

Swing Blade

David Wirth

Artist Profile

Dave & Pike

By BRANDON DANE

When marine sculptor David Wirth was named the International Game Fish Association's (IGFA) featured artist in 2006, he was genuinely surprised because he was the first sculptor to be honored by the IGFA in almost 40 years. Wirth's art stems from a lifelong passion for angling, and a near-death experience. He grew up fishing both salt and fresh water while living in California, Minnesota and Colorado. Since then, his artistic career has taken off. He now resides in Temecula, Calif.

He got a late start on his artistic career. "When I was 28 years old, I had the chicken pox and it almost killed me," Wirth says. "During my recovery I used a fillet knife and a piece of oak and made my first fish." He jokes that he began wood sculpting with three things: a piece of wood he found in his garage, his knife and a bucket of beer. "After three days of whittling, I realized something was going on here," he says. It was only two years later that he was winning awards at wildlife art shows all over California. His IGFA artist recognition has special meaning for Wirth. "Being selected as the featured artist was a huge deal for me... to be honored by your peers feels good."

Wirth has come a long way from scrap wood and a fillet knife. Sculpting is a physically demanding and time-consuming process. In the beginning, he only produced four or five pieces per year. Now he creates



Got Mahi



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Pike

30 or more pieces of art annually. "[This] is a lot for a sculptor. I am totally self-taught and developed techniques and use tools that metal fabricators use because I deal with very hard woods. I like using hardwoods because the wood grains are colorful and very animated," he says.

FISH IN THE FOREST

Wirth uses black walnut, orange and olive wood, as well as oak and juniper, which he harvests himself from all over California. Recently, he

opened a new workshop in Kihei, Maui, Hawaii, where he creates statues of local marine life using indigenous woods such as Koa, Monkey Pod and Macadamia Nut. Specific trees also inspire his creative process. "[It] starts when I find a 'fish.' I have to see the fish in motion," Wirth says. "The wood dictates what I can do." Finding logs that inspire him is only the first step. He then must "cure" the log until it is dry. That usually takes five years. It is only after curing that he can really begin. "When it's time, I break out my pencil, er, I mean

my chainsaw, and sketch away, cutting out the rough pieces," he explains. "The rest is fine-tuning detail over a two to six month period." Wirth says he tries to "take woodcarving to another level of 'fine art' [and] create things that other artists aren't." He enjoys all aspects of the marine wildlife genre "from bluegill to blue marlin," but prefers pelagics because they are such powerful and animated animals.

Current endeavors include plans to open a workshop/studio in the Florida Keys, and

recently setting up a display at the Redbone Gallery in Islamorada. Guy Harvey has selected some of his sculptures for his new gallery in the Grand Caymans. His works can also be seen at IGFA headquarters in Dania Beach, Fla. "I will do everything to be different. Originality is the game," he says. "I use the passion I have for the sea and the respect that these old trees deserve. This is a one time shot - no drawings, no practice pieces - only sharp blades and hardwoods." ▶

For more information, visit www.davidwirth.com.