

A Profile of John Rettenmeier: From Curious Boy to Successful Artist

By Julia Appicelli

The air inside the large red barn smells of fresh wood and acrylic paint. It's musty like an old garage, finished with a can of wood stain, and overlain with sawdust. The barn is stuffed full of wood carving equipment, pinewood, and various antique furniture. To the right of the door is a large saw, an intimidating contraption with a tall, thin blade protruding from the center of the tabletop. A pile of fresh Eastern White pinewood lies next to it. A large sander stands on the other side of the saw. Small wood birds peak out from behind the eclectic furnishings, watching me as I enter their man-made habitat. Ten feet into the barn is the heart of the carving station. An old, wooden Black and Decker workbench overflows with wood carving chips. Tan pieces of pinewood, curled in on themselves, scatter the surface in all directions, lying over the platform, the carving tools, the wood, and the wide floor planks. The clutter shows more than the finished carved trout and swans strewn throughout the barn, the movement from a regular piece of wood, to an animated decoration.

The barn is the workshop of Ashford's resident woodcarver John Rettenmeier. He specializes in nature carvings. His carvings have been featured in Connecticut Magazine's Holiday Ultimate Gift List. Woodcarving is John's second job, the one he does on the side of his full-time job as an IT Manager for his own small business. He's a husband and a father of two children that grew up in the Ashford area.

"It's such a mess, I'm sorry." John brushes some of the chips from the workbench. He picks up one of the pieces of wood that is half-buried under the pile of chips and places it on the bench. He selects a gauge from the carving tools lined up on the bench, a metal instrument that looks like a knife, except the sharp point comes from a flat edge at the top of the tool. He chooses the tool with the biggest edge and secures the piece of wood into a clamp on the platform. He pushes the gauge into the wood, using one hand to hold the wood and the other to direct the tool, as new chips curl to the floor. His gaze is focused on the wood. As the pile of chips becomes bigger, the original piece of cut wood forms into the shape of a small owl, its body first appearing, followed by its pointy beak and beady eyes. John moves the tools effortlessly, making the process appear to be as simple as a swift push of the gauge. He stops

after a minute or so, and turns to me, “It’s easy to do, you try.” However, the power that he has over the wood eludes me and I can barely get the tool to go through it. He tries to correct me, “Keep this hand a little looser and use that one to push the tool through,” but when I keep struggling he reverts to kind lies, “The bench might be too tall for you, don’t worry, you get the idea of it all.” My respect for his skill rises.

The craft of woodcarving is not a hobby that one just picks up out of nowhere, with all of the tools and supplies involved. Because of this, John’s story is surprising, “I just started when I was at a craft show with my mother-in-law in the early 1980s and she said, ‘I like that bird,’ and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll make you one.’ I had never carved a day in my life, I just picked it up and started carving and away it went.” This story seems too simple and too circumstantial. Can life be as random as that? Or had John’s artistic yearning been ingrained in him long before that, and his carving is just a natural culmination of it all?

John pursued his calling, attending woodcarving classes where he amassed both skill and a collection of tools. He started selling wholesale, but he evolved over the years, now selling retail on Etsy and Ebay and attending craft shows at least twice a month. He’s a member of the Artists’ Open Studios of Northeast CT, converting the second floor of his barn into a studio that displays his finished pieces, without the dusty clutter of the downstairs work area. He has grown into a successful and respected artist in his craft.

At first, John’s two occupations seem to be directly opposite, one involving the virtual world of computers, while the other is based firmly in the tactile world, “It’s different, but in a way they are related. I had a friend who’s a headhunter and he told me that he looked for artists and musicians for IT positions because that side of the brain is the same side as the IT brain. When you’re doing this stuff, it’s multi dimensional, out side of the box, same as programming.” His experience in the technological side of business is also useful in his creative endeavors, as is seen through the marketing of his carvings, “I do everything. I do my own website. I do all of the photography, I do all of my paper literature.” This approach seems necessary in the modern world that grows more and more electronic each day, giving John an advantage in the artistic industry where most people aren’t as technologically savvy. Even with all of these commitments, he still makes time for his woodcarving, often working twelve to fourteen hour days. He states, “The biggest thing about woodcarving is that it gives you a sense of accomplishment from start

to finish.” Even with the large amount of time carving consumes, he isn’t able to disregard his passion for it.

All of his carvings are of natural forms, many of the birds looking very similar to the live ones I saw outside on my walk to his workshop. There are blue jays, cardinals, robins, and woodpeckers littering the shelves. John’s love for the shore and fishing is seen through the white swan perched on a table and the various different fish lying about. His work reflects what he sees as beautiful, the country landscape that he lives in. “In Ashford, when you walk around with the dog or when you’re fishing at 5 o’ clock in the morning or late at night, you see so much stuff. Nature’s different when there’s nobody around. You’re just sitting there, especially on the water, you get to see a lot of cool things that nature does.” One can see in his workshop how he succeeded in capturing that still beauty that he glimpsed in nature in his work. However, he is still the practical businessman, and his other pieces reflect this. John has several egrets lined up together, a gold painted eagle mounted on a plaque, a nautical sign for one’s beach house, and even a blue and purple painted mermaid lounging on a table. John’s dual nature is revealed again as the workspace is both an extension of his countryside and an acknowledgement of homeowners looking to furnish a second home.

Even with all of John’s technological knowledge and marketing techniques, one can’t overlook the fact that woodcarving is an antiquated practice. The entire atmosphere of his workplace hums with the comforting presence of the past, from the musty smell of wood to the antique birds. But this is part of its natural charm, of the craft’s ability to connect to the beauty that surrounds it in the country atmosphere; it is because it returns to the original form of one’s surroundings, away from computer screens and fluorescent lights. John is just as interested in this natural work as he is in getting others involved in it. He has taught on the craft at Quinebaug Valley Community College, and encourages other carvers, even as interest in the art form has slipped away.

“I had a little boy last year at a show in Niantic, he had to be ten years old. He kept coming back and watching me carve. He brought his mom back, and his mom was talking to me and he’s still eyeing me. I said, ‘Do you want to carve?’ and his mom’s like, ‘Try it, try it.’ So I had a box, got him up, I drew a design and had him carve into the wood. I’ll be curious if he

comes back to this year's show saying that he did it." He gestures as he speaks, smiling at the thought of the inquisitive boy.

It's the same story again, another boy picks up a piece of wood at a random craft fair and begins a hobby that may stay with him for the rest of his life. John is no longer the curious, young boy carving for the first time, now he's the one with the ability to pass his craft down to the next generation. Maybe he's the enactor of this other boy's fate, or maybe the wood and the past would have drawn in the boy, just like it did John, no matter what.