm not exaggerating. That's how well he builds it."

For more about Eric, and a further look at his creations, visit www.artisansofthevalley.com.



Could you pass the salt, King Henry? A handcrafted Gothic table from Artisans of the Valley.

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