



Carving Out a Niche

by David Dobbs



Brick sculptor Mara Smith uses conventional ceramic tools, kitchen utensils, and shingle hammers to work unfired brick into monumental sculpture. Given the right clay, she says, "the knife goes right through it like butter."

"I've done spaceships," says brick sculptor Mara Smith. "I've done scenes from Shakespeare — Hamlet's hand, holding a skull — and parade scenes and mathematical formulas and biological structures and all kinds of stuff. I've even carved cartoons. One of the stranger things I've been asked to carve is a portrait of John Wayne 8 feet tall on the side of somebody's house."

Smith is one of a handful of brick sculptors around the country who work exclusively with brick. Most others, she says, work as potters, designers, masons, or "are recently retired from the fish and game department." Smith landed her first brick sculpture commission without ever having carved brick. She was in art school studying ceramics and won the job on the strength of her experience with clay. She immediately felt at home. "Once my knife touched the brick, it was like I had always done it."

What she's doing, she says, is "by far the least expensive form of monumental art." At \$85 to \$105 per square foot, brick sculpture isn't cheap. Smith and other sculptors

usually carve for companies or institutions seeking to dress up high-visibility public places: libraries, hotels, colleges, and banks.

But Smith also works for the occasional homeowner who wants to commit something to stone. Probably the scariest job she's had, she says, was carving a group portrait of somebody's children. "Portraits are very, very risky for an artist to do. And these were their kids. Luckily, they were real happy with it."

Brick sculptors work with green, unfired brick, which cuts, says Smith, like hard leather. Others say it's like carving well-frozen ice cream.

Brick sculptors use "real high-tech stuff," says Smith. "Like kitchen knives. But, the good stuff, you know — Chicago cutlery. I often draw with a shingling hammer. Those metal meat tenderizers are nice, because they have textured faces. And you've got to have some burger flippers — the heavy-duty kind that can cut deep, like 4 inches. They're like short shovels. Then there are the common pottery tools, metal rods



Smith's 9 x 12-foot "Seafarer" flanks the main entry of a residence in Redlands, Calif. The carving took Smith about a month to design and another month to carve; it cost the clients about \$9,000.

with loops, and so forth, for cutting out small details. You use what works."

It can take up to several months to carve a job, depending on the size. Smith spent three months carving a 46-foot-long mural for an Illinois library and two months carving two 27x14-foot murals for a Korean hotel. She keeps the brick damp and workable by covering it carefully with plastic each night. When a sculpture is done, the bricks are numbered, disassembled,

and returned to the brick factory for firing.

At the factory, the brick air-dries for a few weeks, then moves on flatbed rail cars through "tunnel kilns" 500 feet long, where it bakes for up to a week. After that, the bricks go to the site, where a mason, often accompanied by the artist, installs the wall. "You don't need any different sort of mason to do this," says Smith, "just a patient one, because it goes slower than an ordinary wall." The bricks must line up perfectly, and the artist must carve and shape the mortar while it is still soft to match the adjacent bricks.

Brick sculptors, like other specialty tradespeople, ride the crests and troughs of the building market. When I talked to Smith in April, things were slow, but she said it looked as if she'd be pretty busy later in the year.

And there's at least one other way sculpting brick resembles contracting. Asked what the hardest part of her job was, Smith says, "Getting the drawings approved in the first place. After that, the rest is just a lot of hours." ■

David Dobbs is an associate editor at The Journal of Light Construction.



This seascape of the Cayman Reef was done by artist Jack Curran. He used large bricks (12 x 12 x 8 inches) to keep mortar joints to a minimum and achieve the deep relief distinguishing this sculpture.