



Building a Sustainable NYC From the Ground Up

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Made in NYC Company of the Month - July 2011

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Deborah Mills Woodcarving

Chisels at Work Near Court Square

"...sideboards, cabinets and the like, which we have quite as much for beauty's sake as for use; we need not spare ornament on these, but may make them as elegant and as elaborate as we can with carving, inlaying or painting..." ~William Morris



In her Long Island City studio, artisan Deborah Mills continues a long tradition of customized, passion-filled work of wood carving. Mills designs and carves every commission by hand, using chisels and mallets in a meticulous process. Incorporating symbols and motifs from historic folk and medieval sources, Mills' designs and skilled craftsmanship contribute to making what she calls "people's personal history." She collaborates with other New York City artisans to carve ambitious works like the [St. Peregrine Shrine](#), the lion cornice she hewed of cherry wood with Brooklyn cabinetmaker Wolfgang Pflanzl, and the playful [Cowardly Lion Mirror](#).

Mills sometimes accepts commissions for original sculptures from individuals, but mostly she works with New York City based architects, designers, restoration experts, museums, and cabinetmakers. She has positioned herself within a bustling, growing business cluster -- a "microclimate," she calls it, in which each player is able to "create work for one another." Her extensive portfolio ranges

between one-of-a-kind original designs, reproductions, and restoration projects. Mills receives commercial and private commissions, building architectural elements, liturgical furnishings, doors and doorways, and fireplace mantels. Mills also designs and carves decorative relief panels and ornamental details on capitals, cornices, newel posts, antique reproductions, friezes, and panels.



She started out not as an entrepreneur, but as an artist. In 1983, Mills began studying wood sculpture with Lorrie Goulet at the Art Students League of New York and has been carving professionally since 1991. She perfected her ability to work with the chisel when she lived in Norway and trained with master woodcarver Erik Fridstrøm at the Viking Ships Museum in Oslo. After working as an intern in the museum for a year, Mills reached a breakthrough when Fridstrøm hired her to assist him in carving a full scale replica of the twelve-foot-tall **Ål Portal**, an 800 year old stave church doorway in the collection of the Historical Museum in Oslo.

Even with a flow of work from loyal partners and clients, maintaining studio space remains a struggle. She currently works on a project-by-project basis and leads an Introduction to Woodcarving class at **3rd Ward** in Brooklyn. Mills is planning to hold more advanced carving classes in her new studio space in Long Island City.

Mills regularly attends trade shows, including the International Contemporary Furniture Fair (**ICFF**), Preservation Trades Workshop, and **Architectural Digest Home Design Show**, and she holds demonstrations at schools, crafts fairs, and historical festivals, including New York City's **Medieval Festival at Fort Tyron Park**. Earlier this year, when Martha Stewart hosted a dozen New York-area wood artisans and their work on her TV show, Mills was among them, displaying the **intricate beauty "Guardian Angel."**



Mills carves in a wide variety of woods, among them pine, cherry, walnut, oak, maple, mahogany, teak, and basswood, and when she can she sources the materials from New York State. But her other most valuable resource she finds all around her in New York City: it's the cabinetmakers, architects and others who collaborate with her as part of a growing network of artisans and small

manufacturers. "Truly," says Mills, "being able to turn to the incredible pool of artisanal and design talent in the metro area for this type of collaborative work is a big reason for makers like me to be here."

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<http://www.deborahmillswoodcarving.com/>

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