

Keeping Maritime Traditions Alive: Woodcarver Joseph Uranker Restores *Eagle's* Figurehead and Sternboard

by Mark Alan Lovewell

The US Coast Guard Barque *Eagle* may not hail from Martha's Vineyard, but she carries a fine example of Vineyard craftsmanship on her stern. Last year, she underwent a significant refit in a Baltimore drydock. While shipwrights strengthened her hull, the Coast Guard also recognized a need to refurbish her more aesthetic qualities. They commissioned a traditional woodcarver to replace the sternboard and restore her figurehead.

Joseph Uranker is a Martha's Vineyard woodcarver and last year completed his work on the famous ship. Today, her name "Eagle" is prominent, visible and legible, carved in a large mahogany timber. The brass letters that spelled out her name before were too similar in color to the varnished mahogany background, making them virtually illegible at any distance. Today, ten-inch high letters of gold leaf contrast against black. Hand cut and carved

small, coal-mining town in rural Pennsylvania, Uranker, 53, took to woodcarving as a boy. He started by making linoleum cuts to make Christmas cards. Carving came early; his affection for the sea came later. In high school, he recalls whittling relief carvings of local scenery on drawers and gun cabinets. "I did it in the basement of our house in Moon Run. I had quite a few little hand tools. I kept them in a cigar box. There wasn't a lot going on in my town; no television, no shopping. I spent a lot of my time by myself developing my skills."

While attending Carlow College he worked, at times, as a carpenter and framer. In 1978 he worked as a union carpenter for Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh restoring quality-built furniture—a job he held until 1991. He learned wood restoration from the best, working on furniture crafted by the late George Nakashima, an artist and craftsman, internationally acclaimed for his work in hardwoods such as black walnut.

In 1984, Uranker and his wife Francesca Anne started spending summers on



Eagle's sternboard - a whole new look



by a skilled craftsman, they display the talents of a man who has earned his reputation as a traditional maritime artist.

Uranker cut the new letters in relief and coated them with gold leaf to stand out against a high-gloss black sternboard, measuring ten feet long and weighing more than 150 pounds. The chisels that carved them are nearly as old as the ship itself. "I am willing to wager that the original German artisans who carved the sternboard used the same era tools I used," Uranker says.

Uranker also restored and gilded the large gold-leaf figurehead at the bow, much deteriorated after years of exposure to the sea and weather. It had years-ago dulled but now shimmers in the sunlight.

Born far from the sea in Moon Run, a



Uranker at work in his Martha's Vineyard wood shop

PHOTO BY MARK ALAN LOVEWELL



Eagle's gilded figurehead now shines brilliantly after Uranker's handiwork

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Martha's Vineyard. They loved the ocean and immediately took to the island community. In June 1991, they moved permanently to the Vineyard so that he could dedicate himself entirely to woodcarving and wood-related crafts. Right away, people took an interest in Uranker's carved eagles and other carved wild animals. He made sophisticated sea chests, following patterns that date back to the age of sail. His first big job was for the Black Dog Tavern in Vineyard Haven, where the maritime heritage of the community is kept alive in many ways. Black Dog's owner, Robert Douglas, built and operates the 108-foot topsail schooner *Shenandoah* and a 90-foot pilot schooner, *Alabama*. Uranker carved the wings for the *Alabama's* transom.

Meanwhile, orders for Uranker's carved eagles came from across the country. His exhibitions at a Cape Cod gallery, Kahn

An example of one of Uranker's popular gold-leaf, carved eagles



PHOTO BY MARK ALAN LOVEWELL

Antiques in Chatham, is where Uranker believes his work came to the attention of both collectors and those responsible for the US Coast Guard flagship's restoration.

Most anyone can whittle—it's easy to get a piece of wood and a sharp knife. Uranker's gift as an artist, however, stems from forty years of effort. He would sooner carve a fresh piece of wood than watch television. It is quiet work. The chisels in his shop are so sharp Uranker can shave hair off the back of his arm without effort.

"I rarely use a mallet. Before I start, I am big on using drawings. You have to visualize what you want," he explains. He never plunges his chisels into the wood. "I don't take out large pieces," he says. Watching Uranker work is like watching a person play a musical instrument. He holds his chisel with two hands. One hand holds the handle, the second applies pressure on the blade. He creates rhythm with each cut, and at times each shaving looks alike. "You learn patience when you do this. You hear it often said, always keep your tools sharp. It is a dull blade that will cut you, not a sharp one. When you have a dull blade you lose control," he says.

Uranker's woodshop is a converted single-car garage next door to his house. He and his wife live in Oak Bluffs, a five-minute drive to the water and to the East Chop Lighthouse on Telegraph Hill. Cus-

Eagle's figurehead before Uranker's restoration



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tomers and tourists frequently pull into the driveway—dropping by to see how Uranker's projects are progressing.

In the shop, rows of German and Swiss steel chisels are displayed inside a handsomely crafted case. Gold-leafed eagles, wooden signs, and a recently completed sea chest decorate the room. Wood shavings cover his table and floor, but Uranker confides he is usually persnickety about cleanliness. This suits the small workspace well. "I can work for hours without a break," Uranker says. His wife often brings

him food when he becomes so absorbed in his craft that he forgets to eat.

Uranker restored a 19th-century figurehead for the Edgartown Yacht Club a few years ago. In 2001, Eunice Kennedy Shriver commissioned him to carve an eagle for her son-in-law as a Christmas present. The recipient, of course, was her daughter Maria's husband, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Last year, the US Coast Guard contacted Uranker regarding the *Eagle's* ship carvings. He was recommended by the National Woodcarvers Association. "They contacted me on June 18, 2002. I was asked to go to Fort Lauderdale to survey the ship. My wife and I went down for the weekend. The ship was in port," he recalls. "I wrote up a report of what was wrong. They wanted me to recarve the sternboard, rope and dolphins that run along the stern."

Built in 1936 at the Blohm and Voss Shipyard in Germany, the ship was launched with carved dolphins adorning her transom—a sign of luck from the god Poseidon. Uranker started work October 2002. *Eagle* was in drydock in Curtis Bay, near Baltimore. He retrieved the pieces of the old sternboard, much of it rotten and decayed. A good portion was patched with body filler.

Uranker started with a huge piece of laminated mahogany measuring ten feet long and six-to-eight inches thick. A lot of wood had to be taken off, for the sternboard wraps around the curves of the transom. In retrospect, Uranker feels he did not give himself enough time for the job. Often he worked 14-hour days—cutting, then sanding. He and his wife recall how even in the winter's cold, much of the work was done outdoors. He used a sander to bring much of the wood down to the proper dimensions to match the old one. Snow in the yard around the woodshop became discolored by the settling saw dust, taking on the color of mahogany.

Uranker finished restoring the twenty-foot-tall figurehead in December at the Baltimore shipyard. He completed all the pieces for the stern by late January 2003



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USCG Barque Eagle

and installation took two days the next month. Assisted by a team of shipyard workers, Uranker climbed fifty feet up the scaffolding to position himself directly under the counter. The work was secured to the transom, bolted to the bulkhead from inside.

"This is a great honor. I know that many years from now, the vessel will be sailing and representing our country, and my work

will be on her. When you do something like this, it is a great privilege." ⚓

For more information on Joseph Uranker's work, see www.jpwoodcarver.com. His work is displayed at Willoughby Art Gallery and Edgartown Scrimshaw, both in Edgartown, Martha's Vineyard and at Kahn Nautical Antiques & Maritime Works of Art in Chatham, Massachusetts.

USCG Barque Eagle's homeport is at the USCG Academy, New London, CT. At 295 feet in length and carrying over 20,000 square feet of sail, *Eagle* serves as a training vessel and ocean-going classroom for USCG cadets. For more information, see www.cga.edu or call 1-800-883-USCG.

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