

Local Sculptor's Talent Brings Unseen Sea Life To The Surface

BY LYNN CARLSON

Duane Schilz is a different kind of sculptor. He brings to those who view his work a part of the world most people are aware of, but almost none have seen.

Growing up among seashells and shell enthusiasts, he taught himself to sculpt models of the thousands of species which inhabit the sea—not the shells, but the animals which inhabit them.

Painstakingly interpreted from drawings in textbooks and other published sources, Schilz's sculptures range from the tiny nudibranchs and sea slugs to large octopi and squid. They are colorful and precise, reflecting the luminescence which the sea creatures exhibit in the deep, but which they lose out of their natural habitat.

It all comes pretty naturally for the Shallotte resident. His grandmother, Zyda Kibler, is a longtime collector, dealer and true expert in shells, from the exotic to the rare to the simply beautiful. Schilz grew up "hanging around" the shell museum his grandmother operated in Virginia Beach.

"I was there several hours a day. I had clay, and I was always making dinosaurs and other animals. It was a way to kill time. My interests changed, but I kept up with it over the years."

It's a unique talent—an art, a craft, and a science—which few have pursued, especially at his young age. His work has been bought for museums in Australia, Japan, Germany and Belgium as well as right here at home, in the Museum of Coastal Carolina at Ocean Isle Beach.

"There's a lot to be learned from small things about the way all nature works."

—Duane Schilz

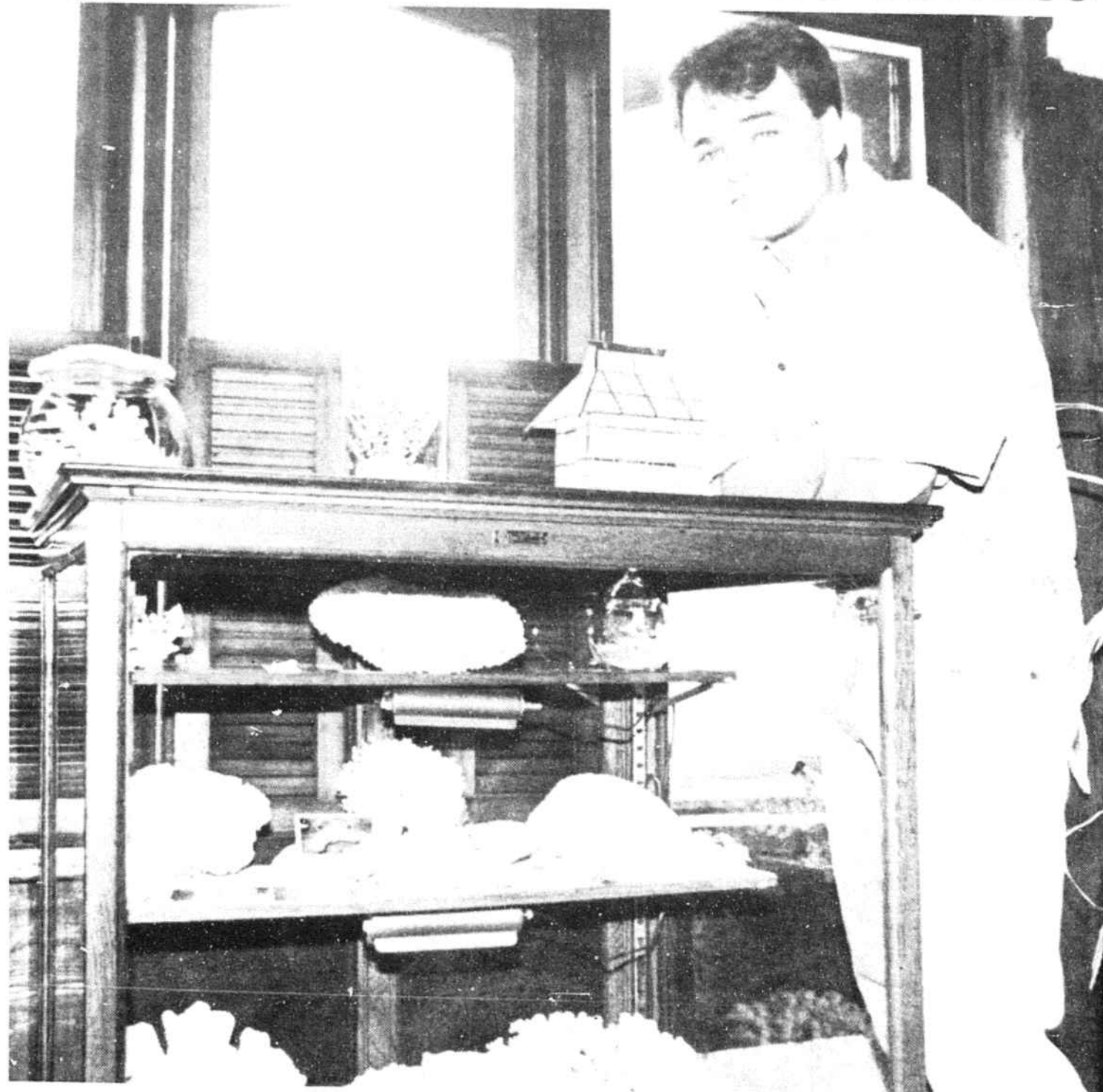
His sculptures also appear in Atlanta's exciting new Fernbank Museum of Natural History, with its "Walk Through Time in Georgia" exhibit and 14 galleries interpreting the state's landscape and animal life, including its coastal shoreline.

Schilz's sculpture of a scotch bonnet—the state shell of North Carolina—was purchased as a special gift to Emperor Hirohito of Japan shortly before the ruler's death. "As far as I know, it got to him," Schilz says.

"Marine life just can't be preserved," he explains, so exacting reproductions like his are the only means of bringing the shapes and brilliant colors of the species to life for humans.

"Most shells are nocturnal," he adds. "They're not real active unless they're feeding. I try to illustrate what the animal looks like at its best."

To do this, he has used all types of media, including "every type of clay known," to plastic, to paper mache to the epoxy-filled mold he used for a squid he sculpted for the



DUANE SCHILZ poses over a case of shells, including some of his sculptures, in his grandmother's Shallotte home. STAFF PHOTO BY LYNN CARLSON

Fernbank Museum.

The modest Schilz has a one-woman cheering section in his grandmother. Despite major surgery and a long recuperative period, Kibler has endless font of enthusiasm for her grandson's talent.

Case upon case, box upon box and drawer upon drawer in Kibler's sprawling Shallotte home hold not only hundreds of thousands of shells, but her grandson's work from his youth to the present.

She'd like to see him promote his talent a little more vigorously. Schilz, who is unfailingly polite and unassuming, says he "doesn't have the ego it takes" to thrive commercially in some art circles.

It is only in recent years that he has begun to talk to other artists outside his field about painting techniques and how different effects can be achieved.

He has no formal art training and says he can't paint or draw, though he does do sketches he "wouldn't show anybody."

But he knows more about the creatures he sculpts than many biologists would, thanks to his lifelong exposure to people who love and deeply respect all nature, but especially the undersea world.

"I'm thankful I grew up with this," he says, adding that he hasn't consistently pursued his craft in the past, but plans to as he grows older.

"When I was younger, this was keeping me inside, and I wanted to get out and see my friends and be part of the world again—to take up a 9-to-5 job."

With maturity, though, comes the new realization that a unique talent like his is too good an opportunity to waste. "My work has been all over the world, but I haven't," he says. Keeping the sculptures going is the most logical way to remedy that.

"I'm thankful I grew up with this—in the museum, being underfoot there. I learned to appreciate nature. There's a lot to be learned from small things about the way all nature works."

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