

WOODWORKING

Carving out a niche



Asten Smith/The Daily Item

Ross Smoker, of Selinsgrove, paints one of his hunting decoys at his home. He, along with James Romig, of Middleburg, have been selected by the Pennsylvania artisans as master decoy makers to teach their skills.

Local decoy artists turn hobby into more

By Asten Smith
The Daily Item

Two area men are passing on their artistry and skills to help continue the art of decoy carving.

Master decoy makers Ross Smoker, of Selinsgrove, and James Romig, of Middleburg, were selected by Pennsylvania artisans to participate in a program funded by a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts for a project called "Carving Out Future Mid-Atlantic Decoy Makers." They are two of 17 master decoy makers who were selected to teach six students in their communities.

Those students — who started with a block of wood and carving tools and ended up with decoys — will enter their work in a competition this weekend, starting Friday, at the Chesapeake Wildfowl Expo in Salisbury, Md. Mr. Smoker and Mr. Romig will also enter their waterfowl decoys in the competition.

Over the years, both men have taught students ranging in age from 10- to 93-years-old. They are well-known decoy artisans not only in the area but also on national and international levels. Mr. Smoker has served as a decoy judge on the world level at the World Carving

Competition in Ocean City, Md. He has been decoy carving for 25 years and teaching for 10.

He first learned the art from his father and brother. His father was a woodshop teacher in Selinsgrove and his brother carves for a living. He said decoy carving is something that stemmed from another hobby he had — hunting. "It's just a hobby I've always had. I started the hobby through hunting and it just blossomed into carving and teaching," he said.

The same is true for Mr. Romig who also became interested in decoy making

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Expo set for this weekend

The Chesapeake Wildfowl Expo will be held this weekend at The Ward Museum, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Md.

Salisbury University received an art grant from the National Endowment of the Arts and is using it to preserve, promote and present the decoy carving traditions of the mid-Atlantic region. The project is called "Carving Out Future Mid-Atlantic Decoy Makers," and is provided free of charge to the students.

For more information call (410) 742-4988 ext. 106 or visit www.wardmuseum.org.

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because of hunting. "Basically, I just wanted a couple of birds for my hunting rig," said Mr. Romig, who took up the craft in 2001.

Since then his hobby has turned into an enjoyable past-time and business. He now sells birds all over the country and just recently sold his first bird out of the country — to a man in Scotland.

"I've been pretty successful this year," said Mr. Romig, who has placed second and third best of show at the World Championships for the International Waterfowl Carving Association in Dundee, Mich.

Decoy carving for both men has become more than a hobby or business. They both agree it is something they thoroughly enjoy. "Oh, it's highly addictive," said Mr. Romig. "For me, it's what I do to relax. I'm a school teacher by profession. This is my outlet; this is my refuge so to speak."

They agree there's always room for improvement. "People can make birds that look like birds in a weekend," said Mr. Smoker. "To master it yourself, it's going to take a long time."

Mr. Romig said that continual learning is what contributes to success. "I'm always learning, I'm still learning. The only way you get good and stay on top is to continue to learn."

Decoy carving in history

According to James Romig, the art of decoy carving is a part of American history. "There's a tremendous history with the decoy in this country as a hunting tool."

He explained the development of the railroad in this country was the initial major event that boosted decoy making because it was the first opportunity market gun-

ners had to export their goods from one coast to the other.

The next major factor that influenced decoy carving was the Great Depression.

Many families were left to provide for themselves at that time and an investment in decoys increased their odds of putting food on the table to feed their families.