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The Art and Process of Wood Carving as a Meaningful Occupation

Abstract

Leonard G. Trujillo, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, occupational therapy professor and chair emeritus based in North Carolina, provided the cover art for *The Spring 2019* issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The piece, titled “Life’s Struggles,” is a relief carving made from butternut wood. Dr. Trujillo enjoys carving lifelike images that depict previous travels and his love of nature. His carvings are sculpted from a solid plank of wood, yet they provide the illusion of a three-dimensional form. Dr. Trujillo’s body of work reflects a lifetime of learning and engagement in the art and process of wood carving as a meaningful occupation.

Keywords

occupational therapy, occupational therapist, occupation, arts and crafts, wood carving

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, MS, OTR/L

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Relief carving is a form of sculpture in which a flat piece of wood is carved to reveal the illusion of a three-dimensional form. The process begins with a design from the wood carver's imagination. The design is matched to a piece of wood before it is laid out on tracing paper. Once transferred to wood, the design is minimized into simple shapes. The carver must determine which cuts will create the desired perspective, depth, and illusion. Using a variety of tools and techniques, the carver brings the design to life. The excess wood removed with a mallet and chisel gives the simple shapes depth. Gouging, scraping, and burnishing help the depths reveal their details. Soon, the illusion of a three-dimensional form is revealed. Sandpaper is used to remove debris from the background. An experienced carver sands very little and lets the tools do most of the work. With experience comes comfort in allowing the wood to reveal the evidence that it has been carved. Sometimes, the wood dictates change to the original design. When a mistake is made, the carver adheres to the following creed: "It's only a piece of wood. It only becomes a masterpiece when you are done with it. If you make a mistake, get another piece of wood."

Leonard G. Trujillo, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, occupational therapy professor and chair emeritus of Eastern Carolina University (ECU), provided the cover art for the Spring 2019 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). The piece, titled "Life's Struggles," is a relief carving made from butternut wood. The inspiration for this piece came from his memories of living in New Mexico. "In warmer climates, it's amazing how trees find ways to grow," he said. "It's a struggle. You are fighting against something that tells you no, but life is resilient. It wants to grow." Dr. Trujillo enjoys carving lifelike images that depict previous travels and his love of nature. He sculpts his carvings from a solid plank of wood, yet they provide the illusion of a three-dimensional form. Dr. Trujillo's body of work reflects a lifetime of learning and engagement in the art and process of wood carving as a meaningful occupation.

Dr. Leonard Trujillo has been participating in arts and crafts projects for most of his life. "I've always been creating and doing things," he said. When Dr. Trujillo was 4 years old, his mother took him to the local education center to enroll him in a summer arts and crafts course. "They told my mom I was too young," said Dr. Trujillo. "My mom asked them to give me a chance." While the adults were talking, Dr. Trujillo picked up some clay and molded it into a coil bowl. They let him join the course. As a child, Dr. Trujillo taught himself to make things from an encyclopedia style book series that provided detailed instructions for projects such as copper foil, clay sculpture, and embossing. "I have always been fascinated that people could learn to do these things," he said. When Dr. Trujillo was a young boy, his father bought him a basic

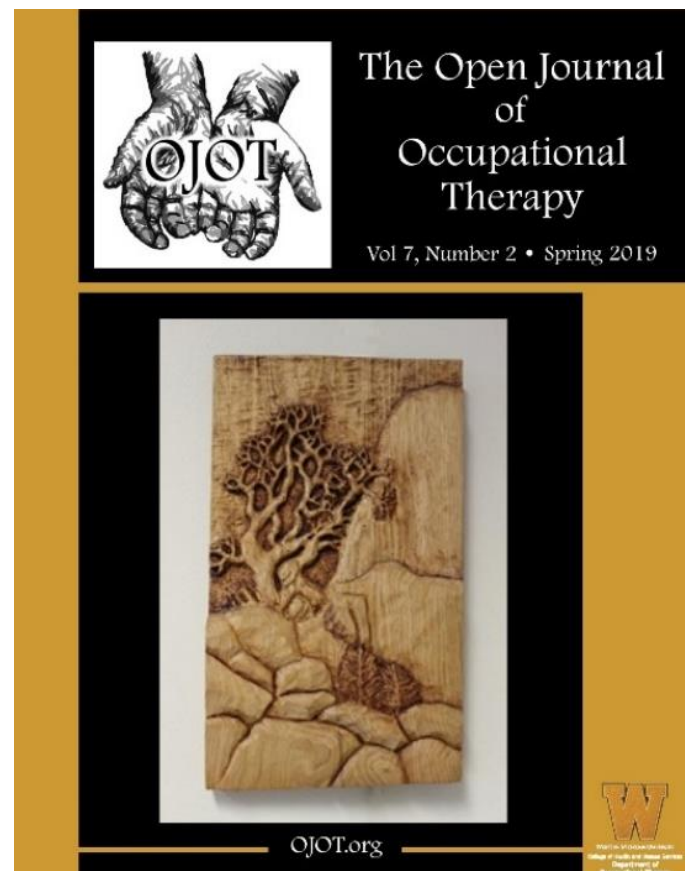


Figure 1. Cover art for OJOT, Vol 7, No 2, Spring 2019.

wood carving kit. To practice, he carved wooden neckerchiefs for his fellow cub scouts. “Someone always wanted one, so I ended up selling them all before I got home,” he said.

Dr. Trujillo continued to engage in meaningful learning opportunities. During most of his high school years, he was part of the yearbook publishing group. “In the late 1960’s, students did not have access to art classes or computers,” he said. Without formal instruction, Dr. Trujillo taught himself calligraphy and completed all of the yearbook designs by hand. After high school, Dr. Trujillo moved to Denver, Colorado, to study at Saint Thomas University (STU). He enrolled in seminary studies with plans to enter the Catholic priesthood. As Dr. Trujillo was preparing to enter the theology level of coursework, he was told he would have to put aside his creative projects to concentrate on his seminary studies. Dr. Trujillo graduated from STU with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities. He decided to change career paths and set out to find a profession that would allow him to use his creative initiative.

In Denver, Dr. Trujillo accepted a job as an activity director for a children’s program. “I noticed many of the children could not do things, or make things,” said Dr. Trujillo. Every time he needed help for a child who was struggling, Dr. Trujillo was referred to the occupational therapist. Over time, he became intrigued with the profession. “Eventually, the occupational therapist encouraged me to become an OT,” he said. Dr. Trujillo met his future wife, Jane, at a retreat in Greeley, Colorado. The couple started dating and were soon married. They have been married for 44 years. With Jane’s encouragement, Dr. Trujillo took the necessary steps to enroll in the occupational therapy program at Colorado State University (CSU). The piece, “Dreams at the River” (see Figure 2), is a relief carving on Butternut wood. The carving depicts a time when Dr. Trujillo and Jane were first married, sitting and dreaming near a river in Colorado.

In 1977, Dr. Trujillo graduated from CSU with a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy. During his job search, he made a major decision. “I [had] always wanted to join the military,” he said. “I felt compelled to serve.” In 1978, Dr. Trujillo enlisted with the United States Air Force. As a Commissioned Officer in the Biomedical Science Corps, Dr. Trujillo provided skilled occupational therapy services to military personnel and their dependents. Dr. Trujillo gained experience working with a variety of diagnoses and populations. “At every duty station, I had to learn a new practice area (e.g., cardiac rehabilitation, school-based, mental health, orthopedics),” he said. In mental health settings, Dr. Trujillo used crafts as a therapeutic modality. “We used crafts to maintain our patient’s focus and help them get through difficult times of the day,” he said. Crafting has been used to promote physical and mental health in occupational therapy practice since the early 1900s. Community workshops and



Figure 2. “Dreams at the River” (2017) by Dr. Leonard Trujillo.

convalescent clubs offered instruction in handicrafts, such as weaving, woodworking, basketry, and printing to assist veterans with reintegration into healthy and productive living (Cole & Tufano, 2008). These programs enabled veterans who had been discharged from the hospital, but had not yet fully recovered, to restore physical and mental functions while developing skills for economic self-sufficiency (Cole & Tufano, 2008).

Dr. Trujillo specializes in relief carving, a form of wood carving in which intricate designs are carved into a flat piece of wood. "I enjoy creating the illusion of three-dimensional effects," he said. Dr. Trujillo says most of the sculpture is carved (in his mind) before he touches the wood. "I think of the shapes and challenges I could face," he said. "How deep to carve, what to omit and what to keep." Dr. Trujillo is inspired by scenes from nature. "I see oak leaves blowing in the wind and I think, I have to carve that!" As a novice woodcarver, Dr. Trujillo entered one of his carvings into an art competition and it took first place. He won 2 weeks of training at the American Wood Carving School in New Jersey and the chance to study under Mike Denike, master woodcarver. During this experience, he adopted a motto that has proven helpful when working on difficult carvings. "It's only a piece of wood," he said. "If you mess up, go get another piece of wood. It only becomes a masterpiece when you are done with it."

Near the end of his military career, Dr. Trujillo returned to school to pursue a master's degree. "This was the new requirement for the occupational therapy profession at that time," he said. In 1993, he completed a Master of Arts degree from Webster State. At the time, he was also the program director, curriculum coordinator, and fieldwork coordinator at the Occupational Therapy Specialist School at the Academy of Health Sciences in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. In 1996, Dr. Trujillo officially retired from the Air Force. "In the beginning, I was just going to do three years, but ended up doing twenty," he said. "It was a fun and productive 20 years," he said. Unbeknownst to Dr. Trujillo, the training he received in the Air Force would help him to prepare for his future career in academia.

Prior to retiring from the United States Air Force, Dr. Trujillo began to consider pursuing a doctorate degree. Dr. Trujillo turned to his mentor, Dr. Patricia Crist, for advice. Dr. Crist was a professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Colorado State University. "Pat pushed me to go further," said Dr. Trujillo. "She told me I was going to make a difference in the profession, so I needed to get my Ph.D." Dr. Trujillo enrolled in the Educational Administration Ph.D. program at Texas A&M University. After retiring from the Air Force, Dr. Trujillo and Jane moved to Plano, Texas, where they began to focus on starting a family. Dr. Trujillo accepted a new job as associate professor and assistant dean of the School of Occupational Therapy at Texas Women's University. After completing his Ph.D., Dr. Trujillo remained in the role of professor and associate dean. Over time, he grew frustrated when his administrative role did not allow him time to engage in research and publication.

In 2003, Dr. Trujillo accepted a job as an assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at ECU. After establishing a research agenda and receiving tenure, he was asked to step back into an administrative role. With a career in academia in place, Dr. Trujillo found time to return to his love of wood carving. He developed a research project to explore the art and process of wood carving as meaningful occupation. The study took place at a transitional living home for older adults. When one of the residents asked Dr. Trujillo what he liked to do in his free time, he shared some his carvings. Several residents asked Dr. Trujillo if he could teach them how to carve. "The process of teaching them to carve was just so rewarding," he said. "The light in their eyes." Dr. Trujillo believes the residents were motivated to learn how to carve because they wanted to give their friends and family something they

made themselves. “Mankind, in order to be happy and maintain both physical and mental health, must be constructively occupied” (Willard, 1938-1939, p. 293).

Dr. Trujillo shared the story of one resident who stood out among the rest. “Mary would not talk to anyone. She even sat alone at meals,” said Dr. Trujillo. “People would approach Mary and say ‘hello,’ but she just looked at them and walked away.” Dr. Trujillo believes Mary did this because she did not want her cognitive issues to be identified. “Mary avoided social interactions so people would not know she was struggling.” On one occasion, Mary approached the group during a wood carving lesson. She asked, “What are y’all doing in there?” Several group members responded, “Carving wood.” Mary replied, “You better not cut yourselves!” and walked away. The next week, Dr. Trujillo arrived to find Mary waiting for him in the craft room. “So, what’s the deal?” she asked. “What do we do?” Dr. Trujillo described the carving process to Mary. “Okay, let’s have at it!” she said. Dr. Trujillo got Mary started on an introductory project. The other group members arrived and greeted Mary. “Y’all just don’t mind me!” she responded. Mary continued attending the wood carving group. “Mary picked up carving faster than any other member of the group,” said Dr. Trujillo. When Mary did not return, the group learned she had been moved to the memory unit. Dr. Trujillo and the other group members decided to visit Mary. Dr. Trujillo brought her the carving she had been working on. “I just loved that,” said Mary. “In the last moments of her life, all she wanted was to create something,” said Dr. Trujillo.

In 2007, Dr. Trujillo was offered the role of chair at ECU. Although hesitant at first, he accepted the position while remaining mindful of his research agenda. Dr. Trujillo remained chair until his retirement in 2018. During his professional tenure, Dr. Trujillo accumulated an impressive collection of scholarly research and publications. He authored several peer-reviewed articles and textbook chapters on topics related to fall prevention, assistive technology, grant writing, instructional design, and the use of interactive metronome as a modality. Dr. Trujillo contributed to the dissemination of research with numerous scientific presentations and posters. He provided opportunities for professional development through presentations and workshops at national and international conferences. Dr. Trujillo served on various university committees and editorial boards. He has received several service awards in recognition of his contributions to the profession. In 2006, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) recognized Dr. Trujillo with a Recognition of Achievement Award for Outstanding Contributions in Distance Education and Assistive Technology. Every year between 2007 and 2017, Dr. Trujillo was awarded the Health Sciences Author’s Recognition Award for Dedication and Scholarly Contributions to Education and Research. In 2010, the AOTA invited Dr. Trujillo to join the Roster of Fellows in recognition of Outstanding Contributions in Education and Research. In 2018, the AOTA presented Dr. Trujillo with the Retired Educators Award.

The demands associated with Dr. Trujillo’s life of service left him little time to engage in creative projects. “I didn’t carve wood from 1986 to 2011 due to my busy life,” he said. Dr. Trujillo’s interest in wood carving was reignited when his sister-in-law requested a carving of a cliff dwelling village from New Mexico. In 2012, ECU’s Health Sciences Library launched their “Art as Avocation” series at the Evelyn Fix Laupus Gallery. The exhibit aimed to showcase the hidden artistic talents of university faculty, staff, and students in the Division of Health Sciences. Dr. Trujillo submitted the application and was accepted as an exhibitor. “I just got fired up about carving again,” he said. Dr. Trujillo has been featured as an “Art as Avocation” exhibitor on two separate occasions. In 2012, a collection of Dr. Trujillo’s carvings was featured in an exhibit titled, “Artistry in Wood: Reflections of Past and Present, Preserved Forever.” The second exhibit, “Visions in Wood: Carved Creations,” was on

display in 2017. The relief carvings featured in Dr. Trujillo's exhibits capture his love of nature. The piece, "Peek-a-Boo" (see Figure 3), is a relief sculpture carved on basswood.

Over the years, Dr. Trujillo completed all of his wood carving projects in the garage. The process of setting up shop and cleaning up afterward was both time and labor intensive. Dr. Trujillo longed for a designated work space to carve wood. In 2013, he committed to converting the "bonus room" above the garage into a studio. After a few unsuccessful attempts at finding a contractor, Dr. Trujillo decided to complete the project himself. As a resident of North Carolina, he was concerned that the rising temperature in the attic would be problematic. "I woke up every morning at 4:00 a.m. so I could work before the heat got too intense," said Dr. Trujillo. Outside of the electrical work, he completed the entire project by himself. Today, Dr. Trujillo completes all of his creative projects from his home studio.

Since retiring from ECU in September of 2018, Dr. Trujillo and Jane have dedicated a fair amount of their time to physical rehabilitation for orthopedic and health issues. The couple is working hard to build physical endurance so they can start traveling again. "We love adventurous travel," said Dr. Trujillo. At the top of their travel list is the Vatican, Northern Italy, and Spain. "We just love Spain," he said. Other destinations that made the list include Alaska and several National Parks. Dr. Trujillo is seated in front of a wall covered in relief carvings as he shares these memories. The carvings capture scenes from nature, including aspen groves and previous travel adventures. "I just go back into them as I am talking," said Dr. Trujillo.

To celebrate Dr. Trujillo's retirement, Jane purchased a truckload of wood. "My wife is my best critic," he said. "She gives me the most wonderful, straightforward, honest feedback about my carvings." Dr. Trujillo says he only keeps the carvings that receive Jane's highest compliment (e.g., "Now that's a keeper!"). At one point, Dr. Trujillo considered starting his own wood carving business, but ultimately decided against it. He does not want the business aspect to take away from the creative process and become work. "I worked hard to earn this retirement so I can just carve what I want to carve," he said. "I did not do all of this work only to take on another job. I carve because I enjoy the process."



Figure 3. "Peek-a-Boo" (2017) by Dr. Leonard Trujillo.

Resources

- View more of Dr. Trujillo's carvings in the OJOT Gallery: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/26
- Visit Dr. Trujillo's Website: <https://carvedbyleo.com/index.html>

- Learn about the wood carving process:
<https://spark.adobe.com/video/peeUmJDhxwTKV?w=4504&fbclid=IwAR0UsC8yA3Ng5E6PSyth6OSEPTIfaCOI84QltXGyyFDqyO6VgVjQBkbJJmY>
 - Learn more about the “Art as Avocation” Exhibits at the Laupus Health Sciences Library:
 - Artistry in Wood (2012): <https://hsl.ecu.edu/exhibits/art-as-avocation/artistry-in-wood/>
 - Visions in Wood (2017): <https://hsl.ecu.edu/exhibits/art-as-avocation/visions-in-wood/>
 - YouTube - Visions in Wood:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=g8lb6MNFHsE
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