

Lee Nelson and Wood Carvings

Presenter: Merlin Mayer

October 28, 2013

Lee Halverson introduced Merlin Mayer and Bob Thompson for the program of the month which featured woodcarving, and how Lee Nelson influenced Merlin.

Merlin Mayer

- About 26 years ago, Merlin was looking into taxidermy as a hobby after he retired. Merlin got to know Lee Nelson indirectly through Lee's work with TDS. It was Lee who suggested that Merlin try woodcarving. After Lee passed away, Merlin received his unfinished work. Some of Lee's carvings that Merlin finished were a band carving, a wood duck and a fish wall hanging. Merlin may donate some of Lee's work to the IHS sometime down the road.
- Merlin went to a vocational school in Waupaca for his woodcarving training. His first one was a bird carving, which now looks rather primitive compared to his later works. The most difficult part was getting the proportions correct, since his first carving was too big, too square, etc. He still uses it as a guide for his current work.
- Merlin started with patterns before moving onto original work. His originals started by working with burls, which are tree knots. He showed a blue bird carving on a burl bowl.
- Merlin had several carvings on display during his talk. The unpainted ones will be completed this winter.
- Merlin discussed the different types of carvings.
 - Chip carving is good for surface detail. He showed a bible made out of basswood.
 - Realistic carving examples include birds and ducks. Want them to look "life like".
 - Stylized carving is more free form.
- Some of Merlin's carvings will be on display at a show on April 27th next year at Chrystal Falls supper club in New London.
- Merlin went on to discuss some woodcarving tips.
 - It's important to work from detailed pictures.
 - Different tools are used for different types of wood. Determining wood properties are hardness, grain, etc.
 - The best finishes are made with stains and waxes. Varnishes are not as good.

- Oil paints are good to work with due to their ease of blending.
 - Sometimes problems occur with cracking due to pressure buildup in the wood. Sometimes cutting the heart out of the wood helps. Repairs can be made with putty.
 - Pine wood from the lola area has a hard grain. It difficult to get fine detail with this type of wood.
- Nearly all of Merlin's samples on display were blue ribbon winners. He doesn't consider himself to be a master carver compared to others around the world. In this country it takes three blue ribbons to move up a class, and it takes 4 class levels to get to be a master. It is much more difficult to get to this level in Europe.

Bob Thomson

- Bob moved up to the area after retirement and took up the hobby of carving with both Merlin and Lee. They both were great teachers.
- He discussed acanthus carving, which is similar to rosemaling.
- A bread board was his first project.
- He passed around a couple books on Norwegian folk art, and then showed a pattern for a "mangle board". A man would carve it for his prospective bride. It is used in conjunction with a roller to remove water out of linens as well as to smooth them. The pattern showed an example of chip carving.

Lee Halverson

- Lee started in October with both Merlin and Bob. They call their group the "chippers and sippers"; since Bob's homemade wine is often part of their sessions.
- Lee showed a butternut wood sample as an example of carving and burning. This style works well for him.
- Cottonwood bark is a soft type of wood, and it's easy to work with. Lee showed a bobble-head dog that he made for a granddaughter.
- Several books and magazines were shown as examples of where to find patterns.
- As for tools, Lee mentioned that many are specialized depending of what type of carving is to be done. Merlin added that a pencil is one of the most important tools. A caliper is the next most important tool, since it is necessary in order to get proportions correct.

A number of questions were asked by the audience.

- Joel Edler asked if Merlin could work from a photo of Vidar to make a scale replica. Merlin said he was willing to try, and then he used the statue of the Indian to point out key reference points for carving a replica.
- Joanna Rheingans suggested that the carvers demonstrate at next year's Taste of Norway, which everyone thought was a good idea.
- Joel asked if the removal of the burl hurts a tree. Merlin replied that it usually doesn't. He went on to say that burls have different grains, and that it's fun to see what's in each burl.

