



Making his mark in MARQUETRY

Del Porter practices the ancient art of marquetry to create intricate pieces of artwork and furniture

Photos and Story by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Tucked in the corner of his garage filled with tools and scraps of wood, Del Porter hunches over his workspace, turns on his overhead lamp and begins to thread his saw blade.

The 90-year-old World War II veteran takes the blade, which is as thin as a horse hair, and carefully attaches it to his saw as he prepares to work on his latest marquetry masterpiece.

For over 30 years, Porter has honed his craft in the ancient art of marquetry, a form of wood carving that has been around for centuries.

“I have done this almost continuously since 1985,” Porter said. “I’ve always had something going on because you can get out of it real fast.”

Marquetry is the art of creating decorative designs and pictures by skillfully utilizing the grain, figure and colors of thin veneers. With the infinite variety of veneers, grain and figuration, marquetry insures a unique, one-of-a-kind product every time.

Porter does not only create pictures of people and scenery out of wood, he also creates one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture, each hand-carved with intricate designs and stunning details.

“I love doing it because it’s something different,” Porter said. “It keeps you from drying up.”

Porter refers to his home as “The Museum.” After walking through his house visitors can easily understand why. Each room has at least one of Porter’s creations on display. Whether it is a carved picture of an outdoor scene or a small table decorated with a geometric design, Porter’s works of art are prominent throughout his home.

His masterpiece is a beautiful women’s writing desk, with drawers, cabinets and a secret compartment. Porter was inspired to make this piece of furniture while reading a novel that described the *bonheur du jour*, or women’s writing desk, of the infamous Queen of France Marie Antoinette. Before he set to work on this stunning project, he had to come up with a plan.

“I make it in my mind first.” Porter said.

To make the desk, Porter used a piece of veneer that was so special he had been keeping it around for decades before deciding this would be the time to use it.

“I had had this piece of veneer, it’s Carpathian Elm and it’s book-marked, and I had it for about 20 years because I couldn’t find any-





Del Porter repairs his broken saw blade while working on a marquetry project. The blade of the saw is as thin as a horse hair, and needs to be threaded very carefully to prevent it from breaking.



thing good enough to do with it," Porter said.

He used the Carpathian Elm to create the tabletop of the desk, and it's naturally intricate pattern is a showstopper itself. He also used cherry and river-recovered cypress to create the desk, which took six months to complete.

Although he has the skill set of someone who has been doing marquetry for his entire life, Porter didn't pick up the trade until he was in his late 50s.

After he got out of the army, Porter worked in the medical field until his retirement. He was a medical laboratory director and ran hospital laboratories in New York before moving down to Florida. He continued to run medical laboratories in Miami until he was able to retire.

"I spent my life at something that I loved doing," Porter said. "I got my first chemistry set when I was eight. But I was always interested in art even as a kid. After I retired I did what I loved to do: wood working."

Even before he got into wood working, Porter had been a wood collector for many years. Whenever





Still Waters West

Assisted Living & Adult Day Care
"Where Care Runs Deep"

- 24-Hour Staff
- 3 Nutritious Meals, Snacks Served Daily
- Assistance with Bathing, Dressing, and Grooming
- Housekeeping, Laundry, and Linen Service
- Medication Assistance Program
- Secure Memory Impaired Unit
- All Utilities, Including Cable TV
- Assistance with Arranging Transportation to Doctors Visits, Shopping, & Social Events

Accepting Most Longterm Care Insurance

507 NW Hall of Fame Drive, Lake City, FL 32055 • www.stillwatersalf.org • 386-755-6560

A NOT-FOR-PROFIT CHRISTIAN ORGANIZATION

Del Porter pulls out all the drawers that are a part of his handmade women's writing desk. The desk took porter six months to make, and also includes a hidden compartment.



he would go to a new city, he would always look to see if there was a wood importer there who could add to his collection.

Once he retired, Porter joined a club for marquetarians while living in South Florida. It was there that he began to hone his craft, and eventually he joined the American Marquetry Society and the British Marquetry Society.

Porter has had work published in publications for both societies, and he also wrote an article for *World of Wood*, one of the most popular publications in the world for wood carvers.

Porter has spent years becoming the marquetarian he is today, and he was able to get to that level through lots and lots of practice.

"It's not something you can read a book and do because there's so many tricks to the trade," Porter said.

With modern advances in technology, marquetry done by hand is

becoming more obsolete, with many modern marquetarians using lasers to create their works of art. However, Porter plans to stick to the original form of marquetry.

"Now you can do things with lasers instead of spending months making something like this," Porter said when referring to one of his hand-carved pieces of art. "You can do such fast work with lasers but it doesn't have that touch."

Porter periodically enters his artwork into contests, where he continues to outshine his competition and win prize after prize.

"In Miami or Palm Beach, whenever you did a competition you would get ribbons," Porter said. "Up here, they give you checks. Checks are much better."

While Porter does earn cash prizes

for his artwork, he does not usually try and sell them. Instead, he prefers to give them as gifts to his friends and family, which includes Dolores, his wife of 67 years, and their four children, seven grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren with one on the way.

"I don't try and sell them because I know I can't sell them for what it costs to make them," Porter said. "I just give them to special people,"

Some of Porter's artwork is on display at the Lake City Gateway Art Gallery. Porter also teaches a marbling class at the gallery. While he is always willing to share his experiences with marquetry, he does not teach a class in it.

"It's hard to teach a class in this because you learn by doing," Porter said. "You do it over and over again."

The History of Marquetry

While the exact origins of marquetry are unknown, it is known that ancient artisans devised techniques to create objects decorated with exquisite inlays of wood, stone, metal, shell, bone, ivory and other exotic materials.

The art of marquetry can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, where artifacts including hieroglyphs and paintings were made using the art form.

In the mid-16th century, innovations in spring-driven clocks resulted in the development of the fretsaw, a handheld tool which could be used to precisely cut inlay elements. With the ability to now very accurately cut thin sheets of wood, bone, ivory, shell and other materials into nearly arbitrarily complex shapes, 16th-century craftsman began to piece together these materials and shapes into more complex images.

Over the next few centuries, marquetry schools were established in France, Germany and Holland.

During the 16th to 18th centuries much exquisite work was focused primarily on decorating furniture, especially for royalty.

By the early 17th century, marquetry largely replaced inlaid decoration in furniture.

Geometric patterns (often referred to as "parquetry") were also quite popular.

Today there are a handful of professional marquetarians. However, it is often the amateur who produces

some of the finest work. Unrestricted by commercial concerns, they are able to develop new techniques which are often labor intensive, advancing this unique art form to new standards.

