

Carving a niche

By JANET PURCELL
Special to The Times

TAKE an ordinary room, add handcrafted woodworking, a few pieces of handmade fine period furniture, include a handcarved accent piece or two, and you've got a room that is not only warm and welcoming, but a room that also reflects individuality.

"Handcrafted woodworking enhances the unique atmosphere of your home and is as artistic as a painting, a stained-glass window or sculpture," says custom woodworker Eric Saperstein. "Woodworking, freestanding or built in, can accent your home and bring a warm rich feeling to any room unlike that of any other material."

Eric Saperstein is the son of Trenton-born-and-raised Stanley Saperstein, the only formally apprenticed woodworker adhering to 18th-century methods in New Jersey. Eric, who served an apprenticeship with his father, is now working with him hand-in-hand and will carry the trade of fine woodworking into the next generation.

"In 1994 I became very ill and had to restrict what I did because I didn't have the strength," says Stanley Saperstein. "I had trained my son from the age of 10, and when I told him I might have to close down everything and retire, he was upset. He didn't want to let my name die. He decided to take it to the next generation, and I'll work with him and oversee him."

Reflecting on his development as a woodworker, Saperstein recalls being handed his first pocket knife at 6

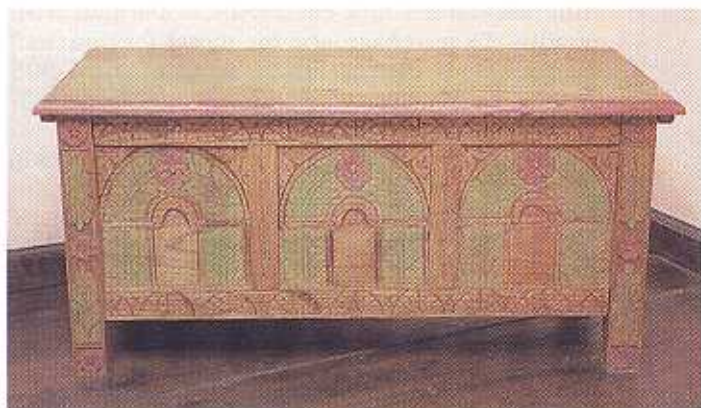


Stanley Saperstein, left, with his son, Eric, in their workshop in Trenton, N.J., are keeping the art of 18th-century woodcarving alive.

— Photo by Frank Jacobs III

and says he was shown how to keep it sharp. His summers were spent on his grandparents' farm in upstate New York, and by the age of 8, he was joining the old farmers of the region when they gathered around a pot-bellied stove. "They'd tell stories and whittle and I'd watch them," he says. When he was 10, his grandfather gave him a whittling knife, and he has been whittling and carving ever since.

In 1972 he met 75-year old Clarence "Larry" Grinnell of the well-known family of woodworkers. The Grinnell



Circa 1650-1680, a hand-carved Connecticut-style blanket chest in oak, above, and a Bible box in walnut, below. Right: A Duncan Phyfe roll-top desk houses Stan's pocketknife collection.

— Photos by Thomas H. Clark, Jr.



family had, since 1614, directly passed the trade of woodworking down through the generations of their family. "But he had no one to pass it on to," says Stanley Saperstein. "He became like a grandfather to me and I apprenticed with him. For seven years I went nights and weekends until he was satisfied with my skill level and I started to make things for people."

Saperstein now creates works of art in wood that range from walking sticks to hand-carved and joined fine period furniture, to a complete 16-by-20-foot mahogany English library entirely crafted by hand.

The library is paneled in mahogany with an 18th-century finish of shellac base with tung oil over that to make it water resistant. Ten built-in bookcases, 8 feet tall with modified acanthus leaf carving over the shelves, have a 24-karat gold finish crown molding. Hand-planed raised paneling surrounds the doors and fireplace.

The room boasts a bar that is entirely lined with mahogany. Saperstein says he was trained by Grinnell "to make things as good where they can't see it as you do where they can."

That attention to detail is also evident in the period furniture the Sapersteins create. The family home is the showcase for their work. The senior Saperstein finished the interior of the home himself adding authentic touches such as hand-laid random-width yellow pine floors stained dark in the dining room and left to a lighter tone in the family room. He carved and installed a Jacobean lintel post on the stairs, and a freestanding Chippendale corner cupboard that has a hand-carved shell architectural feature.

The dining room table is a Saperstein copy of a Queen Anne gateleg table found in the Governor's Palace



Walking sticks are another specialty.

— Photo by Frank Jacobs III

in Williamsburg. In the living room are several other pieces of period furniture expertly copied and crafted by Saperstein. One is a Duncan Phyfe roll-top desk that houses his pocketknife collection. The desk was made from detailed original drawings and the turnings, carving, and fluting are all made from antique lumber.

A Queen Anne period solid walnut lowboy with hand-sculpted goat's legs stands flanked by Chippendale chairs. Across the room is a full-size solid oak Connecticut chest with a wooden cleat hinge. As was common in the 1640s, the chest is adorned with low-relief carving.

The front of another solid oak blanket chest is tinted with a wash of spring green that doesn't cover the graining of the wood.

Rooms with a blend of furniture from several periods are pleasing because of their authenticity. Says Saperstein, "Furniture was very expensive to make and was passed

down in families, so when it was passed down, people started to mix (periods). It was common to find Queen Anne, Chippendale, Federal and Jacobean in one room."

Handmade wooden accessories also add to the charm of a room. In his family room, Saperstein has hand-carved fireplace bellows, doll house lamps — one of which is a trading post and one a tavern, and hand-carved gunstocks. A collection of his carved walking sticks stands on the bluestone hearth of the fireplace.

Each of the walking sticks is unique and, when carved for a specific individual, contains custom insignias such as a family tree, a favorite design, fraternity letters, business logos, etc. Each is topped with a wooden sculpture of an animal or an historic figure.

The Sapersteins work in a complete cabinet shop in the family home that contains modern tools as well as what is perhaps the largest known collection in the region of 18th-century handmade carving tools still used to produce furniture.

Eric Saperstein began learning his father's craft at age 10 and in the last 20 years he has assisted in many projects. He is now doing the work that larger cabinet shops will no longer do such as small accent pieces, hand-carved pieces or fine molding. He is also doing what his father calls "the hard back-breaking work" on larger projects.

What is most important to the senior Saperstein, however, is the fact that the trade that has been handed down continuously in the Grinnell family since 1614 and was passed to the Saperstein family will continue with his son in the next generation with the same high quality of workmanship.

Note: Artisans of the Valley can be reached at <www.artisansofthevalley.com>. ■



This array of woodworking tools, probably the oldest still in use in this area, includes tools from the 17th and 18th centuries.

— Photo by Frank Jacobs III

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