



20 minutes with...

Tom Dean

We go behind the scenes with American fish carver, Tom Dean

When did you start to carve?

My very first taste of woodworking, or even carving for that matter, was in the winter of 2006 at the age of 45. I never did any type of carving or woodworking before... ever. I had spent my entire career in advertising/medical sales and sales management. Having been born and raised in Montana, where fly fishing is world renowned, I have fly fished my entire life and am passionate about it. Strictly out of curiosity, I 'carved' my first fish out of a piece of pine.

The result was primitive – I used a jigsaw, an old Dremel tool, and a palm sander. For the eye of the fish, I used one of my son's stuffed animal's eyes! It wasn't until late 2007 that I really became passionate about carving as a hobby.

What made you continue with your carving?

My own curiosity, confidence in my ability and my passion to see if I could do better on the next fish.

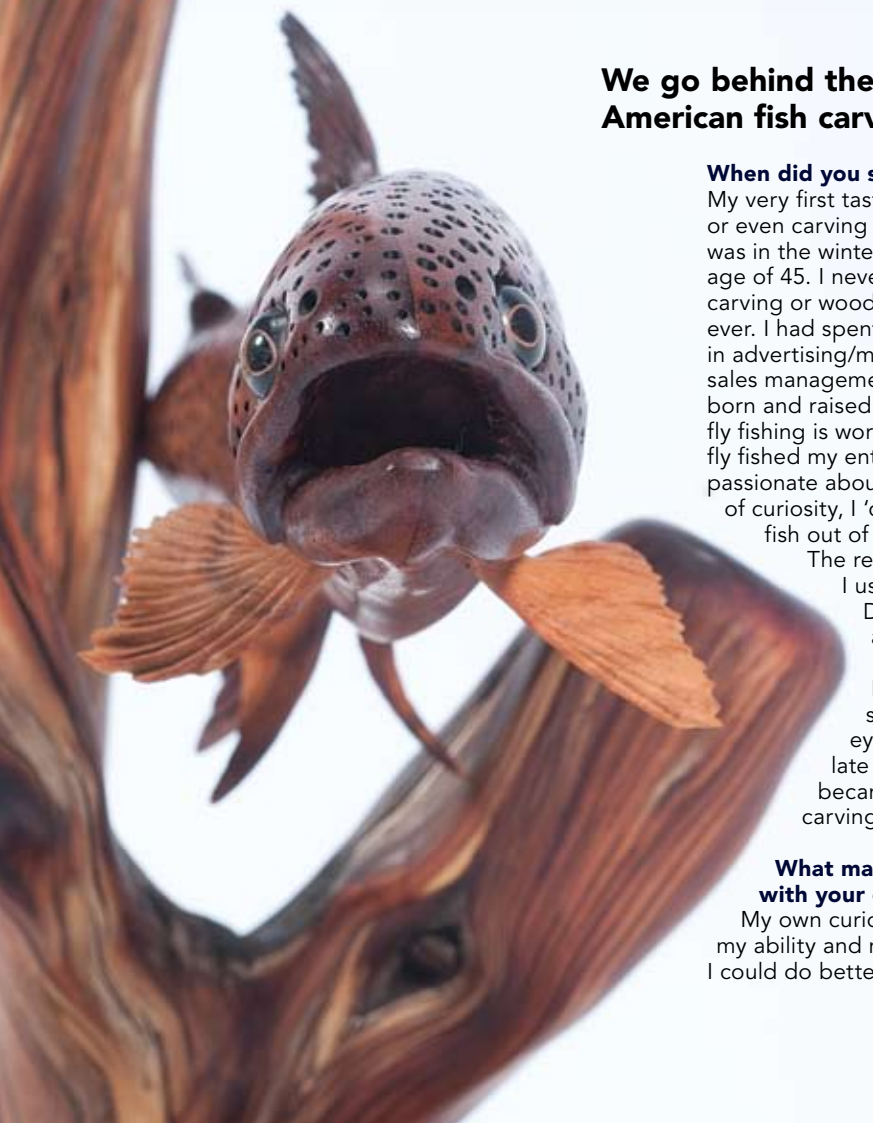
They say failure is the best medicine for success – well, I failed a lot in the beginning. Not having someone to turn to, I had to figure everything out on my own. I would show my family and friends a completed piece, always listening to their feedback – good or bad! My wife and my children are my best critics. I have and will continue to always appreciate their feedback – it keeps me grounded.

What inspires you when you carve?

Whenever I am carving a fish I literally see, in my mind, the fish moving through the water, reacting to its environment. Because of all of those days fishing out on the rivers, watching their movement and behaviours, this image inspires me every day to capture it in wood.

What are you working on now?

I am always carving fish from exotic woods. I am passionate about the native trout because I have fished for this species all my life. I also like to carve cattails/reeds and dragonflies to add to a sculpture. It seems as though I can never have enough of them at any one time. As soon as I carve them, they sell. Not a bad thing mind you, but I like to have about a dozen fish, varying in length, shape and different types of



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM DEAN



woods on hand, in order to pick and choose from them to place in a sculpture.

Which tool wouldn't you be without and why?

The most important tool for me is the 2in inflatable Guinevere sanding tool with a flexible shaft. I would be completely lost without it!

Once I rough out the shape of my fish or other subject matter, the Guinevere allows me to slowly eliminate the wood I don't want, allowing me to sculpt the wood into the form I am looking for. I can inflate or deflate the 2in drum to any pressure and application.

Which is your preferred style of carving and why?

Since my sister gave me her used Dremel in 2006, I've really never tried anything else. Power carving always seemed like a very natural way of carving and sculpting for me. It's probably a good thing I went with power carving as I'm impatient and like to see my results right away. My dad was a dentist and I was around all these power tools growing up – it must have rubbed off somewhere down the line. I will use any tool at my disposal to accomplish my goal, including gouges, mallets and rasps.

What do you think has been your biggest carving achievement?

This is a hard one to answer for me. I am a truly blessed and humbled person to be able to make a great living, doing what I love to do, all because of my new found intense passion for carving!

My greatest carving achievement is a huge 3.4 x 1.5 x 1.8m (10 x 5 x 6ft) piece which took me 18 months to complete. It weighs over 907kg (2,000lbs) and has 11 hand-carved

fish, 117 hand-carved cattails/reeds, two hand-carved dragonflies, one frog, and 816kg (1,800lbs) of real river rock simulating a true river bed on a slab of bubinga wood. It's spectacular!

Whose work do you most admire?

Honestly speaking, I couldn't single out just one! I truly admire and respect anyone who has the passion and desire to pour themselves into carving and art of any kind. I was once told that in order to admire someone's art work, you must first see it, to see it you must feel it, and to feel it you must experience it – that is what is admirable in art.

My father's artwork is truly amazing. He is brilliant when it comes to carving wood with a knife, sculpting in clay and painting in oils.

If you weren't a carver what would you be?

I've always had a great love, respect and passion for the outdoors and wildlife. If I were not carving I'd be involved with something surrounding the teaching of children the wonders of wildlife and the outdoors. I would also probably have my own fly fishing business.

Describe the view from your workbench and the area you live.

I work out of my attached garage here in Montana. Not very exciting views, but it has everything I need! When asked where my studio is, I hate to disappoint folks and let them know it's not this fancy studio along a beautiful river – it's my garage and it works! One of these days, I will have a beautiful studio along that gorgeous river.

I live in Central Montana, which is in the prairies of Montana along the Missouri River. Abundant wildlife lives here including deer, elk, moose, antelope, grizzly and black bears, and of course, there's the world-renowned fly fishing

Who would you most like to carve for?

I love carving for my children. It's really been a wonderful and magical experience to see the 'light' go on in their young minds and produce some amazing artwork! I would also love to be able to come to the UK and Europe someday, to learn and teach the carving of my fish.

Are you a self-critic of your work?

Yes, I am a big critic of my artwork and carvings. I would be the first to tell you what I think is wrong with a piece. In my opinion, I think it is important to critique and be constructively critical of your work. If not, how does one improve? ▀

