

Romancing the Stone

Nathan Hunt leads a global crew of stone carvers in an age-old process.

The ancient craft of stone carving is alive and well in a rambling hodgepodge of outbuildings along a gritty shoreline in San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood. Over the din of motorized chisels and through billowing clouds of plaster and limestone dust, one can just make out the energetic Nathan Hunt orchestrating the controlled chaos that is Hunt Studios.

Hunt's team of master carvers and architectural sculptors comprises an international brood from far-flung places such as Albania, Turkmenistan and Mexico. Like the countries that Hunt and his crew hail from, their projects are equally far ranging; from private commissions, such as an ornate, hand-carved Carrara marble fireplace built for a Hollywood producer, to large-scale public works, including a reproduction of a 14th-century statue of Neptune for the St. Louis Museum of Art and the massive *Spirit of the Ocean* fountain in front of the Santa Barbara County Courthouse, which was carved from more than 120,000 pounds of sandstone.

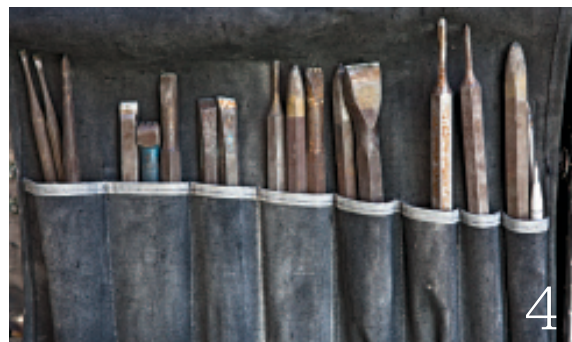
Hunt grew up on an organic farm in Devon, a county in the southwest corner of England. "It's there that I first developed a love for working with my hands," he says. "When you live on a farm, there is always something that needs to be built or repaired." At 16, he began an apprenticeship in stone masonry at the renowned Exeter Cathedral. Now 35, Hunt has amassed nearly 20 years of experience and knowledge that he shares by serving as a mentor to his own apprentices.

Hunt Studios' latest venture is the creation of a new line of modern wall tiles that will be sold commercially—but don't expect a conveyor belt to be spewing out cookie-cutter tiles destined for Home Depot anytime soon. Developing the new collection is a labor of love that includes sketching the designs, modeling them in clay, making silicone molds, meticulously carving plaster and then duplicating the process in either cast composite or stone. At \$330 a square foot for the hand-carved tiles, this love doesn't come cheap, but it is certain to stand the test of time.

Hunt Studios, huntstonecarving.com



1. A collection of stone and cast tiles line the floor of San Francisco's Hunt Studios. Although Europe is still his go-to destination for marble, Nathan Hunt has found many valuable stone purveyors closer to home. "When possible, I like to source the stone we use from within the United States," he says. "Texas, for example, has some of the world's finest limestone." **2.** A tool typically used by jewelers is wielded to create precise etchings in a cast plaster wall relief. **3.** High-grade silicone forms are pulled back to reveal cast plaster replicas. **4.** An assortment of flat- and round-head chisels—a stone carver's most frequently used tools—fills a canvas chisel roll draped over a workbench. **5.** Hunt scrapes excess plaster from a table lined with Prague Clock tiles, part of a new commercial line developed by Hunt Studios.





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1. Hunt uses an electric chisel to carve a limestone tile. "The big difference between working with plaster and working with stone is that with stone there are no second chances," says Hunt. "With plaster, you can just add some more if you screw up." 2. A pointing machine, originally created by French sculptor Nicolas-Marie Gatteaux in the 18th century, is a measuring tool used by stone carvers to accurately reproduce sculptures from models. 3. An electron-scanning microscope helped inspire the design of these wall tiles. "It looks like a feather, but it's actually the cellular structure of a plant stem," says Hunt. 4. Master stone carver Jason Carter uses the ancient technique of pointing (covering a cast in precisely measured points) to faithfully replicate a 14th-century statue of Neptune destined for the St. Louis Museum of Art.



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