

Carver finds new challenges by shifting from signs to skulls

Burls used for human and animal sculptures

By Roger Schroeder

After carving some 5,000 signs for a living, Greg Krockta needed a new challenge. What he came up with certainly isn't boring.

He has spent the last two years creating a variety of burl skulls to represent human evolutionary forms and animals that range from lions to buffalo.

"People mistake these for real skulls," Krockta said, "and maybe there's some unintentional skulduggery in that. But what I'm doing is not really skulls but sculpture."

Why did he choose burl to create these sculptures? He said that it offers an ideal combination of material and subject matter.

"Burl is hard, it has defects and flaws just as an old skull would have. It has variations in color and texture, which are the properties of an old skull that's been buried for a time. The wild colors and grain patterns in burls make them the closest material to what an old skull is really like."

The 35-year-old East Northport, N.Y., woodcarver began carving 30 years ago in his father's basement. There he discovered that a hammer and screwdriver could shape wood. His first project was a totem pole, which he still has.

As a Boy Scout, he learned to whittle. By the time he was in high school, Krockta was selling carvings that went for \$50 to \$75. These gift items were typically trays, wedding plates, coasters, and animal carvings.

When he graduated high school, he enrolled at Syracuse University for a degree in wood products engineering. Engineering was a family way of life, he said, since both his father and a sister were engineers.

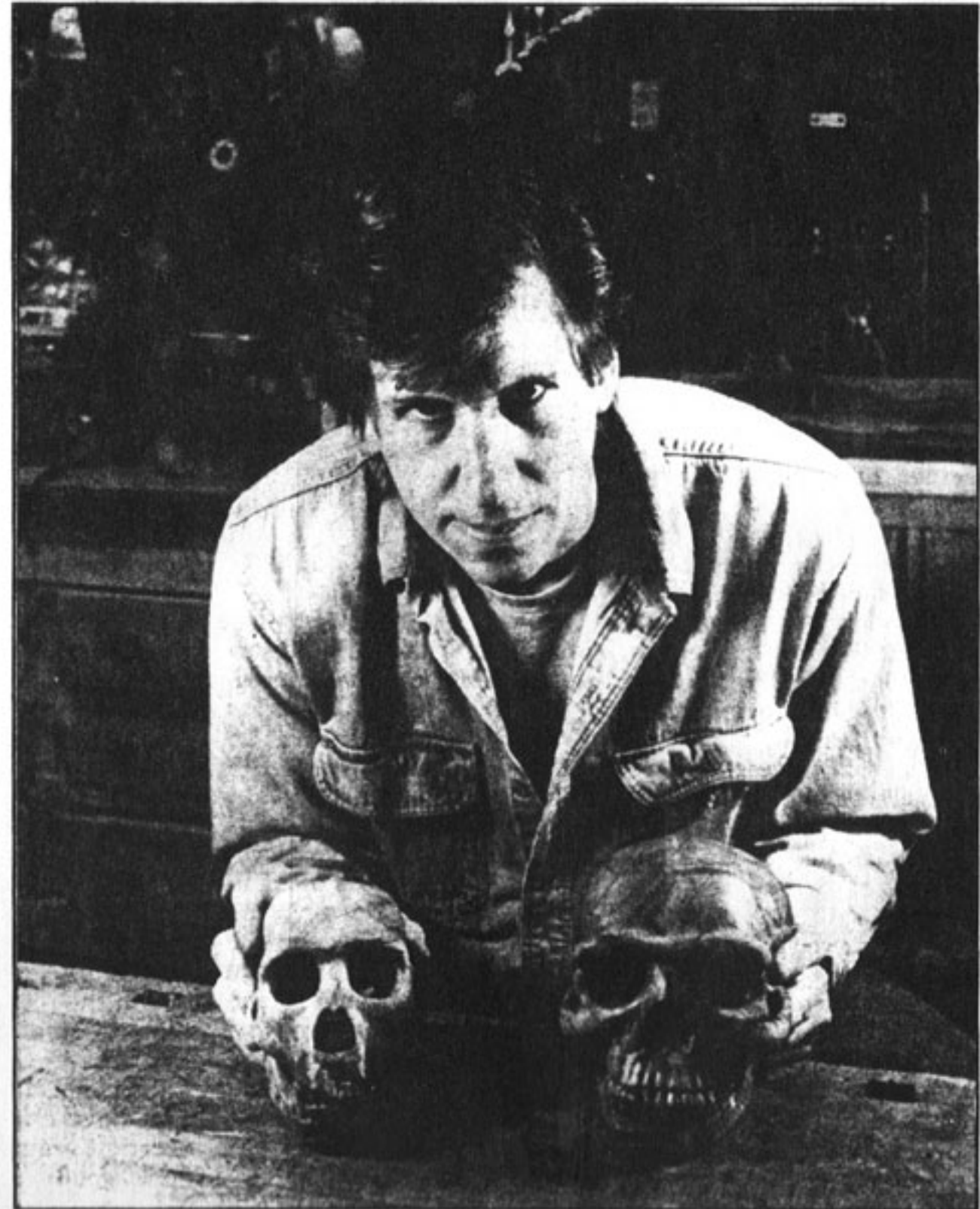
"It was a combination of the engineering mentality and a love of wood that brought me to Syracuse," he said, adding that the university is ranked as a leading school in the country for wood and forestry education.

But after two years, he started to lose interest in the academic life. He found himself coming home on weekends and playing the harmonica in a local band.

"I just didn't want to be a white-collar worker. Almost everybody who comes out of Syracuse goes to a company like Georgia Pacific to design wood products or to a state park as a ranger. That was not going to work for me," he said.

After dropping out of school, Krockta got a job working in a furniture factory in Brooklyn, N.Y. He would get up at 5 a.m. to be at the factory by seven. There he did the clean-up carving on furniture parts that had come off a du-

Continued on next page



ROGER SCHROEDER PHOTO

New York carver Greg Krockta displays two of his skulls, a chimpanzee carved from a maple burl, left, and Peking man carved from an oak burl.

Skulls

From previous page

plicating machine.

In 1980, Krockta left the furniture factory to work at a local sign shop. Working 50-60 hours a week, he quickly learned to carve incised lettering with a knife and apply gold leaf. After spending a year with the sign shop, and making only \$5 an hour, he decided he would start his own sign business.

His own enterprise began in the lower level of his parents' brick ranch house, a house that he now owns and still works in. Borrowing neither tools nor money, he said he built up the business with his own resources.

For the past 11 years, Krockta has carved and gilded a rich variety of signs that range from unadorned house number signs to 20'-long commercial ones with elaborate appliques of carved figures.

At about the time that his business was grossing \$100,000 a year, and he was working as many as 100 hours a week, Krockta started losing interest in sign carving.

"I could have developed a large commercial shop and made twice as much money, but I'm not motivated only by money," he said. "I'm more motivated by the everyday enjoyment of what I'm doing."

The shift of interest from signs to skulls came with the help of Armand LaMontagne, a well-known Rhode Island wood sculptor who Krockta met in 1987.

Before they met, LaMontagne had been collecting burls to make into bowls and



ROGER SCHROEDER PHOTOS

Krockta details the teeth of the buffalo skull with an air-powered rotary rasp.

carving mallets. When he saw the skulls Krockta had carved, he offered eight burls to Krockta, telling him that he had to do more burl skulls.

Krockta soon learned that skulls were not so easily located, so his preliminary research began at the local library where he started looking through books on the evolution of man. He made trips to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and then to the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., to study the anatomy of human and animal skulls.

After making a call to a company in California that sells skull reproductions, he learned about a business that rents and sells real skulls almost in his backyard.

Maxilla & Mandibles, Ltd. is a firm one block from the Museum of Natural History that is owned and operated by three anthropologists. It caters to sculptors, filmmakers, students and artists, or anyone else interested in skulls. The owners say it's the

only one of its kind in the world.

Krockta said there is only so much he can get out of a book. "With the real skull, I don't have to invent anatomy," he said. After renting a skull, he shoots several rolls of film, both black and white and color. In addition, he takes measurements and explores the shape with his hands.

With the references in hand, the next step is to find a suitable burl.

Abnormal, rounded growths that have unpredictable and aberrant grain and sometimes bud formations, burls possess the very character that Krockta is looking for.

"In typical woodworking, you want the perfect piece of wood with the perfect grain and without flaws. With what I'm doing, I'm encouraged by imperfections. Even wormholes and cracks make me excited because of how they add character to the sculpture."

What has discouraged Krockta is buying burls. Finding them too small or disap-



Krockta attaches a carved horn to his buffalo skull, made from an oak burl.

pointing, he has been more successful doing his own burl cutting. Whether driving to a sign installation or off Long Island on vacation, he is always on the lookout for what he calls "the jewels of the forest."

He has learned that cherry burls are the easiest to come by, that oak burls are usually the hardest, and maple burls have the most appealing grain.

He is not adverse to a variety of colors because skulls, unless they are bleached by sun or man, do not remain white. He

explains that a bone picks up the colors of its surroundings, especially if it has been buried.

The first step in shaping a burl is to square it up.

This begins with a 20" gas chain saw and an electric chain saw, though the latter tends to bounce off a burl. Then, if the skull size is small enough, he will use his 6" jointer to smooth off the sides. Once squared, he brings the block to the band saw and cuts out a top and side profile.

Since real skulls are hollow,

Continued on Page 6

Skulls

From Page 4

Krockta removes wood from the inside of his sculptures. This not only allows the wood to dry and reduce severe checking, but it also lightens the skull. Most of the hollowing is accomplished with a spade bit in a heavy-duty drill. "Spadebits remove wood nicely, even inside of burls," he said. The remaining wood is then ground out with a rotary rasp.

He uses compressed air for much of the work. "You just don't feel the effects of grain with air, and burl has the nastiest grain in the world," Krockta said with a laugh.

With the high speed of 35,000 rpm, air-powered bits can easily handle fragile areas such as teeth, which might be broken off by a less powerful tool that is forced into the wood.

However, Krockta does use a flexible shaft grinder for sanding. A sanding attachment powered by air will cause the sandpaper to tear apart or rip the grit off it because there is too much power. He uses up to 220-grit sandpaper for the skulls. For the horns he adds to animal

skulls, he increases that to 320 grit.

When he first started making horns, he used stained maple because he was able to find a large kiln-dried piece that measured 8" x 8". For more recent skulls he is using walnut, which require minimal staining.

Burl, he said, is not stable enough to use for horns because of hidden defects, especially for making large horns. Future pieces will incorporate woods such as ebony or real bone.

Having experimented with a number of finishes that included varnish, oils and wax, Krockta finds the best is a brushing lacquer. This, he said, gives a fast-drying, smooth, hard and durable finish.

A spray finish, he points out, cannot get into the recesses of the skulls. After applying two or three coats, he reduces the shine with steel wool.

Most of his burl skulls are elevated on steel or glass rods that are based in polished marble blocks. He loves the combination of wood and stone.

"Burl almost looks like stone since it is so heavy and dense. So I need a base that complements the skull without com-

peting with it. But at the same time I need something substantial to hold up this heavy object," he said.

Krockta's sculptures have become popular with private art collectors, some of whom have hunted big game. The price range for a skull is \$2,000 to \$5,000.

Presently he is lining up some art gallery exhibits. Eventually he would like to see a set of his sculptures in a museum such as the American Museum of Natural History.

"My goal is not to fool anyone but to make something that looks like a skull yet is really a sculpture." Having studied museum skulls, he has noticed that skulls of the same species differ in subtle ways.

This has opened up his sculpturing so that he does not get bogged down with copying detail. He now feels he can be more interpretive with his art.

For the time being, Krockta wants his creations to be recognizable. For example, his buffalo skull, the most common animal skull in American art, he wants to be identifiable to most people. In the future, however, Krockta may be creating animal skulls of his own imagination.

Dealers expect hard maple prices to level off over summer

By Barbara S. Greene

Staff Writer

Prices for hard maple climbed rapidly throughout the first part of the year, but some dealers were anticipating a leveling off as summers approached.

Dealers reported increases in the trendy white wood ranging from 10-20 percent, but added a tight supply, rather than a surge in demand, was the main factor driving the hikes.

But because of its close-grained appearance and the trend toward natural finishes, hard maple has become increasingly popular over the past several years, hardwood dealers say.

The trend has producers scrambling to deliver the product with as little sticker stain as possible — no easy task.

"There've been so many problems with sticker stains, so everyone's ordering it surfaced," said Jim Von Tellrop with David R. Webb Co. Inc. in Edinburgh, Ind.

Planing the wood to try to detect sticker stain in itself has driven prices up at the truckload level about \$100/mbf, Von

Tellrop said.

As of midMay, truckload prices for 4/4 FAS rough lumber, random widths and lengths, ranged from \$1,200-\$1,400/mbf, according to a Woodshop News phone survey.

Prices for 1,000-bf lots of 4/4 FAS rough lumber, random widths and lengths, at distribution yards across the country ranged from \$1,300-\$1,600/mbf. Retail prices for rough lumber ranged from \$2.20-\$4.31.

Several wood dealers said they noticed a slight increase in demand following the International Home Furnishing Market in High Point, N.C., this April. Hard maple was the seventh most popular wood among furniture manufacturers at the show, according to a survey conducted by the Fine Hardwood Veneer Association and the American Walnut Manufacturers Association.

Cherry led the field, followed by white oak, red oak, pine, mahogany and ash.

Hard maple is also used widely in the kitchen cabinet industry and, to a lesser degree, by millwork shops.