

Masters of Their Craft

Plaster, wood, molten iron … they use it all to create beautiful, usable art
Masters of Their Craft FSU Students Learn the Business of Art While Helping Beautify Their Campus

By Stephanie Castellano

On the corner of West Gaines and St. Augustine streets, in the shadow of Doak Campbell Stadium, sits a discreet beige building with a sunken front yard enclosed by a chicken-wire fence. It all seems intent on anonymity; unless you know where to look, the small sign indicating that the rectangular establishment houses Florida State University's Master Craftsman Program will escape your eye.

Nevertheless, the Master Craftsman Program has a highly visible role at the university. Though the studio itself lacks ambiance, the artists and their apprentices within are responsible for making the campus beautiful.

The program began six years ago when FSU's then-President Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte commissioned local artist Bob Bischoff to create a stained glass window for Dodd Hall, which houses the university's humanities department. The completed window now is one of the most striking architectural sights on campus, and FSU – with Bischoff's help – became the first university to create an “in-house” program for tackling such specialized campus projects.

The studio was originally housed inside the William Johnston Building on campus, but when more space was needed, the program was relocated to 905 W. Gaines St.

The studio specializes in different kinds of moldings, various cold cast materials and stained glass, and now is expanding into hot glass, foundry and statuary work.

Strolling through campus, you can't avoid seeing at least one project that the master craftsmen and their student apprentices have had their hands on. Their recent projects, though not quite as dramatic as the Dodd Hall window, include a series of cast-concrete commemorative benches; the FSU Sod Cemetery – 70 bronze plaques set in the ground, commemorating significant Seminole football victories on the road since 1962; and the restoration of old cast-stone pieces for the new Psychology Building.

Another ambitious project was recently completed. Working with artist Melinda Copper, members of the Master Craftsman Program produced bronze busts of the six Nobel laureates who have been members of the FSU faculty. Work on the busts, which were unveiled in October 2008 near the College of Medicine, took more than two years.

The relationship between Florida State and the Master Craftsman Program is mutually beneficial. The university, aware that the ambiance of the campus is a consideration for prospective college students, benefits from having a program of specially skilled artists ready to meet its needs. The Master Craftsman Program is employed by the university and thus generates its own funding. So everybody wins.

The real winners, though, are the students. To apprentice at the Master Craftsman Studios, students have to be enrolled in classes at FSU. They don't have to come from a particular major; in fact, the students don't have to have any experience in art at all. As long as they agree to spend a certain number of hours per week volunteering at the studio, the students are essentially learning life skills on the side for free. During one visit to the studio, a shaggy-haired student was meticulously touching up a plaster mold. When asked, he said his major was international affairs.

Although the students don't receive any kind of certification from the Master Craftsman Program after graduation, they do receive valuable work experience. The focus of the apprenticeship is teaching the students how to support themselves with their abilities. The students not only become masters of their craft, they also learn project management and business practices.

“Creativity is how you solve problems,” said studio manager Ira Hill. “In some cases, it's salesmanship. Artists need to have people skills too.”

With just the right combination of people skills, business sense and – of course – creative talent, the students of the program are equipped for success, whether they choose to take their career path in the direction of their academic studies or take the leap into the scary world of art for profit.

“We like to look at the things that are objective – ways to be more efficient,” Hill said. “There's a divide between business and arts. The (Master Craftsman Program) has a foot on each side.”

While creating art for money is scorned by some in the art community, the image of the starving artist works better as a

myth than a reality.

“Artists should be able to make a living doing what they love,” Hill said.

The foyer of the Master Craftsman Studio looks like the entrance to an art museum, with polished wood flooring, classical bronze statues and abstract artwork on the walls. A large plaster piece is mounted on the wall on the left — a replica of the bronze-coated original, which hangs in the office of Ron Sachs Communications on South Duval Street. The graceful curves of the plaster look like the rippling motion of wind on water. The inspiration for the piece came one wet morning when Hill was taking out the trash: The rain had pushed the dirt in the front yard into ripples, like the surface of a pond when a strong breeze disturbs it.

Creativity has quite an elastic meaning at the Master Craftsman Studio. It could mean salesmanship, figuring out how to complete a project time- and cost-efficiently, or seeing beauty and artistic potential in the patterns made by dirt on the ground. The successful artist also is an entrepreneur with the ability to make his or her vision a concrete (or plaster … or metal) reality.

Making visions into reality has taken on a more important meaning than ever at the Master Craftsman Studio these days. For two years, the staff has been planning to enlarge and diversify the facility. They want to rebuild the studio so it looks more inviting to passersby. The dirt and gravel front yard will be replaced by a sunken garden with tropical plants. There will be a colonnade in the front of the building, and the front doors will lead into the gallery.

Several more crafts will be added in which students can specialize, including hot glass, jewelry-making and furniture design. The plans will allow visitors to move through the studio and watch the glass-blowers and the other artists at work. It will be safe but accessible. Also, while student education will always be the main focus of the Master Craftsman Program, the staff would like to offer classes in the evenings that would be open to the public.

In addition, for the past two years, Tallahasseeans have been invited to see night-time iron pours at the studio.

“We want to be a resource to the community,” said Hill, “a place where people can watch, learn, do, buy and share in the creative process.”

The staff also hopes to have a bronze foundry, which will allow for bronze casting. Currently they only own a cupola furnace — a four-legged, cylindrical melting device that is used for iron-casting. (Casting, for those not versed in craftsmanship-speak, is the process of pouring a liquefied substance into a mold, where it is allowed to solidify).

The cupola now sits alone in the side yard of the studio, looking like a rusty relic of medieval times. Hill picked up something on the ground that, to the unpracticed eye, looked like a lump of coal.

“Coke,” he explained. “This is what fueled the Industrial Revolution.”

Coke is a coal derivative that gives off little or no smoke when burned. When used as a substitute for coal in iron-making blast furnaces, it was found to have properties that allowed for a cheaper and more efficient production of iron. The possibilities this little chunk of carbonaceous material opened up for architecture and art must have seemed endless.

Now, at the Master Craftsman Studio, the only ingredient needed to fuel plans for studio expansion is funding — which may be hard to come by. The staff remains optimistic, however.

“We’re very close to seeing this come to fruition,” Hill said as he headed into the back office to retrieve the sketches of the future facilities. As he flipped on the lights, Hill and a visitor stopped short at the sight of a man who had been sitting alone in the dark office. It was Bob Bischoff, the program’s founder.

“I have a very important meeting,” Bischoff said. “I’m collecting my thoughts.”

As they were leaving, the visitor commented to Hill that the studio was difficult to find. Even though they had been there before, they passed it twice — once in each direction — before spotting the correct driveway.

“Yes,” Bischoff said as they walked down the hall. “We’re a well-kept secret.”

Learn more about the Master Craftsman Program at craft.fsu.edu.