



J. P. URANKER

Coming Out of the Woodwork

*When the
US Coast Guard
wanted the best,
they looked on
the Vineyard*

Profile by **John Budris**

JP URANKER LEANS FORWARD, and with a familiar sweep of his hands and eyes, presses a freshly sharpened German chisel blade firmly yet lightly into a slab of mahogany. He speaks and carves in an easy, familiar rhythm: A few well-chosen words, a surgeon's thrust of the

blade, a breath, another wafer-thin slice of auburn mahogany. And he starts again.

Halfway through a story about his childhood home in Moon Run,

Pennsylvania, with detour tales to his father's coals mine days and poverty and bitter winters, the mahogany takes shape, and an eagle's wing is born, so lifelike it might fly off his workbench.

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Photography by **Charlie Utz**



“Live Free or Die” (top, left): A John Bellamy style eagle is the sentry over the door at Uranker’s workshop. Hands of the master: J.P. Uranker (above) transforms a slab of mahogany into a Winged Victory Eagle. The gold leaf of the “Born Free” Eagle (left) has the patina of age.



The classic Chesapeake Eagle (top) in the American style spans six feet. The highly stylized American Pride Eagle (middle) carved in the manner of John Bellamy is more than nine feet long. "The 24" by 24" Born Free Eagle (above) is fully carved on all sides and is designed to perch on a post or mantle.

Joseph Paul Uranker was born to carve, or at least destined himself through sheer will to become among the handful of the world's elite woodcarving artisans.

"I was carving by the fifth grade," he says, holding the pace of both story and blade cut, "I'd make Christmas cards by engraving old scraps of linoleum and then inking them up."

When his junior high pals were making birdhouses and cutting boards in woodshop class, he was already carving exquisite walnut gun cases for commissioned clients. By high school, Uranker's drawing skills were already so honed and mature that upper school science teachers plucked him out of class to draw diagrams and illustrations as their teaching tools.

He was – although yet unaware – carving out a life in wood. In Moon Run, Pennsylvania all work is honorable, and J. P. Uranker did much of it except crawl into a coal car every morning. If the

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J.P. Uranker begins a dovetailed panel (above) for a US Navy sea chest. The Winged Victory Eagle, (left) is carved from solid mahogany.



Urnaver's German and Swiss chisels and blades are continually sharpened, honed and buffed to a razor's edge. He's used these tools for more than 30 years.



From start to finish: Uranker carves a US Naval Officer's crest on the front panel of a sea chest. The commission will be a gift from the officer's wife on the occasion of his sea command. Uranker's finished carving is even more complex than the model insignia's detail. The finished carving and chest carving (left) with its tung oil finish.

closed mine were open, he would have been there too. But he put in his time washing floors, fixing furniture, and learning the carpentry trade along with the restaurant business.

Further honing his love for art while in high school, he went on for a degree in art education from nearby Carlow University and was accepted by a pair of highly selective art organizations in Pittsburgh – The Pittsburgh Society of Artists and the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. “Even then I wasn’t quite thinking of making the creation of art my life,” he says. “That desire for some security, given my childhood, had pushed me to consider teaching.”

But Francesca A. Hoffman had other plans. They were married in 1976 and soon moved to Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University. While at Carnegie Mellon, Uranker participated in numerous art shows and exhibitions. The university at first hired him to repair

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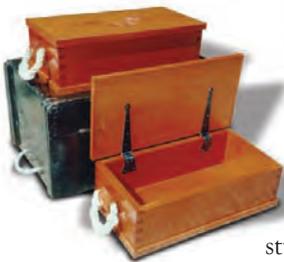
J. P. Uranker
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In January of 2003 – in only four months – Uranker had completed both the creation of a new sternboard and restoration of the 20-foot tall bow figurehead for the US Coast Guard Barque Eagle. At port in Ft. Lauderdale, (top) the sternboard and bow eagle are badly deteriorated. In Baltimore dry dock (below) Uranker's gold-leaf transformation becomes the pride of the vessel.



Uranker adorns Maine's Shaw & Tenney boat hooks (above) with carvings and traditional Turk's Head and French spiral ropework. Becketts for the sea chests and dittie boxes (opposite) are hand woven and decorated by Francesca Uranker and installed with cleats.



fine
woodwork
and
furnishings
subject to the
tough
treatment by
college
students. But

Uranker's talent for
meticulous art and architectural
restoration came to the fore, and for
more than a decade, he worked on
priceless pieces. His last project at
Carnegie Mellon was the restoration of
the George Nakashima woodworking
collection in Warner Hall.

While his hands worked with wood
at Carnegie Mellon, the rest of Uranker
was busy earning a Master's degree in
Business and Public Management in
1986, and another in Labor Relations
the next year.



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GOD BLESS OUR HOME

Hand Carved Mahogany
Painted, with Goldleaf



LIBERTY EAGLE

Hand Carved Mahogany
Painted, with Goldleaf



LOUISBERG EAGLE

Hand Carved Mahogany
Painted, with Goldleaf



SEACHEST

Hand Carved Goldleaf Ornamental
with Braided Handle



**NEWPORT
EAGLE - CLASSICAL
STYLE**

Hand Carved Mahogany
Painted, with Goldleaf



**CONSTITUTION
EAGLE - CLASSICAL
STYLE**

Hand Carved Mahogany
with Goldleaf

Some of the 24 different and distinctive designs for eagles and sea chests from the workbench of J.P. Uranker.

Beginning in 1984, he and Francesca began spending summers on the Vineyard, and the ocean and Island community carved their own marks into both of them. In 1991, they made the jump from Pittsburgh to Oak Bluffs. "I wanted to make carving a fulltime dedication," says Uranker. "But for a little while, at least, I had to pay some dues and more than a few bills."

Drawing on his work ethic and skills learned in Moon Run, he took on small jobs, handyman tasks, which often summoned him in the middle of the night. But a sagging and sorry looking sign at Captain Robert Douglas' *Admiral Benbow Inn* changed Uranker's course and set him on a trajectory to become one of the most sought-after woodcarvers in the nation. "I saw the tired, old sign and inquired about restoring it," says Uranker. "Next came the commissions for *The Black Dog*, and other projects for Captain Douglas, including carving the wings for the *Alabama's* transom."

Laying down his chisel, Uranker pauses and admits to some problems with the early *Black Dog* signs. Handsome and attractive to passersby, the signs held similar lure for thieves. An ingenious locking device solved the dilemma. Other noteworthy projects on the Vineyard include his restoration of a 19th-century figurehead for the Edgartown Yacht Club, and the many items he's carved to benefit local charities, especially for the Preservation Trust, the steward of many historical buildings on the Island. He's also the editor of the Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby publication, the proceeds of which support Island college students with substantial scholarships.

Off the Vineyard, Uranker's work continued to attract national attention. In 2001, Eunice Kennedy Shriver commissioned him to carve an eagle for her son-in-law as a Christmas present. The tree under which the eagle landed, of course, was that of her daughter Maria's husband, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. One of Uranker's prized hand-written thank-you notes came from Vanguard Funds founder John C. Bogle, who proudly posed at home with his eagle atop the family fireplace.

"I'm always looking for new techniques to improve my carvings. I

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Woodcarver J. P. Uranker In His Own Words

MY ART SPEAKS FOR ITSELF so I just want to take a moment and thank those who have shaped my character and my work and made me into the artist I am today. My early family life in Moon Run, Pennsylvania a small coal mining town northwest of Pittsburgh is at the heart of who I am and what I do.

My father Peter was a coal miner, then after World War II he was a steel worker. My mother Josephine was a farmer's daughter, and they instilled in me the dedication to hard work and not giving up. They all taught me to work harder to get the job done, doing it right and doing your best whatever that job might be.

My father died when I was 10 years old, and I started working at the family farm to make money for art supplies and school clothes. I went to work for a wonderful man, Tony Saveikis, at his Tonidale Restaurant when I was 16. He helped teach me carpentry and the restaurant business until I was 24. Tony gave me the opportunity to spread my wings and as an artist in the late 60s early 70s that saying a lot. His moral values stayed with me all my life.

My wife Francesca is why I am where I am today, not only in getting us living on Martha's Vineyard, but also in producing the high quality work and



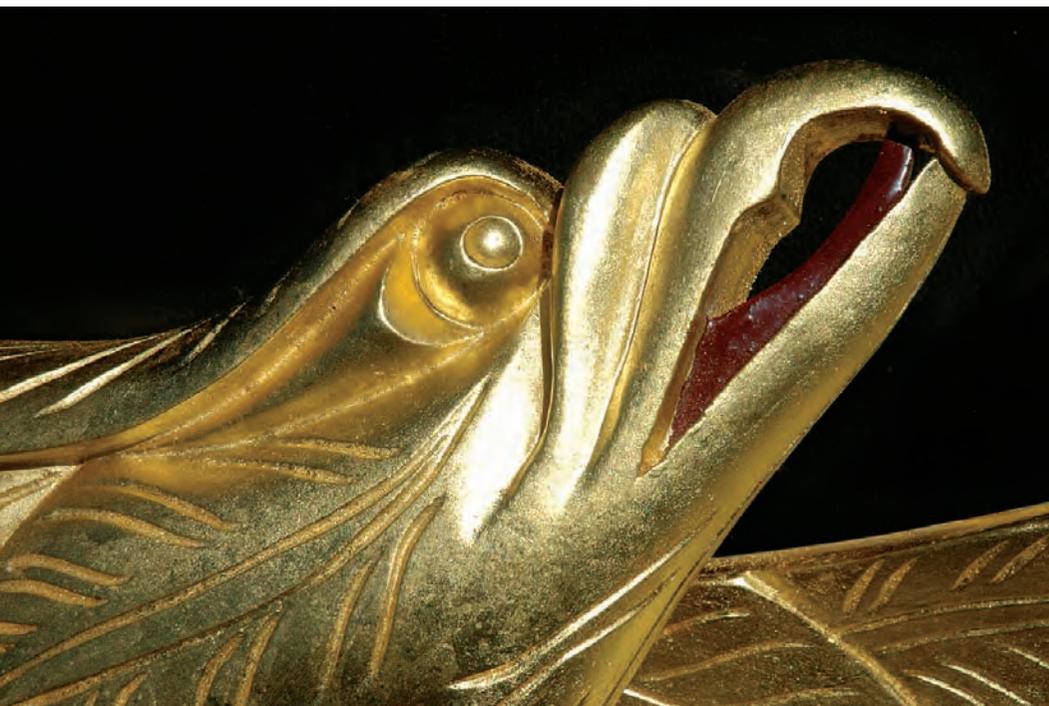
J. P. and Francesca Uranker working together in Joe's home shop.

developing the uniqueness of my carving style. This is what separates me from any other wood carver, and she's the reason. I always add more detail than less, and she is my toughest critic. When I am doing a commissioned eagle or a sea chest or anything for that matter, she has an eye for the details. These details are what my work is known for. She always adds her opinions, and I have learned during the years to trust and listen to her.

To all my patrons – and a special couple from Boston who have allowed me produce my most creative work – I owe much. I so enjoy it when they give me an idea, and they follow along the journey by digital photographs and email until completion.

As a boy growing up in Moon Run, I could never have imagined the kinds of wonderful clients I have now, men and women who I can call friends. I could never imagine being invited to a wedding and sitting next to one of the directors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and talking about art all through dinner. But through my carving, all of this came true. **vs**





The form of a simple scalloped circle around the eagle's eye helps define a sense of depth and character in the soon-to-be-finished commission.

add more detail than then less, and I want something that will put a smile on my patrons' faces and songs in their hearts when they look at my work," says Uranker. "The most important area to me to me is a sharp, deep cut conveys the full three-dimensional quality of my work. " The depth and sharp corners of the gold leafed eagles catch the light and give Uranker's work an ephemeral quality not found in other woodcarvers' pieces.

More private commissions and gallery representation followed. But in 2002, the US Coast Guard approached the National Woodcarvers Association with a request: Find the best in the business to take on a substantial restoration of vintage carving and creation of new on the US Coast Guard Barque *Eagle*.

She would need a new sternboard, and her magnificent figurehead was badly deteriorated by the elements.

"Francesca and I first went to see the *Eagle* down in Fort Lauderdale,

Translation Error.

though the major refit was done near Baltimore,” says Uranker. “I could see right off the extent of the damage and the work needed to bring her back to the original beauty she had in 1936 at the Blohm and Voss Shipyard in Germany, where she was built.”

The glorious carved dolphins adorning the Eagle’s transom were decayed and jury-rigged with auto body filler. To fabricate a new one, Uranker began by laminating together a mahogany slab that would ultimately measure ten feet by eight inches thick. That was the easy part. Not only would substantial mahogany need to be painstakingly removed in the carving process, but the complex and changing angles to make the sternboard properly wrap around the transom’s curves would challenge Pythagoras himself.

By late January of 2003 – in only four months – Uranker had completed both the creation of the new sternboard and restoration of the 20-foot tall bow figurehead. That of course meant countless 14-hour days, many of which were outdoors in the bitter winter months, plus trips to Baltimore for inspection and installation.

But for the man who learned the value of work as a kid, it’s just what you do when summoned. “Working on the *Eagle* was hard work, sure, but the honor and privilege for Francesca and me to be a part of it is priceless,” says Uranker. “This vessel is like an ambassador for our country, and it’s humbling to know that my work is both the first and last sights in the binoculars of everyone who looks at her.”

In his Oak Bluffs garage turned workshop, chatting away, much like a virtuoso cellist playing Bach and talking chisels, J.P. Uranker paws at a German-crafted tool older than the *Eagle* herself, one whose blade may have touched the original carvings and certainly chipped away bushels of mahogany in his seasoned hands.

Some things and some craftsmen are never out of style. **vs**

J.P. Uranker’s work can be seen at the Edgartown Art Gallery,

Kahn Fine Antiques in Chatham, the American Marine Model Gallery in Salem and the Quester Gallery in Greenwich, Connecticut.

His website is www.jpwoodcarver.com



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