

Stone Revival showcases the art of sculpture 10/11/12



Story and photos by Greg Crawford posted Oct 10, 2012

Stone Revival, Julian Isaacson's gallery and studio, hosted an open house on October 6 and 7. Julian and his wife Lee Ann Isaacson were gracious hosts, and they welcomed around 30-40 people over the course of the weekend. Fresh cider, donuts, and assorted goodies were served to the joyful visitors.

Isaacson is a gifted sculptor who works in marble and wood. He also produces tiles molded from his original sculptures. His business card reads: "Interior & Exterior Hand-carved Imperial Tiles, Fine Art, & Architectural Enhancements," which covers it quite succinctly.

Isaacson is a self-taught sculptor born into a family of artists and musicians, so creativity is deeply imbedded in his genes. As a youngster, M. Julian Isaacson originally gravitated toward painting, but it soon became apparent that he was colorblind. Makes painting rather problematic. Thus it was that he found his creative outlet through sculpture.

Sculpture is not an undertaking for those seeking instant gratification. Freeing an image from the surrounding stone takes time and patience. Lots of time and patience, and the techniques for doing so have not changed all that much for thousands of years. Just like the long-forgotten sculptors of Mesopotamia, the masters of the human form from the Greek Hellenistic period, and Michelangelo, Julian Isaacson uses mallets, chisels, and rasps to create his masterpieces.

Interestingly, he says that wood, in some ways, is the more challenging medium. Different woods respond to the sculptor's chisel in different ways. A sculptor must modify his techniques to accommodate the specific characteristics of the wood beneath his hand. Many different woods are represented in the relief sculptures on the walls of his gallery.

But Mr. Isaacson really loves to work with marble, which is part of the reason that he came back to Vermont. He and his lovely wife, Lee Ann, lived on the 'Left Coast' for many years, both in California and in the Pacific Northwest. Eventually, he decided that, instead of bringing the mountain to Julian one or two rocks at a time, it made more sense to bring Julian to the mountains from whence came the source of his livelihood. A friend told him of the late Bill Gilderdale's old gun shop on Route 100 in Stockbridge, a deal was struck, and Julian set up shop.

Isaacson has a particular affinity for bas-relief sculpture, and many of his panels tell a story, or at least suggest that there is a story behind the image. He is also a proponent of what he terms "functional art." The counter in his gallery consists of three marble panels, the longest of which is a little over five feet long, by two feet in height. The triptych depicts an Indian running through the woods among deer. The top is a single polished slab of the aforementioned Rochester Verde Antique marble, and the entire assembly is supported by a custom-made steel frame that allows the piece to be disassembled, should Lee Ann wish to rearrange the furniture. The thing must weigh a ton, literally, so it'll probably stay right where it is for the foreseeable future.

Julian Isaacson is dedicated to making his art accessible to all. If potential customers have desires that exceed the limits of their pocketbooks, he will work with them to find a balance agreeable to all. He also installed a window in the gallery through which patrons can see his workspace. Children who visit are fascinated by the fact that hammering on a rock can produce a work of art.

Look, Mom! An eagle!

The clay tiles that Isaacson casts from molds of his stone carvings are another way to make his art more available and affordable. These tiles are also another form of functional art, as evidenced by the elegant fireplace surround displayed behind his magnificent counter.

The uninitiated may wonder, where does one begin when sculpting an image? Surprisingly, it doesn't necessarily begin with a block of marble, though a piece of marble may sometimes scream, "Carve me into a poodle!" More frequently, though, that first spark of inspiration begins its evolution as a sketch, which is refined to make the most of the particular stone from which it will eventually emerge.

Once the basic outline of the subject is transferred to the stone, the sculptor will begin by removing, or "pitching," unwanted areas, or, anything that is not poodle, with a pitching tool, which is a heavy chisel that can have a pointed or a broad, blunt end, depending on how much material is to be removed with any given blow of the mallet.

Once the general shape of the subject has been roughed out, smaller chisels are used to refine the details. These may be toothed, or claw, chisels with multiple cutting edges. As details are

formed, rasps and rifflers further refine subtle shapes like the folds of fabric, or curls in the locks of hair.

Finally, the piece is finished by polishing. Progressively finer abrasives, starting with a coarse sandpaper, and ending with an extra fine emery cloth, will give the sculpture a beautiful sheen that brings out the color of the marble, and reveals subtle patterns in the grain. Often, both rough and smooth surfaces are combined to convey the sense of the varying textures of a single subject. Now that's one fine lookin' poodle!

You don't need to wait for the next open house to visit Stone Revival. Visitors are encouraged to drop by to see Julian's work anytime during business hours. The studio and gallery are located at 1354 Route 100 in Stockbridge, just a short drive north of Killington. It is a barn red building on the right, if you're heading north, next to a 300 year-old maple tree on the edge of a hay field. For more information, or to make a special appointment, call 746-8110. You can also visit Stone Revival's website www.stonerevival.com.

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