

ART OF LIVING

BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2024 SECTION D



Photos by Andy Coughlan/The Enterprise

World champion carver Phil Brannan shows off a bass that earned his first division win at the World Championships. The Art Museum of Southeast Texas is showing "Phil Brannan: Artistry in Wood" through March 17.

Meet a world-class Southeast Texas wood carver

By Andy Coughlan
CONTRIBUTOR

Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Inspire a man to carve a fish, and he can be a world champion.

When Entergy merged with Gulf States Utilities in 1995, Phil Brannan lost his job as a main frame computer operator.

"I was probably at the lowest point in my life, ever," he said. "I'd sit at home, and I didn't know what I was going to do."

An avid fisherman all his life, Brannan felt drawn to look at boats.

"I just had this strong impulse, I guess it was the good Lord, to go look at boats," he said. "And I thought, 'This is ridiculous.' I didn't have money to even drive down there to look boats. In fact, I got aggravated. And the feeling came over me again."

Brannan finally gave in to the feeling and headed down to Texas Marine in Beaumont. But rather than find a boat, he was confronted by something that would change the course of his life.

"I walked in the showroom, and I looked, and there was just a beautiful hand-carved fish on the wall. I was just mesmerized by and just something told me, 'You can do that.' I mean, it was so strong."

It was a sign from God, Brannan said.

"You didn't want me to come look at boats," he said. "You wanted me to come down here so I can see that fish, not knowing that it would completely change my life."

It turned out that the fish was created by local wood carver Richard Spinney. By rights, the fish should not have even been there at all. It was commissioned to be a sponsored prize in a fishing tournament that was canceled, ending up on the wall of the showroom. Brannan offered to buy it, but the \$300 price tag was more than he could afford without a job.

"So, I went to talk to Dick (Spinney), and if you know Dick he said, 'Well, get a piece of wood and a chisel and a hammer. You know, just make it look like it.' I said, 'OK I'll do my best.'



Phil Brannan works on a flounder in his Lumberton studio.

"That spark that had ignited in me, I couldn't put it out."

Between 1995 and 1997, Brannan carved fish. He bought a Dremel tool — "The chisels and knives, I was losing too much blood," he said. After a while, Spinney said Brannan should enter them in a competition. Brannan didn't know there was such a thing. Spinney told him about an annual wood carving competition at the Arboretum in Houston.

"I drove over and brought my bass over there and I won first place and Best of Show," Brannan said.

The next year, he took a flounder and won best in show again. That judge told him he needed to go to the world tournament, which was being held in Ocean City, Maryland. In the meantime, he consistently won at Texas and regional competitions.

"I won first place and best in show, then I did it again, and people started getting aggravated — really, they got mad," he said. "This isn't why I entered this. I'm going to do this world thing where I can get beat, because I'll never get better if I don't get beat, you know? It was just my thing."

Brannan and his wife Robin headed to Maryland.

"I walked in there, and the fish were just stunningly beautiful," he said.

Brannan entered in the novice category and won first place-category and first place-division.

"The judge told me, 'I gave you every ribbon I could give you. You need to be you need to be on

open table," Brannan said. "I said, 'Well, thank you, sir, I appreciate that vote of confidence.'"

The next year he competed in the intermediate category, where was against some strong carvers. He won his category and third place in the overall. The next year, he went to the open category.

"That's when I just started getting beat left and right," he said. "But I was still bringing the home ribbons. I would place first or second. It took me several years, many years, before I finally won my first in the Breakthrough."

Breakthrough magazine is a large taxidermy publication that sponsors the taxidermy and carving World Championships.

In 2015 Brannan was a double — first place best in world interpretive and first place best in world miniature. Along the way, he has beaten the best the world has to offer, including the judge that oversaw his first world competition.

"I always said you're not a world champion until you beat a world champion," Brannan said. "When I did it, that validated me. First time, a fluke. Second time's a coincidence. Third time, you may be the real deal."

The passion for carving and competing is what drives Brannan. He said it has never been about money. Brannan said if God asks what he did with the talent he was given, he can say he took as far as he could.

"I wasn't really a ribbon chaser," he said. "I did it enough to feel validated and encour-

aged. Because once I started losing, a lot of people they stop short. They really stopped short of their full potential because of frustration. But if it's truly your passion, nothing can stop you. You're going through it no matter what and that's everything in life.

"I always say art comes from the heart. Then to the brain, then to the hands. And then, finally, to the eyes to see. It's a transition. It starts with inspiration and winds up with creation.

Brannan is retired now, having spent 25 years at the Betz water treatment company. But he won't retire from his true vocation. He continues to carve and paint the fish, challenging himself to work on smaller and smaller fish. He competes with himself as much as other people.

"It's it is basically a hobby that got out of hand," he said.

There's a coda to the story of Spinney's fish. After trying to buy it and being rebuffed for many years, Brannan offered to carve a 30-inch speckled trout out of the finest butternut wood as a replacement. Long story short, the trade was made, and the source of his divine inspiration hangs in pride of place in Brannan's studio. Some things mean more than ribbons.

"Phil Brannan: Artistry in Wood" is on view in Art Museum of Southeast Texas' Café Arts series for local artists through March 17. AMSET is located at 550 Main St. in Beaumont.

For more, visit philsfinefins.com.

Fine details separate Phil Brannan from average carver

By Andy Coughlan
CONTRIBUTOR

Wood carver Phil Brannan, by his own admission, is a slow worker. But he is meticulous in the details of his carved fish, as one would expect from a multiple world champion.

Besides, it's the fine details that separate him out from the average carver. The fish seem to be alive. It takes carving skill learned over many years, painting skill that rivals any old master, and a keen eye developed from hours of watching fish.

Like a human, each fish is different. When he paints the patterns on a speckled trout, where the average person sees uniformity, Brannan sees a unique pattern.

"The real erratic patterns is what makes your fish look real," he said. "You can train for perfection, but when you do, it looks plastic. It doesn't look real."

Brannan uses dental tools to put fine details in the wood. Each scale is carved individually, not too deep, but just enough so the paint has depth. Many carvers use an airbrush to put on a base coat, but Brannan prefers to use a brush, sometimes with as few as three hairs. He applies acrylic washes, building slowly as each layer dries, sometimes applying 15 coats to give it the right tone.

As each coat dries, Brannan looks for what he calls "eye snags."

"If my eye runs across it and my eye snags on something, I'm like, I gotta fix that," he said. "It's just got to be the full package deal. And then when you finally step back, and my eye just flows across both sides — because a lot of these have a front but they're designed to be 360 (degrees)."

While he may have several fish on the go at any one time, his slogan is "one of a kind, one at a time."

"I finish one at a time," he laughed. "Better put it that way."

Brannan has a lionfish that is merely four-inches long but took 11 months to finish.

"I was sick of it," he said.

In 2005, Brannan said a competitor at the world championships from New Zealander's lionfish beat him into second place. Being a competitive person, Brannan thought he could do better. While he prefers carving fish that are indigenous to his native Southeast Texas, Brannan began to study the Indonesian fish.

"I'd go to these aquariums and watch (the lionfish)," he said. "The pattern is flat, but you have to carve it at a 45, so you're having to offset. What makes a good judge is when they know anatomy."

Brannan noticed that the spines down the back of the lionfish were not uniformly straight.

"Each one had to be individually carved, flared, and then a tip of poison on the end,"

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Phil Brannan, world champion wood carver

Brannan said. "And the guy from New Zealand had done them all straight up and down."

But Brannan had noticed that when the fish relaxes the spines they lay down. The way the New Zealander had carved them, they would stack like boards.

"(But) that's incorrect," Brannan said. "Every other one is offset, so that when they lay down, they all lay beside each other. So, I had to carve every one of them different (angles), not much, you can't go too much inside. You have to do just enough."

When he finished the lionfish, he was reading his Bible when he came across a passage in Genesis where it stated that Bezalel had built the Ark of the Covenant.

"God told Moses, 'Hey, I had given this man the wisdom and knowledge and understanding in carving of wood' — and I never saw that before," Brannan said. "So, I had an idea. I signed the bottom of my piece, and then down at the corner I wrote Bezalel, and I think, 'Now we're both going into this show.'"

When he arrived at the competition, the carver from New Zealand had a lionfish that depicted Guido Galletti's submerged sculpture "Christ of the Abyss" with coral all over it and the fish swimming around it. Brannan said he thought, "Ah well, another second place."

"Well, I had forgotten that I had written Bezalel on the bottom," he said. "I couldn't lose, because I felt like God gave me the wisdom and knowledge and understanding to carve wood. So, we were like brothers, you know from a different millennia. I walked back in there and I saw I had this long ribbon lying beside it. It was so emotional, I just cried."

The judge had felt the other piece was too busy, Brannan said.

"Then I remembered Bezalel on the bottom — I thought, that was a God wink, Brannan said. "We started this journey together. We ended it together."

"It's a very rewarding career. I just can't talk about it without talking about (God) because when I've run into a problem I'd stop. I say, 'We're in this together. You're gonna have to help me figure this out.' He was my customer service, tech support, whatever you want to call it."

"It's been a wonderful trip up and I've enjoyed every minute of it."