

Carving for CEOs

Visit the 3 shops of David Monhollen, who shed a successful career in sales to carve wildlife for executives.

David Monhollen has three woodshops. His first shop is decidedly bigger than yours. His second shop (his so-called “working” shop) is in his house. And the Crittenden, Ky., carver’s third shop (what he calls his “dirty” shop) is in his garage. It’s in this dirty shop where he performs the grungy parts of carving – the slamming and banging parts of carving – that give this shop its name.

Although he shares the garage with a car, gardening tools, workbench and canoe, the majority of the floor space is filled with stacks of linden, walnut and cherry. But he doesn’t think of this cache as lumber. Rather, he refers to wood as souls of trees. Here, he says, is where they wait for him to create.

Most of his work is done by hand. The few power tools he owns are stored on metal shelves in the corner of this shop. They include a Craftsman belt sander, a Porter-Cable miter saw, a router and a couple of drills.

The Working Shop

Monhollen’s second shop, what he calls his “working” shop, is in the back of his home. Walking into the shop, which is also a studio and office, you first notice a carving of a female red-tailed hawk (shown here and on page 35). It’s so realistic that your fingertips half-expect to encounter a body of soft feathers instead of the wood.

All of Monhollen’s carvings relate to nature, and he spends hours researching his subjects to authenticate his work. For example, a few years ago he carved dozens of wildflowers, songbirds and butterflies into a 6½"-thick, almost 4'-diameter piece of lin-



Photos by Al Parrish

Monhollen was inspired to carve this female, red-tailed hawk after visiting his daughter in Colorado. He paints his carvings with acrylics when a client requests it, although he’d rather highlight natural wood with lighting.

den. To accurately depict the flowers, he dug some up, studied them and then replanted them when he was done.

He painted the project, but only because he was asked. “My personal preference,” he says, “is [to] let the wood be.”

Some carvings are on display in his studio. Most were commissioned and are waiting to be taken to their new homes. Except for pieces he gives to his wife, Monhollen keeps nothing. His attachment to a piece isn’t in the owning, but in the creating.

by Kara Gebhart

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Monhollen’s hand-pegged, cherry workbench sits next to the studio area, in front of a double window. Outside the window is a spring. He enjoys, along with Native American music, listening to the water tumble over rocks. He illuminates his bench with fluorescent and low-wattage bulbs, although he says sunlight filtered through trees is best.

Behind the workbench is a simple oak tool cabinet. Tucked inside are his tools – gouges, chisels, V-tools and carving knives.

Pulling out Pfeil’s Swiss Made tools and some carving tools purchased from Japan Woodworker, he says Japanese and Swiss tools feature the sharpest and toughest steels.

To keep these tools sharp, Monhollen

uses Japanese waterstones. He starts with #800 grit, then moves to #1,200 and a finishing stone. For curved tools, he uses a leather barber's strop loaded with jeweler's rouge.

He also has a leather sharpening wheel that he chucks into a drill. The vise on his bench holds his drill steady, and the leather gives his tools a razor-like edge.

Monhollen used to use oil stones. But 20 years ago he read an article about Japanese waterstones by George Nakashima, a man whose furniture and writings have influenced Monhollen greatly. Monhollen purchased some waterstones and has been using them ever since. He says there's no comparison.

Also in the oak cabinet is a tool Monhollen has owned since he was 9 – his Cub Scout pocket knife. When first given it, he says he had a riveting thought: He could create. For him, that was magic, he says.

As a boy, Monhollen carved constantly. One day in the third grade, his teacher caught him carving during class. Instead of scolding him, she asked the other students to bring in a block of soap and a knife, and the next day Monhollen gave a carving lesson to his class. When he finished, the teacher explained that the students could continue to carve, but only on their own time.

And Monhollen did. His passion led him through high school, college and Vietnam. During the war, Monhollen served in the Army. While there, he carved birds for Vietnamese children, and the children gave him a nickname: "The Carver."

Today Monhollen carves not for children, but for clients – mostly high-profile corporate executives who will come to visit him. So in his working shop is a sitting area where Monhollen sits with clients and tries to discern the topic of a commission. When talking to executives, the words "a bird" don't cut it – he wants to know more.

Monhollen, who has a degree in business from the University of Cincinnati and a career in sales, will sometimes sit with clients for hours, pulling out the history of the company and what the carving is meant to represent. He strives for his work to intimately reflect his clients' companies.

For example, birds resting on a base pyramid might represent a company built on a solid foundation. A beautiful slab of walnut with a defect in it, whether caused by light-



Past this reflecting pond is a gazebo that overlooks an apple orchard and small garden. Monhollen doesn't eat his apples; rather, he grows them for possums and raccoons. Similarly, his berry bushes are for the birds.

ning or insects, might represent the company's challenges. Six birds carved out of six species of wood might represent the diversity of the company's owners.

The Shop Outside

When you arrive at Monhollen's gray farmhouse tucked into the woods, you expect to be first led into the studio to view his work. But instead he insists on taking visitors to a shop that's bigger than yours – a place he goes to every morning – his back yard.

In many ways, this eight-acre "shop" is his most important because it's here where he draws inspiration. The trails that wind through the woods are covered with chips – remnants of past carvings.

A wooden arch crosses one of the trails with the words "Be Peace" carved into one side and "Be Love" carved into the other. Monhollen has planted many of the trees – one of his many ways of giving back. The trails lead you to a hammock, a gift from his two grown children, Perrin and Kyle. It's situated so that when lying on it you are graced with a spectacular view of the underside of several pine trees. Monhollen says this spot sparks much of his creativity.

Every morning he walks these trails regardless of weather. On some days you can find him carving out here, too.

Once a carving is completed in the other shops, it goes back to the "dirty" shop for sanding and polishing. On hardwood, Monhollen uses Tru-Oil Gun Stock finish, which he rubs on by hand. After building three coats he uses the finest steel wool he can find to buff it out. Then he applies two



A close-up of Monhollen's female, red-tailed hawk exemplifies the detail. He plans to use this carving as a sample of his work when talking to clients.

to three coats of Johnson's paste wax. For painted pieces, he uses acrylics.

The Business of Carving

Monhollen enjoys the fact that he doesn't have to punch a time clock every day. In fact, he can only estimate how long each carving takes – some take weeks, some months.

As far as income is concerned, he does well – very well. One carving can fetch anywhere from \$15,000 to \$60,000. Some are even in the six figures. Besides 50 years' experience and obvious talent, a previous career in sales has helped him succeed.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, Monhollen worked as a sales representative in pharmaceutical sales and then metal sales. In 1981, he was offered a promotion and transfer.

But instead of taking the promotion, Monhollen quit. While working in sales, he discovered that 60 percent of the clients he sold to were making warfare products. While in Vietnam, Monhollen says he saw war first-hand and the experience damaged him in ways he's still figuring out. But perhaps more than that, he simply wanted to carve.

"I dove in the pond, paddling like crazy," he says in describing the leap from the corporate world to carving. "It isn't always an easy paddle." But he tries to do his work as



This bench was built by one of Monhollen's friends 15 years ago. The oak tool cabinet at right, which he purchased from Sam's Club, keeps his tools accessible. His pocket knife – which he has used since he was 9 – is on the bench at the far left.

gently and with as much love as he can.

Monhollen remains, as he calls it, invisible to the public. He doesn't "do" art shows and he doesn't "do" galleries. When first starting out, he cranked out songbirds and sold them to state parks. But it felt like he was working on an assembly line, he says.

Then he read Nakashima's "The Soul of a Tree." The book inspired him so much that he traveled to Pennsylvania to walk the

author's property. Although he didn't get to meet Nakashima, the author's reverence for nature in his work inspired Monhollen when he returned to Kentucky to begin carving one-of-a-kind pieces for corporate executives that are inspired by nature.

For each of his birthdays Monhollen tries to do something new. On his 57th birthday, he climbed the tallest tree on his property and tied a ribbon at the top. On his 59th, he was looking into his reflecting pond and suddenly dove in. There he swam wearing his clothes and sandals – paddling like crazy – and so glad he jumped in. **PW**



In his "dirty" shop, Monhollen stores thousands of board feet of lumber along with a bench and a few tools. Here he is working a piece of wood with a chisel and 3-pound mallet.

BOOKS MONHOLLEN RECOMMENDS

In the working shop is a cherry and walnut bookshelf full of books that have inspired Monhollen. They include:

- "The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity" by Julia Cameron (J. P. Tarcher)
- "No Nature: New and Selected Poems" by Gary Snyder (Pantheon Books)
- "Payne Hollow Journal" by Harlan Hubbard (University Press of Kentucky)
- "The Soul of a Tree" by George Nakashima (Kodansha International)
- "A Timbered Choir" by Wendell Berry (Counterpoint)