

Wednesday, April 9, 2008

Woodwork

Belen artist isn't just talented in it, she wrote the book on woodburning

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Belen A bright pink cast covers artist Nedra Denison's right arm, and she laughs as she tells how her broken wrist is keeping her from creating her artwork and driving her crazy.

"Just a couple more weeks," she says of having to wear the cast.

As a young child, Nedra Denison used to express herself through a paintbrush, but today it's pyrography that has captured her heart — and it only took 20 minutes to do so.

It was in 1999 while at a wood carving rally in Texas with her husband, Alan, that Denison became intrigued with the smell of woodburning being taught in the next room. She said after three days of smelling it, she asked the instructor teaching the class if he could take one extra day to give her a lesson.

"I did a project on my own, and I was hooked," Denison said smiling. "For the next year, I figured out what I wanted to do and I perfected it."

Denison remembers loving old sepia photos as a child, and once she began fine-tuning her skills at woodburning, she set out to create the illusion of those types of photos through her work.

"I look back at my work and what I can do now, and there is such a vast difference," Denison said. "The other work was technically good, but it didn't have the feeling."

Denison attributes the work she does now to a dark period in her life where she had no interest in creating any kind of art at all, and it was her struggles that brought her to this level of work she creates today.

She said most good artist have some sort of pain or internal demons that come out on their canvas, and she believes it was her life experiences that taught her to grow and be stronger.

"I gave it up for eight years, but when I came back, I came back with a vengeance," Denison said. "My early work looked flat before. There was no oomph, no life to it. Now it looks like it's coming off the wood. I can now put the breath of life into my portraits."



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With a piece of wood, a burner and points, Denison creates stunning, award-winning portraits of people and animals that look as if they could jump off the wood. Through shading and undercutting, using the point of a burner, she puts the curves and folds in the flowers she burns, giving them the curves that they have in reality.

"I create layers from the bottom to the top," Denison said. "I do something called undercutting, where I use the tip and go under (the wood) to create a shaded area."

Her first portrait, done in 2002, was of John Wayne, and Denison creatively used shading to create a worn look on his leather vest. She said that, unlike painting, woodburning is less forgiving and while you can make some subtle changes, you have to use the flaws in the wood with your design.

"You have to match the wood with your design," Denison pointed out. "Sometimes I find a piece of wood and I don't know what I will do with it at the time, but then it just comes to you."

She said every piece of wood is so different - with textures and the grains and flaws — and when she looks at a piece of wood now, she thinks of what the substance will bring to life.

Denison uses different types of wood — depending on what she is creating. She said maple burls, a lighter colored wood, has a rustic look to it, which is great for wildlife burning. She also uses basswood, saying it is an easier wood to burn on, and she uses it when teaching students the craft.

"The wood is my canvas," Denison said.

Denison not only creates beautiful works of art, she also teaches the craft to those wanting to learn to do something creative. She said it's not an expensive hobby to get into, and what's nice is you don't need a lot of supplies. "It's very easy to take with you wherever you go."

She also has three books she authored - two instruction books and one book of patterns. She is currently working on a fourth step-by-step book that will also include patterns.

"Pyography 101 covers the A to Z in woodburning," Denison said. "I also teach safety (when woodburning), which in my first priority."

While there are numerous pens that people can buy to create different illusions when woodburning, Denison said she discourages people from spending a lot of money on numerous supplies.

"Ninety percent of the work I do is with one pen," she said of all the pieces she's created. "You can get a really decent woodburner and three pens for about \$120."

Through her years of woodburning, Denison has also designed a pen of her own that is more comfortable to use and is versatile enough to create all kinds of

effects on the wood.

While she puts hours and hours into her pieces, the end result is always, "Wow, I did this," she said with amazement. "I'm constantly challenging myself to do better, and I never regress in what I do."

Although Denison does show and sell some of her work, she said she "burns" for herself, and for her it's not about the money.

"I do it purely for the love of it," Denison said. "I have to love what I'm doing or it doesn't come out good. Art is not in the hand, it's in your head."

Denison will be teaching a one-day woodburning class at the Belen Art League from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday, May 31. Class size is limited and interested persons will be taken on a first-come-first-served basis. The cost of the class is \$55, which includes all supplies.

For more information or to view other works by Denison, visit www.NedraDenison.com or email her at nedradenison.com or call 859-4005.