

Wood Wonders

By Patti Post

Published in the spring 2006 edition of the *Sideroads Magazine*, *Georgetown Independent*

Joe Coutts can take an old loom and turn it into a raven caught in a gust of autumn leaves, or create a table base that is art-under-glass from hardwood planks.

Working quietly in his Tweedle Street studio in Glen Williams, Coutts has a reputation for being “the best in the world at what he does,” according to fellow artist Terry Black, painter and film maker, whose own major works sell for \$25,000, worldwide.

“No one else does what (Coutts) does. He’s an artist of international stature,” says Black. “He’s not a wood carver. He’s a sculptor. His study of flight and motion with birds is totally unique. He has tremendous insight and perception; very strong ideas and creativity.”

Carvers agree. Nine-time world champion wildfowl carver, Pat Godin, says, “the art work of Joe Coutts is refreshingly unique in a world where original thought is a rarity. Joe is among the few artists working in three-dimensions who have chosen to pursue a direction that is clearly identified with them and you really have to respect him for that.”

The recognized uniqueness of Coutts’ art is due to skillful rendering of what he observes in nature and his use of exotic hardwoods rather than paint for colour.

He works with several kinds of wood, depending on colour perspective: black walnut, West African babinga, hard maple, yellow pau ameralla, black African gaboon, cherry, and others.

Wood sculpting is part engineering, part science, and all art for Coutts, who draws inspiration from his walks with the family dog around the Glen.

“One day on 10 Sideroad, I saw five sandhill cranes flying towards me, and heard their unmistakably loud trumpet-like call. It’s very unusual for them to come to this area. But I think they’d gotten lost during a storm. They were circling, then eventually found their direction.”

It's Coutts' close study of natural drama that supplies creative material for his art. And those epiphanic moments, captured in his work, are what attract his clients.

Tom Caldwell, Chairman of Caldwell Securities Ltd., Toronto, and Member of the Order of Canada, has two Coutts sculptures in his office. He says it's the stories they tell, besides their beauty, that he values.

What sold Caldwell on The Sharp-shinned Hawk, was its portrayal of relentless persistence.

Coutts had witnessed this hawk – considered a low form of the species – fly smack into a tree trunk while pursuing a robin that had escaped through the branches. Even though the hawk was knocked out cold by the impact, he rallied and continued the hunt.

"I liked the story of that determination and focus," said Caldwell. "But I was also very impressed with the execution: highly detailed and beautiful pieces, individually crafted in natural wood, to bring out the colour of the bird. They are really quite remarkable works of art."

"The other piece we have – The Red-tailed Hawk and Crows - was purchased by my stepfather, Roy Pledger. Two crows are harassing a hawk, but the hawk has one of them by a tail feather, about to take a swipe at it, and you don't know whether or not he's going to get away. Will the hunted become the hunter?"

"The other crow is swooping away, and it's a nanosecond dynamic of aerial combat. My stepfather was in the RAF and has been in the aircraft business his whole life. So it really spoke to his interest."

It's a quality-of-life investment for Caldwell, rather than simply a financial or even aesthetic one.

"It's a good investment if I enjoy it, and if it speaks to me in a positive way. If I walk by that sharp-shinned hawk on a tough day, it's a reminder of who I am and what I do. It's uplifting. A form of therapy - of encouragement. It gives me positive reinforcement."

The beauty of birds in flight, and the striking metaphors Coutts creates, began during hikes taken along B.C.'s north shore more than 25 years ago.

Coutts discovered a love for wood carving in the early 60s, when he decided to make, rather than buy, duck decoys. Then he became intrigued with mixing varieties of wood and grain to show colour and detail.

During the mid-90's, he started creating furniture art as well.

Barbara Moore, a financial advisor with Wachovia in New York, says she and her husband, Jim, commissioned Coutts to create four glass-topped tables for their family room.

The artist proposed the concept of each table representing a season; with irises, water weeds and incoming birds for spring, tiger lilies for summer, birds leaving and fallen leaves for fall, and snow-frosted bullrushes and dark leaves for winter.

The Four Seasons Suite is designed to give the impression of walking along the bank of a stream. If the tables were circled, the carving would become the outside edge of a pond that is divided into quadrants.

And that is the impression the Moores have achieved by placing the tables around the circular couch in their family room, overlooking Greenwood Lake in New York.

Moore says Coutts' art work is museum quality.

"They are the first thing people see when they walk into our house, and they are awestruck. The tables are spectacular."

"His work is expensive," says Black, "but for what it is - it's still a bargain, and people who buy his art, appreciate that."

Coutts takes pride in being able to create what he visualizes – something many artists strive for, but don't always achieve

“I’m satisfied with the finished product,” he says.

But getting to that point is not easy. Notes and engineering drawings record the development of ideas, followed by construction of a maquette – a model of the intended work. Then the sculpting begins.

Throughout this process, alterations are made and solutions are found to problems that can only be discovered as the piece takes shape. Coutts is constantly working to ensure correct balance, rendering and expression.

Future plans include having some of his pieces cast in bronze – a process he is familiar with, having worked at Artcast in Georgetown. Casting will enable him to issue more than one piece at a time, as well as give the art work even greater longevity.

But the shimmer and sensual texture of wood will also continue to be in demand.

A current work in progress depicts a day lily, with sumptuous-looking yellow petals made of pau amarella, with darker shadings from orange babinga wood. The fine, black walnut frame below the flower belies the table’s base strength. Every detail is meticulously shaped, even the slender stamen of the flower. The 14-inch diameter of the lily is surrounded and supported by grass-like leaves also of black walnut.

“Every piece is planned according to a definite series of steps,” says Coutts. It takes approximately six weeks to complete a project - making a pattern, setting it up and building it.

In the corner of his shop, hangs the maquette of a large snowy owl in flight, commissioned by Imax Corporation founder, Robert Kerr, who has other bird sculptures by Coutts, and wanted something suited to hang in the exposed beams of his Muskoka home.

“I like the owl, because it’s graceful in flight, although it’s not something that’s seen very often.”

Kerr has a specially informed appreciation for Coutts’ medium of wood. Now in retirement, he is building a wooden steam launch.

“Joe’s creativity and ability with wood is quite wonderful.”

The only sculpture Coutts’ has painted is the black raven currently in his studio. He decided against using African ebony because of its protected resource status.

This piece has personal meaning for Coutts. It’s made of red oak from his late mother’s loom. Missing pieces made the equipment unusable, and he wanted to create something his family would value.

During long hours of studio work, Coutts sometimes needs a voice of encouragement, even if it’s his own.

On his worktable, is a small, black marker sign, ‘Keep It Going’

He smiles and says, “I can stare at something and think about how it should be for a very long time. It’s important to take time to think ahead, but not so much that it gets in the way of progressing with the piece.”

As delicate as the bird feathers and base flowers look, their strength is underpinned by steel rods that hold everything securely in balance. The top feathers of a wing, for example, are sculpted first, and under them, the rod is installed, bent to fit the wing shape. Joe then carves a bottom piece, and attaches it underneath the wing, covering the pin.

But beyond all the necessary steps to make the piece work, aesthetically and practically, at some point, says the artist, he “has to let intuition take over.”

“When you see one of his bird sculptures, you almost think that if you touched it, you would feel real feathers,” says local resident, Gail LaBranche.

Joe Coutts’ website is at <http://joecoutts-woodsculptor.com/>

He also displays his art at two annual shows:

Fine Furnishings Providence show in Rhode Island in the fall www.finefurnishingsshow.com;

Philadelphia Furniture and Furnishings Show in the spring

www.pffshow.com