



Leonidas Kyriakopoulos builds unusual wood furniture and turned-wood objects at his studio, an artists' enclave for other craftspeople at Alameda Point.

CUSTOM MADE

When Off-the-Shelf Won't Do

Wherever you look in Alameda, your eye is likely to fall on some monument to the fine craftsmanship of days gone by. Ken Matthias, co-owner of Alameda Art Glass, points out that there are more than 5,000 homes on the Island that were built before 1910, many of them still with their original woodwork, stained glass, decorative masonry, ornate ironwork and other enhancements.

Today, Alameda is also home to a large number of artisans—some of whom have achieved national renown—working in often centuries-old crafts. At home, however, they're often practically invisible. "People think they have to go to San Francisco or Oakland for any kind of art," says Leonidas Kyriakopoulos, known to the Greek-impaired as Leon Paulos. "But it's not true."

Along with his business partner, Dean Santner, whose company, Navigator Systems, makes custom ergonomic furniture, Kyriakopoulos rents 1800 Ferry Point, Building 14, an old structure at Alameda Point which, in its navy base days, was used to test jet engines. Now it houses an amazing array of industrial-strength woodworking equipment that the partners use in their own projects, as well as a large studio in which they lease space to independent cabinetmakers and woodworkers. "This one's going to New York," Kyriakopoulos says, lifting a protective quilt off a nearly finished handcrafted table of quarter-sawn oak, a piece made by one of his tenants.

Kyriakopoulos himself works in a variety of media, creating furniture that combines turned wood, glass, stone and metal for a distinctive, space-age and sometimes-whimsical effect. He also uses his specialized wood-turning equipment to create large molds that a friend uses for casting bronze pots and bowls. But his real claim to fame is his expertise in building wood-fired stoves, grills, ovens and barbecue pits, mostly for restaurants, an

activity that combines his early interest in ceramics and brick technology with his skills in metalwork. He is involved in what he calls "an ongoing quest for lost knowledge." What started a couple of decades ago as a lunchtime contemplation of the Chez Panisse smoking fireplace has led to a lifelong study of and improvement upon ancient techniques that were in danger of dying out until a generation of foodies, especially devotees of the slow-food movement, created a new demand. "It's one of those obscure specialties," Kyriakopoulos says. "I'm the youngest guy standing, and I'm 55."

His building is part of a small but busy enclave of artisans at Alameda Point. Next door, at 450 West Atlantic, a wrought-iron sign over the door proclaims "Blacksmith." It houses the studio of Grant Marcoux who makes everything from gates and railings to custom cutlery. It's also home to Moose Metalworks, where proprietor Richard Hiatt works in bronze and copper repoussé, and, on the day we visit, is hammering away at a bronze Bacchus for a gate in the wine country. Across the street at 451 W. Atlantic Ave., furnaces are blazing at Metropolis Metalworks, and in a small studio at the side of the building, Bernie Mikkelsen makes custom bicycle frames from high-grade steel.

Elsewhere on the Island, skilled craftspeople make all manner of objects for home and personal adornment—for all those occasions when off-the-shelf just won't do: a custom wedding-

By Mary Eisenhart

Photography by Anthony Pidgeon

Finding the Perfect Craftperson

In searching for that perfect artifact, and the person who will make it, you may find these tips helpful:

EXPLORE

Even if you're not looking for anything in particular right now, a day spent biking or strolling around and poking your head into small studios and workshops can be both fun and educational. In addition to Alameda Point, Clement Street along the marina offers a wealth of fascinating establishments, from chair-caners and cabinetmakers to glass blowers, not to mention an impressive range of nautical arcana.

Also, take advantage of such events as the Park Street Art and Wine Faire, Art in the Park and open studios to check out the creations of various craftspeople and get the business cards of those whose work you like. By the same token, many retail shops around town offer various crafts for sale; if you see something you like but want something a bit different—another shape, color or fabric, perhaps—the store proprietor may know whether the artist accepts private commissions (quite a few do) and provide contact info.

Many artisans report that much of their business comes from referrals by satisfied customers, so if, for example, you really like some aspect of your neighbor's recent remodel or the style of your officemate's new earrings, don't be shy about asking who did the work and how to reach them.

GO WHERE THE PROS GO

Retail establishments where craftspeople get their supplies, e.g., local hardware or fabric stores, often have bulletin boards where they post their business cards. The store proprietors are often quite knowledgeable about who specializes in what and how happy their customers are, so it's worth a try to ask for recommendations.

CHECK WITH RELEVANT GROUPS

If the stained glass in your Victorian or the woodwork in your Craftsman bungalow is in dire need of historically faithful restoration, the Alameda Architectural Preservation Society (www.alameda-preservation.org, 986-9232) is a great source of referrals. For artists in a wide variety of media—jewelry, glass, pottery, textiles, wood and more—the Alameda City Arts Council (748-6074), which sponsors Art in the Park, also publishes a directory of its local members. And don't overlook the Alameda Chamber of Commerce (www.alamedachamber.com, 522-0414), which counts a good number of artisans and craft specialists among its members.

ring set, a hand-thrown vase or bowl, the stained-glass window or faux finish that makes a room special. But, while a few of them have highly visible storefronts, many are definitely under the radar, often working out of their homes and only surfacing sporadically for such events as Art in the Park or the Park Street Art and Wine Faire.

And, while many of them work in centuries-old crafts, they often take advantage of the benefits of modern technology to achieve better results. Matthias, for example, describes a recent multi-window project for a house on the Peninsula, in which he designed the windows on his computer, then refined the plans in much e-mailed and faxed discussion with the architect and the client. And Kyriakopoulos' kitchen creations combine the timeless bricks and iron with space-age insulation.

An ongoing problem besetting the Island's artisan community (and contributing to its relatively low profile), Kyriakopoulos says, is the lack of suitable working space, particularly for those who require a lot of room or an industrial-type setup. There are, he says, no warehouse-type live-work spaces in Alameda, and while the little enclave on West Atlantic is currently humming with activity, a sword of Damocles hangs over it.

Although Kyriakopoulos and Santner had to spend a year and a good deal of money in the late '90s to bring the building up to code before they could use it, Building 14 and its neighbors are all slated for demolition within the next few years to make way for the construction of a marina, currently delayed by the high levels of toxic heavy metals in the water. When the cleanup takes place and demolition day eventually comes, it's hard to know where the current occupants will wind up, and while Kyriakopoulos readily concedes that the city's got bigger issues on its plate than creating a hospitable climate for artists, the uncertain future is an ever-present concern.

COST ISSUES

Generally speaking, a custom, handcrafted object will cost a good deal more than a mass-produced equivalent. You're paying for expertise, time and materials, and depending on the project, the total can be quite hefty.

Cathy Rodriguez, who co-owns Quilt Fans with her husband, Walter, says that she's undertaken a few commissions herself and can refer customers to other quilters in the area for custom projects. But, she adds, she often finds that when they get a quote for time and materials, customers opt to take her quilting class and make the quilt themselves. With a bronze gate, this may not be a viable option, but many local craftspeople also teach classes.

And sometimes, the artist's expertise can keep the project more affordable than you'd expect. Frank Lopez of Silversword Jewelers on Park Street says he can often create something special for a customer for about the same price a chain would charge for generic—and his is better quality, too.

A FEW GOOD CRAFTSPEOPLE

So, just who are these expert craftspeople? We're introducing a few, although our list admittedly represents the mere tip of the artisan iceberg in Alameda. These artists are shining examples of the Island's handcrafters, and they represent a solid sampling of the skilled labor on Alameda's artisan front. Have fun discovering your own unusual purveyors of the past. READ ON ►



Grant R. Marcoux teaches blacksmithing and bladesmithing at his Alameda Point studio where he hand-hammers cutlery.



A self-taught weaver, Jennifer Rias looms colorful scarves, including some that were commissioned for Buddhist monks in Nepal.

Jeff Daniels

Jeff Daniels launched Metropolis Metal Works in 1999 and has gradually shifted its focus from relatively generic marine metal fabrication to high-end architectural projects for residences. Daniels and his crew work in steel, bronze and aluminum. Previous projects from upscale hotel and retail outlets to customized residential fittings, railings, gates and doors reflect Daniels' respect for the craftsmanship of old-world guild members, who focused on both enduring functionality and beautiful aesthetics.

Metropolis Metal Works can take existing designs and work flexibly around previous plans, or can launch the entire process from the starting point, adhering to strict standards of both engineering and classical design.

A favorite recent project: A custom, 600-pound bronze door for a San Francisco home. It took 150 hours to design and another 675 to build. It is so well engineered that in addition to being spectacular, it moves with a smooth and effortless grace.

Metropolis Metal Works, 451 W. Atlantic Ave., Suite 102, 523-0600.

Debra Early

In her basement studio, Debra Early designs, crafts and fires hand-thrown vases and bowls, embellished with handmade decorations. She also makes decorative tiles. Most of her work features glazes in greens and browns, and its shape and style blend well with Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts décor—"I get my inspiration from some of the older pottery," she says.

Early ClayWorks, 1590 Pacific Ave., 814-3974, VicDeb@mac.com.

John Erbland

When John Erbland first moved to Alameda and began transforming everything in his apartment into something it was not—his stereo speakers, for example, suddenly looked like blocks of granite—his friends exclaimed, "You're a fanatic for this stuff!" "Hmm," thought Erbland, and a business, Fauxnatix, was born.

Erbland specializes in higher-end decorative painted finishes and works primarily with architects and designers on both residential and commercial projects. While he emphasizes the fact that faux finishes can enhance environments from antique to high-tech, he's especially inspired by the

old-world craftsmanship in the town's many Victorians and Craftsman bungalows.

Erbland says faux finishes have been used to decorate buildings for centuries, if not millennia. For example, in ancient Egypt, Pompeii and elsewhere, he says, painted "marble" finishes were often incorporated into areas where using the actual stone would have been architecturally unfeasible. In recent years, he adds, they've acquired something of a bad image because of endless TV shows and the like featuring really awful do-it-yourself projects (many of which, he says, he winds up fixing). He, on the other hand, says: "I'm always striving to perfect perfection," so he usually does all the work on a project himself to ensure high-quality standards.

Fauxnatix, 748-0498, fauxnatix@attbi.com.

Richard Hiatt

Artisan Richard Hiatt specializes in repoussé, or hammering sheets of metal to create a raised image, a technique that goes back thousands of years. Perhaps the most famous example of the art form, he says, is the much-photographed gold bust of Tutankhamun. He himself works in bronze and copper, creating spectacular art for both indoor and outdoor display.

Moose Metalworks, 450 W. Atlantic Ave., 653-4513

Leonidas Kyriakopoulos

A renowned expert on making custom wood-fired ovens, stoves and barbecues, Kyriakopoulos also creates unique sculptural furniture and ornamental turned-wood objects. Business partner Dean Santner operates Navigator Systems, which makes ergonomic office furniture. In addition, the two lease studio space to a number of independent cabinetmakers and woodworkers to whom Kyriakopoulos can provide referrals.

1800 Ferry Point, Building 14, 864-8211

Frank Lopez

A Park Street institution since the '70s, Silversword (named after the Hawaiian plant rather than a precious-metal weapon) features an impressive array of beautiful handmade objects from around the world, from Indian silver and turquoise jewelry to inlaid wooden boxes. It also offers a fine selection of jewelry in many styles and a full range of skilled repair and restoration services. Proprietor

Frank Lopez, who wields a tiny but lethal torch with artistic and surgical precision, does all this work on the premises.

However, he says, his true gift is in designing and creating custom pieces for clients, who range from longtime locals to rock stars and who have been coming to him for a quarter century for special pieces. His own style incorporates elements of floral, Art Nouveau and Art Deco, but his commissioned work has ranged from the classic to the ultra-modern; his work is often so finely detailed that he hand-carves the molds under a microscope. He also enjoys a creative challenge—one of his favorite projects, working from photographs, was sculpting and casting a tiny gold charm in the image (and spirit) of a client's champion racehorse.

Without a doubt, though, his favorite work is designing and making custom wedding-ring sets. "I really like working with couples that are in love with each other," he says, "and I love to be the one who bonds them together with their rings."

Silversword Jewelers, 1411 Park St., 769-8080, silversword41@aol.com.

Grant R. Marcoux

A graduate of the Sir Sandford Fleming College School of Blacksmithing in Ontario, Canada, Marcoux recently moved his studio from Oakland to Alameda Point and now teaches blacksmithing and bladesmithing to beginning and intermediate students.

Hammering red-hot metal on an anvil—the only metalworker in Alameda to do this by hand—Marcoux works in both traditional and modern styles; typical projects include fire screens, gates, railings and other household fixtures.

And, for the true aficionado of the nearly lost crafts of yesteryear, he also makes custom hand-forged, stainless-steel cutlery with handles of exotic and domestic hardwood.

Artist Blacksmith, 450 W. Atlantic Ave., 865-5328, gblacksmith@alamedanet.net

Ken Matthias/Wendy Zellick

Ken Matthias and Wendy Zellick met in 1998 when he was presenting a slide show on historic preservation, and they decided to join forces. The next year, they opened Alameda Art Glass on Webster Street, where they offer classes in stained glass and sell finished work, but what consumes most of their time is working on the windows themselves.

Matthias (who's also a general building contractor) and Zellick do often work on creating new windows for clients, they've become experts in restoring antique windows ravaged by time, a specialized and hard-to-find skill. "We're one of the few that do that," he says. "It's fun, and we're providing a real interesting service."

Alameda is, of course, most noted for its Victorians and bungalows, but the partners can also design and build windows in contemporary styles. They'll work either directly with the client or with architects, spending a good deal of face-to-face, faxed and e-mailed discussion refining the design before they cut the first piece of glass. Matthias says there's little room in their work for temperamental-artist syndrome; rather, they take the attitude that they're there to make the client's vision a reality.

*Alameda Art Glass, 1508 Webster St.,
521-6245, Alameda Art Glass@aol.com.*

Bernie Mikkelsen

Around the side of the 450 West Atlantic building is the workshop of Bernie Mikkelsen, who's been practicing a highly specialized form of metalcraft for 30 years now. Mikkelsen makes custom steel bicycle frames and then works with the vendors of the customer's choice to add specified wheels and other components.

What usually draws customers to Mikkelsen's shop is that they're hard to fit—tall, small, heavyweight, lightweight, or otherwise—and standard bikes just don't work for them. He makes road bikes, mountain bikes, tandem bikes—just about any configuration the customer requires—from carefully selected steel tubing. He's developed a unique stationary bike that each client "rides" while Mikkelsen adjusts the dimensions; the resulting measurements form the basis of a design for a two-wheeler that's a virtual extension of the rider's body.

Despite the current fashion for aluminum, carbon and other newfangled frame materials, Mikkelsen is a firm believer in steel—in part because it's so durable and reconfigurable (customers regularly come to him for adjustments and enhancements to bikes he built for them 20 years ago), and in part because the advantages of the lighter-weight materials quickly vanish when the bike and its rider don't fit each other perfectly.

His faithful customers seem to agree; one raves, "Many thanks for putting me together

with this fantastic new ride, which has finally recaptured for me the experience of enthusiastic bike-riding that I last had as a child (which was the last time I had a bike that actually fit me—until now)."

*Mikkelsen Frames,
451 W. Atlantic Ave., Suite 108,
521-9727, www.mikkelsenframes.com*

Janice Paredes/Sara Van Orsdel

Artists Janice Paredes and Sara Van Orsdel joined forces about five years ago, working on a variety of decorative painting—murals, faux finishes, *trompe l'oeil*, hand painting, color washes and more. And, while their work often involves ingenuity and cleverness, their goal is to create something that works organically with the particular setting, not something that screams "Look at me!"

The two work with decorators and also directly with clients, on both indoor and outdoor projects. Recent favorites: A mural in a studio apartment showing a path trailing off into the distance; a vineyard motif; a drywall range hood made to look like copper.

Then there was the garage conversion, in which the partners carried the motif of the adjacent garden's leaf-strewn paving stones into the interior concrete floor—so effectively that the client, cleaning up the area, tried in vain to sweep up a particular errant leaf before realizing it was painted.

*ParedesVanOrsdel, 865-4458 or 769-8902,
www.paredesvanorsdel.com.*

Jennifer Rias

About seven years ago, Jennifer Rias started experimenting with a small loom and was soon weaving colorful scarves for her own use. The next thing she knew, someone at the local healing center where she worked had commissioned a dozen, destined for Buddhist monks in Nepal, and things took off from there. Now she enjoys making custom-designed scarves for individual clients and also sells pieces of her own design.

Color and feel are big issues for her; if necessary, she'll dye her own yarns, particularly in variegated tones, to achieve the right effect. While she started out working in wool, she's gradually migrated to rayon and cotton chenille for their softer textures: "They're very soothing," she says. "I feel that textures can be a healing thing."

A member of a number of craft guilds, including a Navajo weaving guild, Rias also enjoys teaching the craft to children with her fellow guild members and takes pride in keeping traditional skills alive. Recently she's also expanded her weaving activity to include loomed beadwork.

*2421 Webb Ave., Apartment B,
521-9921, McEntyre@aol.com.*

Dora Ritzer

Dora Ritzer is by profession a freelance textile designer whose clients have included Pottery Barn and California Kids. But her current passion is colorful, hand-painted decorative floorcloths, which function as rugs.

Originally developed in England, very popular on the East Coast during colonial days, currently all the rage in that area and now catching on in the Bay Area floorcloths consist of heavy canvas on which a design is painted (Ritzer uses acrylic or latex paints and occasionally other techniques such as *découpage*), after which the cloth is varnished.

While the origins are English, Ritzer says floorcloths can be made with designs appropriate to any *décor*—right now she's working on a very large, multi-room floorcloth in a Celtic theme for a client.

Ritzer says she often has trouble convincing people that floorcloths will stand up to household traffic, but in fact, "they're extremely durable—it's a work of art that is useful." At Art in the Park, she induced a unicyclist to spend the day riding back and forth over one, an activity that left nary a mark.

*755-B Buena Vista Ave., 814-9436,
Bean8@ix.netcom.com.*

Cathy and Walter Rodriguez

Cathy and Walter Rodriguez operate Quilt Fans, the main activities of which are selling quilting supplies and offering classes to quilters of all skill levels. Cathy Rodriguez is an experienced quilter who has undertaken the occasional commission, although she says running the store keeps her sufficiently busy that she doesn't usually have time for major projects. She can also provide referrals to other quilters in the area.

*Quilt Fans, 1716 Lincoln Ave.,
749-6717, www.quiltfans.com.*