

Artist Lets His Carvings Tell The Story

BY SUSAN USHER

Walter Hoff is a storyteller, but instead of words he expresses himself through wood.

He is a woodcarver, with an eye for detailed workmanship and a gift for capturing emotions that range from the joy and wonder at the Christ child's birth to the fear experienced when Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt with their newborn son.

Hoff started out painting in oils, but learned quickly that the hobby wasn't compatible with having small children about the house. He couldn't leave his work out from one day to the next.

He experimented with stained glass, metal, stone, clay. He enjoyed them all, but something was missing. When he tried wood, however, Hoff knew immediately it was his medium. He discovered a natural affinity for the wood and its expressiveness—its warmth of touch, workability, three-dimensional surface appearance and ageless qualities of beauty and grace. It spoke to him in ways he understood.

The three children are grown now with families of their own, but the carving tools have not been packed away.

Hoff's father was a very talented engraver who did highly detailed work. "I may have picked up a little from him, I don't know," modestly admits this talented, self-taught carver. "I like working with three dimensions."

While many of his pieces are in walnuts, he's also worked with maple, pecan, mahogany, oak, tupelo, basswood and even teak, though he finds its residue too oily. Hoff says he prefers hardwoods to softwoods, though both are suitable for carving.

"If I have an idea for a project then I look

for a suitable wood in which to express it," he said.

Other times, though, the wood is inspiration for the work. "I may see a piece of wood and leave it sitting there for a month and find there's something inside it."

"With a lot of wood," he said, "you don't know what it will be like until you start to work with it."

Here in the South Brunswick Islands good hardwoods are in limited supply, but Hoff has built up a collection of pieces over the years from which to choose. The woods include purchases and gifts from friends and fellow carvers.

Hoff and his wife, Eathel (Edie to her friends), have owned property in the South Brunswick Islands for 15 years. They built here eight years ago when Hoff retired after a 41-year career with IBM, where he had been a program manager, securing long-term sources of materials for new products.

That career was interrupted during World War II by a three-year stint as an aviator and trainer in the Army Air Corps. Hoff never saw overseas duty, but the Long Island, N.Y., native did meet his wife, at an air base in Georgia. He was temporarily grounded for six months while re-

covering from a collapsed lung; she was a civilian supply manager.

Hoff's work in various mediums can be found throughout the home they share, from the smiling gatekeeper overlooking the entranceway to the stained glass windows.

But the pieces that beg to be touched are those he's created in wood, from the simple heron in tupelo on oak legs and a walnut base that stands by the fireplace to the combination chess/storage table with its inlaid top.



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED
THIS ANGEL is carved in relief, ideal for a wall hanging.



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER
CHISEL IN HAND, woodcarver Walter Hoff studies a wax model of his work in progress, Adam and Eve entwined with the Serpent, before cutting into the rough wood block.

None of the work is for sale; the prices would be prohibitive given the time invested in each piece. Instead, he carves for the pleasure of creating, in almost a celebration of his faith, turning out only one or two pieces a year.

His masterwork is a collection of intricately carved pieces in a variety of woods. Hoff isn't certain what will become of the individual pieces in the future, but he said, "They are more interesting as a collection."

"Most have a story to tell," he says. Those stories are inspired by the Bible, familiar to readers of all ages: Samson tearing down the temple, destroying his enemies as well as himself; Jacob wrestling with an angel; the three holy children—Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, cast into the furnace by Nebuchadnezzar and delivered by the angel Daniel; Jesus talking to Zaccheus, the publican, who sits among the branches of a finely detailed tree.

The two women at the well are literally carved in the round of a column taken from a choir loft in a Utica, N.Y., church that was being torn down.

In one of Hoff's favorite pieces, a young David plays his lyre for King Saul.

He likes the challenge of working in wood, but is very aware of its limitations. "That's one reason why I work so slowly, I suppose," he said. "Once a cut is made you can't take it back."



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED
HIS EARLY "FLIGHT" portrays Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus fleeing from Egypt. Hoff now prefers a more natural finish instead of varnish.

His touch is sure, but careful. "I take a little bit of it off, and then another little bit of it off," he says.

Hoff uses tools that have changed little since Biblical times—chisels, axes, knives, saws and assorted smoothing instruments.

He works in several areas of his home—a small studio area where he develops preliminary sketches and large gridded patterns for each piece, and a workshop off the garage

equipped with hand and power tools and a large workbench.

He strives to achieve accuracy of detail, down, for example, to the way the sheep in *Behold* cross their legs.

The National Geographic Society obligingly sent photographs of sheep, but all their legs were hidden in tall grasses. Hoff said he finally went out and observed sheep in a meadow, as closely as the shy, nervous creatures would allow. "You do learn a lot by doing this," he said of his avocation.

When working in the round, the next step is to create a three-dimensional model in wax or clay from the drawings. In the workshop, the basic outlines of the piece are transferred to the carving block, disappearing as excess wood is cut away and the form gradually emerges. Strings placed around model and block at measured intervals help keep the work in proper proportion.

The results are spectacular, though sometimes Hoff wonders if he includes too much detail, if cleaner lines wouldn't be better.

Maybe for some pieces, but never for the faces.

Fear, suffering, joy, peace—all are evident in the attention he pays in shaping the expressions of his subjects.

"I try hard to achieve facial expression," says Hoff humbly. "You know what you want but you usually don't achieve it, at least in my case."



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED
SHEPHERDS hear the good news of Jesus' birth in "Behold".



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