

Parfait, Roy



Wood Carver

Roy Parfait is a woodcarver and member of the Houma Indian tribe. He was born and raised in Dulac, Louisiana along Grand Caillou Bayou, in Terrebonne Parish. At about 5,000 members, the Houmas are the largest group of Indians in Louisiana. Many Houma Indians have maintained traditional lifestyles of fishing, trapping, and hunting. Indian and French traditions are especially strong in the Dulac area, where many older people still speak French. Houma craftspeople today include boat builders, palmetto weavers, moss dolls makers, carvers, and blowgun makers.

Roy grew up around the tradition of carving wood. His grandfather was a carver and began carving in 1976, making small wooden animals and miniature pirogues. He found that he was especially interested in carving animals, and he is well known today for his long-necked geese, ducks, beavers, rabbits, birds, fish, turtles, panthers, pelicans, and frogs. He has also begun making raccoons and owls, although he says that getting the owls' beaks right is a challenge. Mr. Parfait tries to use local woods like cypress, willow, and tupelo gum for his carvings as often as possible. The finished products are especially beautiful when he uses the wood he calls "black cypress," which has been submerged in water and mud and has taken on a darker color. He also uses other woods like mahogany, walnut, cherry, teak, black walnut, and butternut, when he can get them.

Each animal figure is whittled with a penknife, then sanded by hand until it is smooth. He suggests that finishing the piece may be the most important step in the process. He uses a clear floor sealer, dipping small pieces directly in the can of sealer. For larger pieces, like long-necked geese, he applies the sealer with a brush. After letting the piece dry for a day, he seals it again. The result is a soft gloss that lets the natural beauty of the wood grain show through.

Fluent in English and French, Roy Parfait often serves as a spokesperson for his tribe's culture and history, a contact for Houma Indian craftspeople, and an interpreter for those who speak little English. From 1979 to 1986, he served as manager of the Houma Crafts Co-op, and until 1986 he was also the Director of the Dulac Community Center. Today, he devotes himself to his craft full-time. The small wooden animals are his best sellers at the many festivals and fairs he attends, but he says that he enjoys trying larger pieces occasionally. He has twice demonstrated wood carving at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, the Natchitoches NSU Folk Festival, Silver Dollar City, the Native Crafts Festival in Lafayette, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in New Orleans, and many other festivals throughout Louisiana and the South. He has also been invited to France twice to demonstrate and sell his work. He was inducted into the LFC Hall of Master Folk Artist.