

## RIVER DREAMS IN WOOD

# LEO AND MARILYN SMITH



"Trempealeau Mountain"

By Pamela Eyden

On a large, dark, wooden panel, a beautiful, naked woman glides through the night on a barge, screened by reeds and saplings. Light gleams from her pearly skin, while water spirits waltz in the darkness around her and fish swim below.

"Siren" is one of Leo Smith's newest carvings. Like much of his work, it tells a story about the river that's mythical, ambiguous and true. It dominates one wall of a two-gallery show of the works of Leo and Marilyn Smith, called "Our Town, Our River," at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum in Winona, Minn.

The river provides both the theme and raw materials for the show. "Siren," for example, is built on driftwood Leo pulled from the river, shaped, assembled and gave to a friend to use as a headboard 30 years ago. When the friend gave it back, Leo didn't know what to do with it.

He considered returning it to the river, but one night while watching towboat searchlights scan the riverbanks he had an inspiration. Something about the quiet river flowing by in the dark and the lights flaring from behind an island reminded him

of sirens in old Greek stories — those alluring daughters of the river god whose songs enticed sailors to dash their ships on the rocks.

The dazzling little siren in "Siren" is both muse and desire.

"We all have desires — food, money, status, achievement, love, sex,

*The stylized head of a mythical horse seems to surge up out of the waves, a lotus bud clutched in its teeth.*

cars, more electronic gadgets — and Americans seem to have more desires than most," Leo said.

The show displays an amazing diversity of styles, from modern to whimsy to folk art, and from minimally shaped driftwood to intricately carved and painted wood assemblies. It's hard to believe they were all created by the same hands.

Every piece has a story, which the Smiths share on small placards mounted nearby.

"Trempealeau Mountain" portrays the secret life of a river mountain. The

brightly colored triptych features an assembly of individually painted elements. Spirits move between the trees and a bald eagle presides over the whole.

"Aorta" derives power from rhythm and repetition, with stylized lily pads, heron beaks and waves arranged in a visual puzzle.

"River Horse," on the other hand, stands alone. The stylized head of a mythical horse seems to surge up out of the waves, a lotus bud clutched in its teeth. You can almost hear the rushing water spiraling off its head. The style is both ancient and modern — like something reminiscent of the ancient Akkadians — that could also fit nicely at the Museum of Modern Art. Originally carved in wood, it was cast in bronze in 1996.

Over the years Leo has studied and absorbed influences from Korean temple carving, Northwest Coast Indian masks and other sources.

Several carvings in the show are figures of real and archetypal river-town characters. Marilyn's grandfather was a butcher in Fountain City, Wis. Another ran a flour mill. There are carvings of both in the show, as

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Above: "River Wreath Mask"

Top right: "River Horse"

Right: Detail of "Siren"



well as other local characters, done in a retro folk-art style, smoothly carved and masterfully painted.

Marilyn painted the carvings, until she retired recently. She now manages their website. Their son Lyon is also an artist, with a gallery in downtown Winona.



Leo and Marilyn grew up in Winona, and make Fountain City their home. The river has been a central inspiration in their work and their lives. Leo and his six brothers and sisters learned to swim, boat and fish at the family cottage on Winnebago Island, near Winona.

"When I was 13 years old my father gave me my own boat with a motor. He pushed me out from shore and said, 'Come back for dinner.' He trusted me. Can you imagine anyone doing that today? What a piece of luck that was for me."

After a tour of duty in the army, Leo spent a year as an apprentice to Konstantinos Papadakis, a carver of Greek Orthodox church screens and altars. This, he said with a smile, is

where he learned the real secret of being a good carver: "Keep your tools sharp."

In 1970 he returned to his "swamp house" on the river and started carving for a living. Eventually he and Marilyn opened a gallery in Fountain City. Leo carved. Marilyn applied color. They collaborated to develop the "folk art" style that many people are familiar with from their "Our Town," Santa Claus and angel figures. Wood carving is not an easy way to support a growing family. Their fortunes changed in the late 1980s, when they sold 10 original Santa Claus figures to Midwest of Cannon Falls, which manufactured resin reproductions and marketed them nationally.

"It was amazing to go from selling on the street to, three years later, selling all over the country," Leo recalled.

The Smiths eventually decided to make their own reproductions, at factories in the Philippines and China. This was an exciting experiment that involved more long-distance quality control than they had expected. Marilyn once had to hand paint an entire

truckload of figures that had been done wrong.

In 2005 the Minnesota Marine Art Museum bought a large collection of the Smiths' original wood carvings and sculptures.

Leo, who now works on his own and occasionally on commission, still goes out to the river nearly every day. He keeps his eyes open for whatever speaks to his imagination. He has an appreciation for worn mussel shells, stems chewed by muskrats, sticks gnawed by beavers — whom he calls his "associates" — and evidence of water spirits — sometimes in ice, sometimes near waterfalls. The smallest new artwork in the show is "Water Stone Frank," a tiny icon in modernist style named for St. Francis. It's the color of lichen and limestone, with a fluid shape and many eyes — or are they mouths?

"Water spirits are everywhere. They suggest mysteries and magic, things we don't understand that are incredibly powerful," he explained.

You'll find lots of water spirits in the show. 🌊👤