

Stirring the Soul

This craftsman finds magic in the art of spoon carving.

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The heartwood grows last. The strongest part of a tree—it forms slowly under an often thin layer of sapwood, like an organ beneath skin. Woodworkers prize it for its durability and rich color. But it doesn't beat. Doesn't keep the tree alive. In fact, some trees can go on living long after their heartwood has rotted away. And some never grow it at all. For Norm Sartorius, an award-winning wood artist, discovering his true talent—his way of seeing into and through a piece of timber to the magic beneath—was a bit like the process of uncovering the heartwood. It was probably always there under the surface. It just took a sharp tool, a little fine sandpaper, and years of patience to reveal it.

"I would need a psychologist to tell me," he says when asked what led him to woodworking. "I grew up on the eastern shore of Maryland. My dad was a country doctor and his dad was a country doctor. The emphasis in my family was on education and becoming a professional. There was no emphasis in our household on the arts. No one said anything bad about it, but it never came up as a viable vocation."

In his late sixties, Norm now grows a thick salt and pepper beard, tends toward casual clothes, and lives in a cozy two-story red brick home on a quadruple lot in Parkersburg. He isn't retired. His work begins every day with a short walk through his yard along a narrow brick path lined with shade plants and trees, ending on a back lot in front of a building that looks more like a garage than a fine art studio. He seems to like that quiet anonymity, a contrast to the buzz and blur of the major craft shows he frequents. "I have very inconsistent work patterns. I have peaks of energy where I feel very creative, and then I have the opposite, where I sit out here and look at each piece of wood—moving from piece to piece, holding them, trying to understand. To someone else that might appear unproductive, but for me it's just as important as when I'm using my tools or actively piling up the sawdust and wood shavings."



PHOTOGRAPHED BY JIM OSBORN

Norm has been a wood artist for more than 30 years. His work has appeared at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, and the Yale University Art Gallery, to name a few. He's best known for taking rare woods—some thousands of years old—from around the world and carving them into the arguably universal spoon form. Not spoons to stir the pie filling, he's careful to point out, but spoon sculptures wrought of wood, polished to silk, meant to stir the soul. Norm's sculptural spoons are at once comfortable and alien—the apparition of warmth and home run through with the dizzying unfamiliarity of a foreign landscape or a time long forgotten.

Among his work you'll find his Conquistador, made of Honduran rosewood burl, its grain writhing and boiling like the surface of the sun; a twisted Algerita root spoon, rippling in pale gold and gray green; and the gleaming red Synthesis, carved in Brazilian bloodwood, more evocative of a dragon's arching neck than a kitchen utensil. "I've always started with the wood itself. The wood is usually the inspiration for the first cuts. And the shaping of the piece has to do with the texture, grain, and figure of it—its special character," he says. "I'm kind of a wood collector, really."

Born in Salisbury, Maryland, Norm spent his childhood in nature. "My dad was an avid fisherman and he took me out with him frequently. I paid attention to those simple things that a lot of people might not think about—weather patterns, storm clouds, sunsets, birds on the seashore." Despite the draw of nature, he studied psychology and spent five years working as a psychiatric social worker in a state mental hospital just outside Baltimore after graduating from college. But it wasn't his calling. "In an overall sense it seemed unsatisfying. I wasn't clear on what I wanted to do, but it was clear after a while that I didn't want to do that."

In the mid-1970s, Norm hit the road. "I traveled. I wasn't married. I didn't have children. I wasn't firmly planted at that time. So I went searching for something." He found his way to an apprenticeship with woodworker Phil Jurus in Baltimore. "It was an experiment. I was seeing if it would take," he says. "It did." Through that apprenticeship, a later work-study stint in Kentucky with sculptural furniture maker Bobby Falwell, and woodworking classes, he learned the craft's foundations—how to cut and shape and smooth, how to bring out grain and color, and how to uncover what lies beneath. "It felt like a more satisfying thing—rather than being abstract, mentally, it was very tangible. I would finish the week with items I'd actually completed."

Norm started with beautiful but functional items—from switch plates to canes. "But spoons, right away, felt different." If you ask Norm what it was about the shape and form of the humble spoon that ignited his imagination, he'll pause. "I can't really explain it. At the time, I probably would have just said I enjoyed spoons the most. I never got tired of them. I probably wouldn't have had an intellectual answer for you." Still, Norm pushed his attraction to the spoon form to the back of his mind for years, learning first to perfect his craft before fully realizing it—and marketing it—as art.

Sometime around 1975 West Virginia also took root in Norm's soul. "It was the tail-end of the hippie thing," he says. "My friends had moved to McDowell County. I would visit them and we would go for long walks in the mountains. It was poor, but it was beautiful." So he bought a cabin on 25 acres and lived there alone, on a ridgetop the locals called Bearwallow or Pea Patch, making mostly functional items and spoons—always spoons. Living primitively in the mountains, the land became a part of him. "West Virginia was my exit from that previous way of living. I had left one type of life and started a new one as a craftsperson." He lived there five years and brought his work to local craft fairs. Then, in 1981, he met his wife, Diane, a Parkersburg native and stained glass artist, at Mountain State Art & Craft Fair in Ripley. "Meeting her was the beginning of phase two in West Virginia, which was really settling in, getting married, raising a family, and approaching my work as a career rather than a subsistence lifestyle on a mountaintop."

With the support of his new family, he began networking with national-level woodworkers, earned grants from West Virginia's Division of Culture and History, spent time researching and photographing spoons in the Smithsonian's Museum Support Center, and watched the contemporary woodworking landscape change. "It was more of an evolution than a revolution. For years I made largely functional spoons. That was OK in my mind, but I was a little conflicted. I was putting a lot of time into each piece, using the best woods, making each unique and special, and people were coming into my booth and asking if they could stir their blueberry pie filling with them," he laughs. "I knew the answer had to be yes, but I was already seeing the piece as something more—as a decorative art object. It took a while for me to resolve that."

Although many of his customers were already collecting his work and treating it as decorative art, it took an outside force in the late 1980s to validate what he knew in his heart to be true. "I noticed what was happening in the

contemporary wood field. I would see carvers my age taking something like a salad bowl and carving holes in it, making it non-functional as a bowl but fully functional as a gallery or museum piece. It still had a use. It had a function. Just not as a kitchen utensil. It functioned as a decorative art, and the function of art is to provide inspiration and satisfaction, to be visual or experiential," he says. "I saw it happening and thought, 'Maybe I'm not so crazy.'"

So he started listening to that little whispering voice in the back of his mind. He put his pieces on museum-style pedestals, commissioned high quality photography, and took his work to the national stage. It wasn't long before his spoons were showing up at the Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, D.C., the American Craft Council Baltimore Show, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show. His work has won numerous awards and appeared in major shows, galleries, and exhibitions from coast to coast. Some of his spoons are valued at \$5,000 or more.

Though he also makes wood sculptures, letter openers, and bracelets (as well as small wooden hearts just for his wife each Valentine's Day), he relishes the challenge of taking on custom pieces—often carved from his customers' family heirlooms and other bits of wood imbued with memory. "I've got people bringing wood into my booth in shopping bags—something from their wood pile, their old uncle's apple tree, or a piece from a relative. They want something that reconnects them with that memory. Wood almost always conveys meaning and history. Almost everyone has a piece of wood in their lives that means something."

If you visit Norm today in his backyard studio, you might be surprised by how ordinary it all seems with the die grinders, bandsaws, and sandpaper. Most of us could never truly see what Norm sees in the hunk of old bog wood, black as ebony with age, or bit of mulberry from Mount Vernon that could have once shaded George Washington. But therein lies the art. "There's something that happens. It happens all the time in children because to them the world is all brand new. Children see the magic in everything, and I'm trying not to lose that," he says. "I'm trying to share that. I'm trying to share what I see in wood, to translate it from my carving to my customers. I think people are looking for that magic."



PHOTOGRAPHED BY NIKKI BOWMAN