

A Piece Of Work

Craftsman Jeff Nelson takes an age-old art into the 21st century.

When Jeff Nelson wandered into a local crafts fair some 25 years ago, the last thing he expected was to change his career—and uproot his life. A one-time student of the San Francisco Art Institute where he had majored in painting, Nelson at the time had his hands full running a frame shop in the Golden Gate city.

But while exploring the show's offerings, he stumbled upon an artisan who practiced the 16th-century craft of marquetry, the intricate inlay of domestic and exotic woods, shell, and stone fragments into handcrafted artwork, furniture, and floors. Hooked, he hopped coasts to take advantage of a growing crafts market and to hone his art.

"It's like making a jigsaw puzzle from scratch," says Nelson, today president and founding designer of Hudson River Inlay, the Ossining-based American marquetry business he runs with his partner, Rob Kitchens. It's a puzzle that no doubt requires a steady hand and infinite patience; one work hanging in his studio, "Sanctuary on Lake Serenity," is composed of 1,121 pieces of inlay using dozens of different types of wood.

After focusing on inlaid pictures for so many years, Nelson expanded his work to include mirrors (\$300 to \$5,000), tables (\$1,650 to \$2,600), desks (\$5,000 to \$20,000), floors, and even elaborate surface inlays of musical instruments, such as an art case piano done in collaboration with Steinway. Flipping through the 2006 Fender Guitar Calendar during a recent spree at Barnes & Noble, Nelson was surprised to find his work—autumn leaves inlaid into a quilted maple top of a Fender guitar—as the September highlight.

Clients interested in Nelson's designs can buy on-site from the gallery, which houses its own line of standard-issue furnishings; adapt various elements of existing pieces; or work with Nelson to fashion custom creations.

"I used to take wood for granted," says Nelson, as if confessing his greatest sin. "I was ignorant of the exquisite palette that exists. Now, I can spend inordinate amounts of time fixated on a small section of grain. In that sense, there is a very humbling component in the course of this work."

— Emily Liebert

