

OUT of the BOX

Local crafters make decorative, functional, one-of-a-kind containers Published on 12/10/06

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In a workshop on Goat Island, Sarah Sanders moves in sync with her circular saw, cutting salvaged pieces of picture frame molding at just the right angles.

Sanders makes decorative, functional objects that not only are very different from anything the molding manufacturer intended, but also are quite different from one another.

She uses the multicolored, multicolored scraps of wood, a few gifts from nature and a vivid imagination to create Goat Island Treasure Boxes.

Sanders, Regina Semko and Kasey Briggs are three local crafters who use different artistic techniques to make one-of-a-kind containers.

There's a sense of mystery associated with the boxes. If one is full, people want to know the story behind each item inside. If one is empty, they want to know what it contained and why the items are no longer there.

But for the crafters, working in media they love, it's an opportunity to make something special.

Think of the carefully handcrafted boxes the three women make as tiny treasure chests. They are places to hold the little things that people want to keep track of both for practical and sentimental reasons.

Sanders, a Goat Island resident and longtime woodworker, says she first became interested in the moldings, then decided to make boxes. "I can't stand to waste anything," she says.

She doesn't overlook the potential that things in her environment hold. She decorates the boxes with bits of driftwood and ocean glass found on Goat Island. She also adds shells and any other items she thinks will enhance them.

"It's fun to finish them and see how different each one looks," Sanders says.

Some of her boxes have metallic finishes, others have weathered finishes and still others have dark stains and bear images such as the Clemson tiger paw and the palmetto tree. Her smallest boxes are about 4 inches square and 2 inches high. Her largest boxes are about 10 inches square.

Semko uses the art of origami to make boxes. Origami is a Japanese technique that involves folding papers in complex patterns to create sculptural figures.

Semko, a West Ashley resident, taught herself the technique in 1968 and began using it to make boxes in 1999.

"Origami appeals to my straight-line mentality," says Semko, who has amassed mounds of wallpaper and gift-wrapping paper to use in making boxes.

"I collect paper. I have gobs of paper. I'm going to die with the most paper."

One challenge of making origami boxes is positioning patterned papers so that the colors and figures that end up on the sides and angles are complementary, Semko says.

Once she is finished making the paper boxes, she applies several coats of polyurethane to them. They are durable enough to be cleaned with a wet sponge and to last many years.

The hexagonal, octagonal, square and triangular containers can hold a small- to medium-size orange.

To present a ring or necklace to someone special in a treasure box enhances the gift for the recipient, Semko says. Boxes that take a lot of creativity and patience to make are an easy answer for someone searching for the perfect gift. And often, very complex treasure boxes can serve as art.

In addition, Semko says the boxes are attractive places to keep even common items such as paper clips and push pins. Even when they are empty, they brighten a space by providing an attractive focal point.

Briggs has as much fun making her treasure boxes as an adult as she did peeking inside her grandmother's boxes when she was a girl.

Briggs, who lives in Goose Creek, fashions boxes by decorating existing containers with paper, beads and clay. She also molds and fires polymer clay boxes from scratch.

The artist has made boxes using a variety of techniques over the past 10 years, but she likes working with clay best.

It's the feel of the clay between her fingers as the patterns she creates and colors she uses come to life. It's the fun of rolling the material into the sheets that will become boxes.

"I'm sort of a dreamer," she says.

Her favorite boxes are the polymer clay lipstick holders she strings on cords for women to wear around the neck. While people often are more interested in the lipstick boxes than other boxes she makes, they usually buy one of her more multifunctional ones.

The boxes are in a range of small sizes and shapes.

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Where to find them

--The treasure boxes in this story are sold at a number of Lowcountry shops and galleries.

--Sarah Sanders' boxes are sold at Sand Dollar Gift Gallery, Sassy's Gifts and Accessories, and The Fifth Season in Mount Pleasant; Brennan's Gifts at Freshfields Village near Kiawah Island; Island Memories at Wild Dunes on the Isle of Palms; and Palmetto Moon stores in the area. They are priced from \$39 to \$79.

--Regina Semko's boxes are sold at the South Carolina Artisans Center in Walterboro and Charleston Crafts at 87 Hassell St. The boxes sell for \$18 to \$50.

--Kasey Briggs' boxes also are sold at Charleston Crafts, as well as on her Web site at www.kaseydesigns.com. They cost from \$30 to \$55.