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...i shouldn't have.)

Everybody Must Get Stones

Master carver Walter S. Arnold is a rock star from a different era.

A fireplace can be a form of sculpture built into a house," proclaims master stone carver Walter S. Arnold, whose Elgin, Illinois, studio crafts very sculptural fireplaces indeed in Indiana limestone and exotic marbles. Arnold's hearths range in style from a lacy classicism to angular, quirky and postmodern. All are one-of-a-kind and hand-carved. Even in our house-proud age, such bespoke stone fireplaces are a rarity; there are many more modern Medicis to commission such work than Walter Arnolds to carry it out.

Chipping beauty and grace from blunt rock requires an uncommon blend of skills and stubborn, dusty years of dues-paying. It is not just out of favor as a career path but teetering on extinction, especially in this country. (Out of an American workforce of 150 million, membership in the Stonecarvers Guild stands at...30.)

Arnold, 52, learned the sculptural aspects of his art by apprenticing himself to master stone carvers in Pietrasanta, near the famous quarries of Carrara in Italy, creating marble Madonnas, altar pieces and portrait busts. He then honed the architectural side of his skills during five years at Washington's National Cathedral, and the man still chisels a mean gargoyle. (Check it out on Arnold's wonderful website, stonecarver.com.)

In crafting a fireplace, Arnold says, "I blend in individual details for the client, but I keep in mind that eventually the house will belong to other families." Sometimes the personal details are subtle, as when he re-created an ornate fireplace from old photos and substituted the current owners' crest for the originals on the corner medallions. For the home of an author, Arnold conjured up an intricate fantasy in which two sinuous Chinese dragons support a pagoda roof and rest in turn on stacks of books bearing the client's own titles on some of their spines.

But what you get when you pay \$8,000 to \$45,000 for a Walter Arnold fireplace is not just an ornament for your home, but the sense of a connection to the whole history of men coaxing form from stone. Communication in this vein opens Arnold up to a kind of time travel. Says he, "Many of my most important 'teachers' have been the anonymous carvers whose pieces I've come across while passing different buildings. Over the hundreds of years I can still stop and read the forms and language of their chisel work." •



How do you spell relief? A range of hand-carved sculptural forms by Walter S. Arnold.

