

Woman carves out her niche for a living

Chance has played a big role in woodcarver Jan Fitch's life.

She was a secretary and personnel officer in her native England until 1997, when she was offered a chance to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to Maryland.

The wealthy owner of a 38-foot boat wanted it brought back to the United States from England. Fitch was a crew member on the trip.

She ended up staying in Maryland for the next four years. It was there that she was introduced to the art of woodcarving.

By chance, she saw a woodcarver doing a demonstration at a shopping mall.

She was fascinated that he could turn a block of wood into a piece of art – a duck that looked like the real thing.

"I took classes while I was living in Maryland. The owner of the boat had some contacts and he got me into some prestigious shows."

Later, she worked on another boat – the 72-foot Coastal Queen – and had her first visit to Kingston.

While Fitch lives on Wolfe Island, she rents space for a workshop in downtown Kingston.

Her husband, Ron Peddle, works at the Kingston Marina in the Inner Harbour.

"One year, we had a long trip. We went through Chesapeake Bay, up the Hudson, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi We did a big circle," she says. "We spent three weeks in Kingston and met a lot of British people and I felt comfortable here."

During the year-long journey, she kept on carving – on the boat and on the dock.

She liked it so much that she decided that she would make woodcarving her profession. She tried without success to become an American citizen.

"I tried to immigrate there," she says. "I formed a company called Art in Wood. But the Americans didn't want me because I was not big enough a commodity for them. So I immigrated to Canada and ended up here."

That was in 1983. She's been here since.

Over the last 25 years, she has exhibited and sold her carvings all over Canada and the United States. Her favourite show is still in Maryland, at the Ward World Championships.

"The Ward brothers were the first to make their decoys more decorative," Fitch says.

She doesn't know how many awards she's won for her creations – between 100 and 200.

"I have no idea," she says.

Two display cases in her workshop are filled with show ribbons.

Her specialty is bird carvings – at half size or smaller. She uses three knives for most of her work. She carves the birds out of basswood and then paints them.

The smaller carvings sell better than the life-sized ones because most collectors want to put more carvings in their homes or in their display cases.

She is trying to reduce the number of shows she enters.

"I'm trying to cut down on the number of shows and concentrate on teaching," she says. "I've got some pieces at the Cornerstone gallery in Kingston. I'll go to Westport [for the Rideau Valley Art Festival] in August. Now, I teach year-round."

– Jack Chiang



Jack Chiang/The Whig-Standard

Woodcarver Jan Fitch has won between 100 and 200 awards for her work. Her specialty is birds.