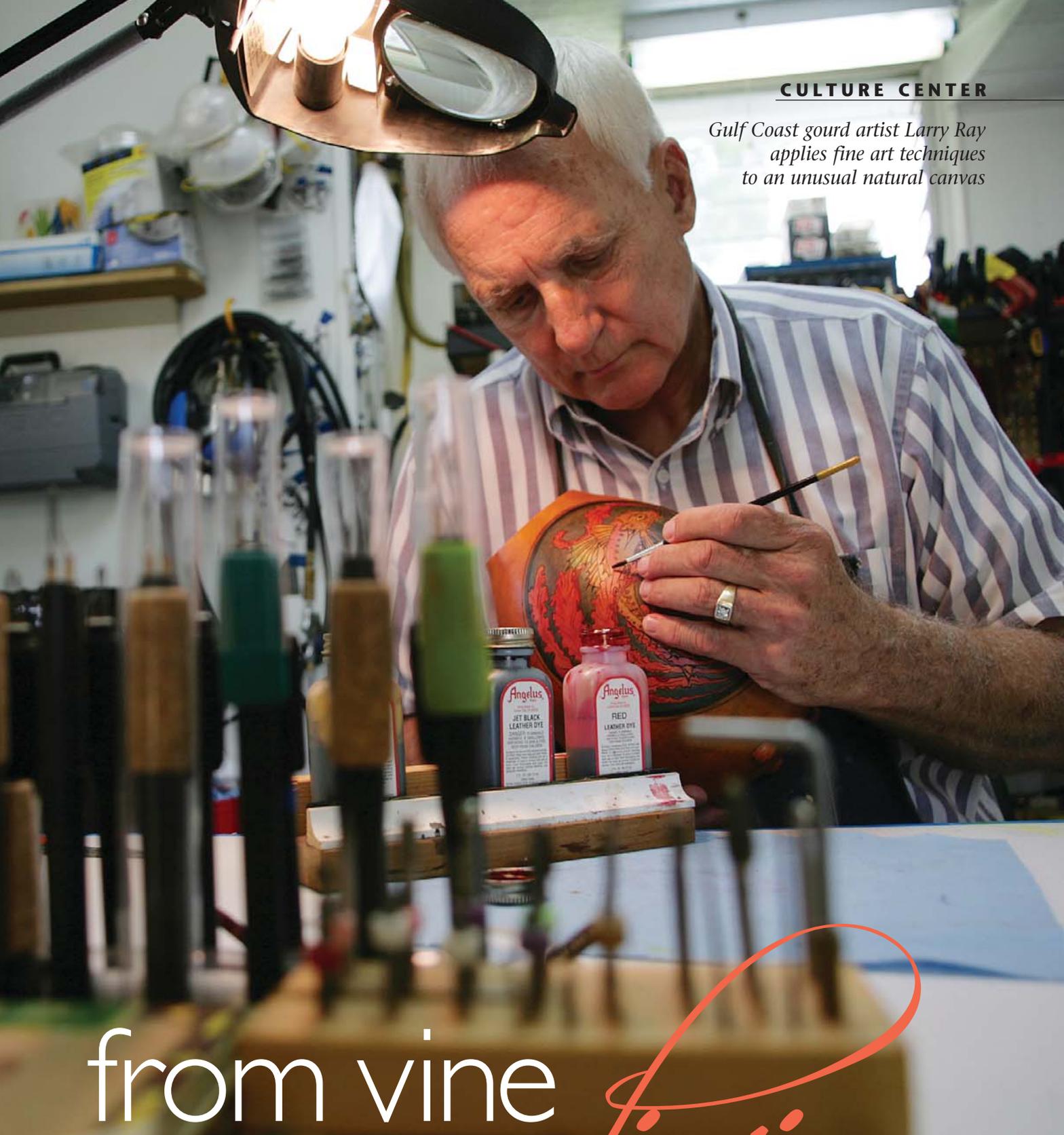


Gulf Coast gourd artist Larry Ray
applies fine art techniques
to an unusual natural canvas

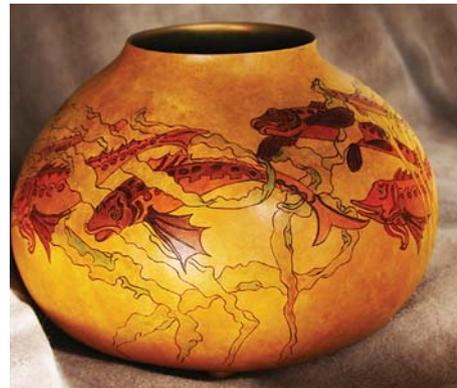
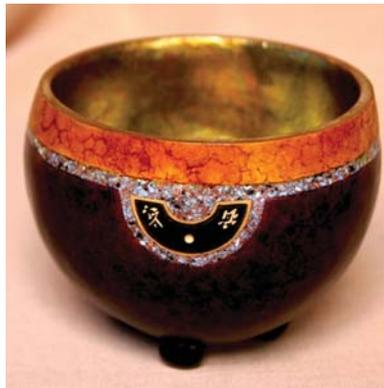


from vine

to *divine*

BY KRISTEN TWEDT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE WANN



“Each one is a piece of pottery thrown by Mother Nature and then offered for the hand of an artist to decorate and embellish into a warm and delightful piece of art.” — gourd artist Larry Ray

a veteran broadcast journalist and television producer, artist Larry Ray of Gulfport savors his transition from long hours with the camera to creative time spent with an unlikely canvas. Gourd artistry has launched a renewed vitality in the work of this painter who first dabbled in oils as a teenager in Aransas Pass, Texas. When making art that rivals the finest sculpture or ceramics, Ray retreats to his studio and uses his gourd.

"After all those years working as a journalist under the pressure of deadlines, the escape to a small work table in my studio transcends past and future," says Ray. "It provides a place to delight in taking an ordinary gourd and watching it surprise and dazzle me as it becomes a beautiful thing."

At age 66, Ray astounds fine art collectors with exquisite designs that begin as a rustic, hard-shelled gourd. Within only a few years, his pieces have emerged as highly prized collectors' items.

Ray's artistic inclinations developed early and flourished during his time overseas as a Navy serviceman and as a correspondent for the American Red Cross. He visited world-renowned museums and drew inspiration from the works of such diverse artists as Titian, Maurice Utrillo, and Salvador Dali.

"For a kid from south Texas to be surrounded by the work of masters of the Renaissance was literally eye-opening," says Ray. He studied paintings at the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, Italy, transfixed by the artists' delicate control of light and dark, or "chiaroscuro."

"When I lived in Naples in my early 20s, I was a very prolific painter," says Ray. He made friends at the Accademia di Belle Arti, and his surrealist oil canvases intrigued his fellow artists. "My Italian friends found the work interesting. I had several small exhibits in Naples."



SMALL PHOTOS COURTESY JEAN BRAGG GALLERY

After his service in the Navy, Ray attended the University of Texas before working in television in south Texas and New Orleans. He left broadcasting in 1980, moved to Gulfport, and built an independent television and video production studio. All the while, he returned to Europe often, painting and visiting old friends as well as museums and galleries.

Around 1993, Ray realized his interest in creative artistry had dwindled. "I was losing my fascination and discipline with oils, and I slowly stopped painting," says Ray. But 10 years later, inspiration arrived again in the form of an unusual gift.

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After hours of steady-handed work in the studio (opening page), Larry Ray's "Gliding Gunards" is complete (below). The emblem is adapted from an 1896 Art Nouveau design by M.P. Verneuil. "Gunard is the French term for what we call a robin fish," Ray says. "They are bottom dwellers, thus the dark mood of the coloration...because there is very little light down at that depth." Each of Ray's finished pieces (examples below left and opposite) invokes a similar attention to detail but retains its exquisite individuality of style. When he's not creating, Ray is frequently found with his border collies, Missy and Scout (opposite, top).





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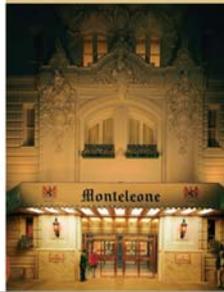
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FROM VINE TO DIVINE

(continued from page 21)

"A neighbor gave me a gourd she had grown," says Ray. "I thanked her and thought I might someday make a birdhouse or something out of it. That's about all I knew about gourds. Then I discovered beautifully decorated gourds while doing research on the Internet. I had never seen anything like them."

He plunged into networking with the creators of these spectacular pieces and studying the methods used to transform the three-dimensional gourd surface into a true work of art.

Jean Bragg, owner of the Jean Bragg Gallery of Southern Art in New Orleans, touts the jewel-like perfection of Ray's gourd artistry.

"Larry Ray is, first of all, an accomplished fine-arts artist who has adapted his talent and experience to the decoration of the unique and changing form of each gourd," says Bragg. "His knowledge of historical design is far-ranging, from European Paleolithic themes to Art Nouveau, from Oriental motifs to American Deco."

Bragg credits the signature depth and style of Ray's works to the artist's familiarity with natural surroundings. "Ray is also a superb student of indigenous flora and fauna and is able to re-create them in exacting detail," she says.

Similar in approach to the design and decoration of pottery, gourd artistry predates clay and stone pottery by thousands of years, when natives of Africa, Peru, the Caribbean, and other regions inscribed the surfaces of gourds with pictures detailing events of the time. Thick-walled gourds like "Lagenaria siceraria" are

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Precision tools (above) and special dyes originally intended for leather (opposite, bottom) give Ray's finished works added artistic dimensions. "I use inlaid composite stone, gold leafing, and other techniques, so we don't 'paint gourds,'" he says.

thought to be the oldest surviving cultivated plants. Serving as utilitarian vessels since ancient times, gourds have been converted to an endless array of containers, instruments, masks, and even phallic sheaths used by New Guinea tribesmen. But it is their lasting hallmark among three-dimensional forms like pottery and sculpture that established these pieces as timeless collectible art.

Beginning with a gourd supplied by growers at Lone Star Gourds in Texas, Ray embarks on what he calls the left brain/right brain challenge of gourd artistry.

"The gourd requires the use of both sides of your brain," says Ray. "The physical work of cleaning, cutting, sanding, and preparing the gourd is, first, a sort of parallel to throwing pottery. It's dirty work, too. You have to wear special respiratory equipment because of the threat of inhaling black mold inside the gourd."

Once the gourd is cleaned, cut, and prepared, Ray takes his time envisioning the finished piece.

"Sometimes these gourds sit around here for a long time before I do much with them," says Ray. "It's the challenge of shifting from the physical to the creative process that excites me."

Gourd artists use a wide range of techniques and media, including intricate carving and pyrography, in which designs are burned onto the surface. Ray has also

perfected the use of Inlaid, an inlay stone composite material. Inlaying stone and adding color to the gourds with leather dyes offer welcome diversions from the familiar application of paint on canvas.

"Using the leather dyes is challenging," says Ray. "Water-thin leather dyes are flowed into the design with sable brushes. You get one chance to get it right. It's tougher than watercolor painting because it cannot be erased and takes total concentration and Zen-like relaxation at the same time."

Ray gently dismisses the misconception that gourd artistry is simply a flea-market hobby. "Each one is a piece of pottery thrown by Mother Nature and then offered for the hand of an artist to decorate and embellish into a warm and delightful piece of art."

Marjie Gowdy, executive director of the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, witnessed the delight of museum visitors during Ray's two-month exhibit there before the facility's destruction by Hurricane Katrina.

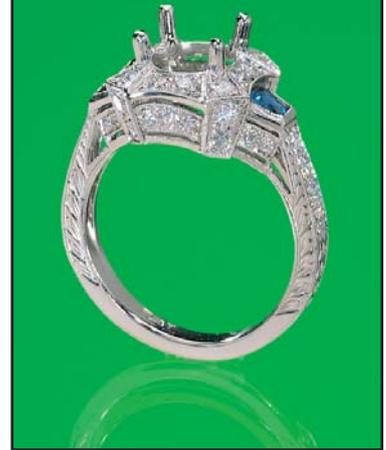
"Almost all the works Larry had on display were sold," says Gowdy. "The response was overwhelmingly positive. And he's such an engaging fellow. Everyone enjoyed meeting him."

Larry Ray, like so many other coastal artists, speculated about his ability to return to his art or even to remain in his Bayou View home after the storm.

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FROM VINE TO DIVINE

(continued from page 23)

"I have had a hard time surpassing the blow to my creativity and to the joy in my artistry that Katrina somehow imposed," says Ray, whose son David, daughter-in-law Kathy, and granddaughter Eve live in storm-ravaged New Orleans.

Thankfully, Ray has returned to the studio, though he suspects few of his original works owned by Gulf Coast collectors have survived the hurricane. "A lot of my work has been ground up by Katrina and is in landfill," he says.

Honored as "Artist of the Month" at 13th Street Gallery in Gulfport and invited as one of four featured artists to the prestigious Welburn International Gourd Art Festival near San Diego, Ray treasures the acceptance of his work by fellow artists and collectors. Now "semi-retired," he enjoys time with his rescued border collies, Missy and Scout, and a raucous group of traveling friends nicknamed the "Cronies." He considers his sessions with gourds to be a soothing reprieve from the years spent chronicling the harsh realities of our world.

"I am having a wonderful time again with my art and have just scratched the surface of creative expression in gourd artistry," Ray says. "Being 66 years old is somehow not as I imagined it might be. It is really better because of this serendipitous continuation of my art with such an improbable canvas."

Amusing gourd sculptures like the surrealist "Acid Reflux as a Profit Center" speak to the dry wit of a man who has rediscovered the inherent pleasures of creating with purpose and passion. From shimmering small ceremonial cups bedecked with ornamental stone and cryptic inscriptions to elegant pots garnished with whimsical fish in resplendent hues, Ray takes the homely gourd from the obscurity of the vine to its rightful place among treasured art of the ages. ■

For more information on Larry Ray's gourd artistry, contact the Jean Bragg Gallery of Southern Art, 600 Julia Street, New Orleans, 504/895-7375; www.jeanbragg.com. Visit www.larryray.com for more photographs of Ray's fine art.



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