

Hand Crafted Custom Woodworking



The Box Plot ...

Eric M. Saperstein – June 2006

There is a goal shared by artists spanning all mediums and spectrums of the creative universe, and that is to be able to create freely, allowing their mind to generate ideas and then guide their hands to develop the concept in physical form. This goal is easy to achieve when art, in our case carving, is a hobby. The complexities begin when the artist steps into the professional realm, in other words, the need to satisfy a client and fulfill the terms of a contract within a designated time period take precedent over free-range creativity.

The woodcarver, the artist, becomes the contractor when their ability to wander freely through the creative process is restricted by terms, conditions, and requirements. Furniture makers and woodcarvers allocate the majority of their time to projects we would happily turn down, given release from our financial obligations. Flipping to the other side of the spectrum, every once and a while a project falls in our laps where the scope merges the free-range artist with the professional; we are now a commissioned artist.

Artisans of the Valley strives to maintain a consistent flow of projects as commissioned artists, sticking with marketing a wide variety of unique hand carvings adorning our furniture, or simply as artwork. One of the more unique commissions we received in 2006 is a project involving extensive detailed carving on a small box with a distinctive purpose.

When we receive a commission, its origins are from client is driven by some specific need that can't be filled by any standard shrink wrapped object. People that seek an artist for their project take a great deal of time to search for the right craftsmen for their project, reviewing and revising a set of requirements that are unique and inspire the design and creation of a one-of-a-kind result. The array of requests we receive is rather eclectic; it is this constant change of venue generates the creative challenges and keeps our interest in woodworking.

About six months ago we received an email from "Ken," outlining an elaborate scheme, requiring some specific props including an elaborate box. We get a lot of requests like this, very complex projects and the client has absolutely no idea what the costs and timeframes actually are. Weeding out is the first phase; the basic level setting discussions to determine if the project is feasible for the client and the artist. As it

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turned out, Ken really was planning to ruin the proposal curve for all remaining single guys by going ahead with this commission.

The original scope was rather outlandish, and would have included just short of a complete chronology of the lives of Ken and his girlfriend (Jessica.) Ken pretty much wanted to incorporate the history, hobbies, interests, thoughts, and the combined story of two individuals becoming a couple into one project; it seemed like he spent years gathering small details to include, and was bound and determined to cram it all into this one work of art.

He prescribed his concept, nothing ad-hoc this was a full grown requirements document; there are to be scenes involving beaches, mountains, cabins, lakes, coastal water, a jeep, chairs, roses, rings, ribbons, hibiscus flowers, specific dimensions, oh and of course the full functionality as a jewelry box. The requirements went on in detail, specific items in the scene, layouts, and feelings about overall impacts, through how the ribbon should be tied around the rose. The amount of detail a client provides varies; the level Ken's spec sheet made more sense when we realized his occupation tied back to NASA.

Flipping back for a moment to the distinction of woodcarvers; there are two categories, perhaps poorly described as professionals and amateurs. This is a poor description as amateur offers a connotation of less skills, and the reality is that those left to themselves as truly free range artists often develop the most unique, highly detailed, and perfected pieces.

Professionals are, as previously mentioned, contractors. Even as commissioned artists they are the indentured servant of the time clock, a business model, and they have to fixate within the various timeframes and budget constraints of a specific commission. The game changes a bit when we decide to toss the time clock off the bench and let the project take on a life of its own.

That said; our function became translating the client's specifications into a design. This is where we often pull back on the reins; Ken's case was a classic example where a little distilling went a long way to actually achieve his goal of being all encompassing.

Overbearing complexity and detail in a carving actually results in losing that very affect in the end result. A carver must consider the medium, different wood carves with a different affect and level of detail. We used white oak for this project, a dense hardwood that carves quite well both with and across the grain without tearing or splintering. Also considered are the final requirements for finish, painting, and other details – oak being one of the favorite woods of the perspective bride made the decision simple.

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The box design used two framed panels for the faces, and plain planks for the sides. The top is a single plank, with a 3/8" inset. The base is a plank with four simple feet and two shells mounted on the underside to lift the box like a small chest. Everything is tongue and groove joints, with glue and pegs. Building the box itself first set the exact panel sizes to scale the carving templates.

The scale is very important; the format of this project allowed only 16" x 4 1/2" of carving for each scene, so we used it all creating a window effect with the box's frame. Once the dimensions are set, the carving has to provide the desired impact, without overachieving or missing the most significant facts.

Rendering down Ken's requirements to the fundamentals for each scene required dropping out certain items, such as the jeep and the beach chairs allowed us to keep proper proportion and perspective. Without taking a step back, it is easy to develop a cartoon like picture. Always remember, wheels are either perfectly round, or they look like a hack job ... wheels on the scale that this jeep would fall into would be just about impossible to accurately portray.

When we work with a someone that has this much of a vision, part of what we have to do is let them keep talking and begin to form our rendition of what is already developed in someone else's mind. We pull them in directions they don't want to go, let them take us back, take them in new directions and incorporate aspects previously unthought-of. Usually a few artist/client misunderstandings will form at this phase – this is all part of the process, get used to it if you're going to accept commissions.

Once the scope is set, we tell them to sit back, drop their preconceptions, and let the artists do their work. Interactions at various points keep things on tract, and the concept turns to reality. If we've done our jobs, this artistic box is the first heirloom of the forthcoming family, one that encapsulates how Ken sees Jessica's interactions as a couple, showing his astute level of observation of her personality and a reminder of why they are together.

Developing the actual patterns is actually an entirely separate trade from carving. A woodcarver is no better than their pattern, and there was little to no chance that the perfect custom pattern exists in its finished form for this project, or any other truly custom carving for that matter. We have found that creatively integrating aspects of various templates with our own drawings usually gets us close to a complete pattern.

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As a carver – you should break any rules that claim you have to use a pattern exactly as you purchased it. Take elements from various sources, combine them, and create your own final template. One of our favorite pattern artists is Laura S. Irish, to whom we credit many of the scene features on this project. Use any available tools, a copy machine, a computer, a pen, a razor blade, carbon paper, pencils, or paste; whatever it takes.

The beach scene pulled in a lighthouse, a sailing ship, a cabin on a peninsula, various trees, a sunset, and a windbreak fence – these came from several other scenes. The overall impact – tranquil, serene, warm sand, cool breeze, sunrise or sunset doesn't really matter which there nowhere important to be but where you are, except perhaps out on that sailboat if the itch to get out to sea gets to strong; everything the Corona commercials want you to feel in a Key West Jimmy Buffet lifestyle.

Ironically the most difficult aspect of depicting a beach scene is that it is minimalist in content. Depth requires layers; the beach and ocean by themselves have no discernable content in a pattern. This means the carver must use the sun, the birds, or other aspects such as a jetty, lighthouse, a boat, perhaps a palm tree, driftwood, or the effect of a cove to create the scene's perspective.

Mountain woods scenes are in direct contrast to beach carvings; they are often driven to employ overwhelming content. The carver has at their disposal an arsenal of trees, wildlife, plants, mountains, lakes, rocks, cabins, boats, docks, streams, roads, and hundreds of other possible features. The goal here is to reduce the scene, maintain a realistic scope. The cabin scene encompasses much more diverse content; trees, the canoe, and of course a cabin. The lakes allowed for a shore line and depth extending into the horizon. Mountains are beast of their own, developing a humbled awe at the snow capped peaks, warm fire in a log cabin, the smell of breakfast, fishing off the dock, a front porch and a squeaky screen door.

The rose carving was a basic pattern we found in our library, with the addition of a scaled ribbon and a hand drawn in diamond ring. The goal of the rose was to draw a hint as to what may be in the box, and also to remain indefinitely as a reminder the fresh cut flower exactly as it was presented. The hibiscus flowers are Jessica's favorite; these patterns were drawn free form from photographs.

Small scale emphasizes reducing each feature of a carving to the most basic lines, muscle structures, horizontal & vertical beams, branches, and horizons. If we leave you with one impression here, sharp cast carbon steel tools. The right tools, the right size, kept at a razor edge are critical to success in carving. Carving perspective is an illusion; using layers within the relief depth is developed by fooling the mind

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into believing it is there. Consider using a burning tool to develop the minute detail and color (tinting) to enhance a scene with shadows and highlights.

When combined, relief carving, burning, and tinting create a complete illusion. Consider your choices for stain and finish carefully, avoid drowning out the fine details with overbearing color or the glare of a high gloss finish. Use the stain to highlight the grain, and create a backdrop for the color. Stick with a satin finish, which will bring warmth to the piece without hiding the particulars behind a thick layer of plastic like film.

When the box was complete – we packaged it up in a custom made create for shipment to Key West, the presentation (proposal) to take place on the beach. This was all a covert operation, taking place over six months all the while maintaining telephone silence, using private email accounts, and alternate mailing addresses. It was imperative to the success of this commission that the female (Jessica) be kept entirely unaware of the plan while Ken stayed on track as the density of her hints increased.

Ken met the box in Key West, where he tucked a red rose inside with the ribbon holding the ring in place. He then put the box into a duffle bag with two glasses, a teddy bear, and a bottle of champagne and somehow smuggled this package to the perfect secluded spot on the beach, and made his move. Ultimately, the plan was a success and the two are now planning their wedding. We also heard that many points were earned to Ken's account for generating tears from not only his new fiancée, but her mother, family, and several friends.

Footnotes:

Cabin and Beach Patterns are composites from designs by Laura S. Irish www.carvingpatterns.com. The rose is a composite from various out of print books and pattern materials in Artisans library. The Hibiscus flower was pulled from a generic image library off the internet. Photography by Eric M. Saperstein with the exception of the two on location photos by Ken Bellock and the photo of Stanley & Eric is by Frank Jacobs.

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