

# Ira Chaffin

## Carving a piece of the past

BY KATHIE FARNELL

PHOTO BY KARIM SHAMSI-BASHA



**"Most of my work is in bronze. So carving uses a different thinking process. I like interacting with the students, since I'm alone in my studio so much of the time. And by teaching, I give myself greater clarity as an artist." IRA CHAFFIN**

**I**RA CHAFFIN'S STUDENTS MAY SOMEDAY SEE their work go around in circles. His weekly classes in carousel-horse carving teach students to craft the traditional merry-go-round steeds, though the carvers are just as likely to produce monumental lions, foxes or even a cigar-store type Indian. The Birmingham Carousel Horse Carvers, who meet each Monday at the Woodcraft store on Cahaba Valley Road in Pelham, include a wide range of students, some of whom repeat the course for the fun of seeing their large, nostalgic carvings come to life.

For each class, Chaffin glues timber to make carving blocks, which are then turned over to the students who follow his instruction in the delicate art of carving a glued wooden form into the semblance of a horse (or, for that matter, a giant toad)

and using paint to bring it to life. The resulting figure is 34 inches long, big enough for a lucky child to sit on.

Carousel carving is rapidly becoming a lost art. Old-fashioned carousels with wooden carved animals still operate; A spectacular one at Disney World features a row of six white stallions, while a smaller one at the Birmingham Zoo spotlights endangered species. But newer models often use fiberglass animals, and the expertise needed to carve the monumental figures

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## [ perspectives ]

is vanishing. Chaffin believes that his class is the only one in Alabama. So far, his students' works haven't found a home on a carousel; the carvings end up as decorative sculptures in homes or as heirloom gifts for thoroughly spoiled grandchildren.

Cobb Lane Gallery featured Chaffin's carousel carvings, along with some of his students' work, in an exhibition called "Horses and Hands" during September and October. The exhibit included five full-size carousel horses, along with a carving block and one work-in-progress to allow visitors to see how a carving takes shape. Local interest in the carvings has led Chaffin to begin offering private lessons. His students include Dr. Dennis Pappas, who met Ira through the weekly Woodcraft course and enjoyed carving so much he now has a workshop at his home, where he has turned out imaginative figures including a horse, frog, rabbit and lion. He says meeting Chaffin offered him the opportunity to make a long-standing dream come true: "I always wanted to learn carving and thought I'd have to travel somewhere to learn how. It was a stroke of fortune that I found Ira Chaffin here."

Chaffin moved to Birmingham in 2001 and began carving horses shortly thereafter. He was purchasing his own carving supplies at the Woodcraft store, and the contact led him to begin teaching. He still teaches two or three of his original students. For Chaffin, carving is a way to flex his creative muscles. "Most of my work is in bronze. So carving uses a different thinking process. I like interacting with the students, since I'm alone in my studio so much of the time. And by teaching, I give myself greater clarity as an artist."

Chaffin's bronze sculptures include monumental full-size figures of UAB presidents Dr. S. Richardson Hill and Dr. Scottie MacCallum on the campus. A bust of Joe Lee Griffin, philanthropist and former mayor of Warrior, occupies a niche near Bottega Restaurant. Chaffin and his wife, Sheila, are very much a part of the Southside community—they operate the Cobb Lane Bed and Breakfast in a restored Victorian house at 1309 9th Street South. ●

**Ira Chaffin leads carving classes each Monday at the Woodcraft store, 220 Cahaba Valley Road, Pelham. For more information call Woodcraft at: (205) 988-3612.**

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