

Dean Crouser: Crafty Fisherman

Local Portland Artist Helps You Catch Fish—Without Getting Wet

by Rachel Guerin

Dean Crouser's work isn't your average day job. A typical morning in the Crouser home: the kids head off to school, wife Molly begins the commute to her project management post in Portland, and Dean proceeds to his workshop to whittle. Crouser spends his days—and the occasional night—making fishing lures. "It's a conglomeration of all these things that I like to do," he says, "I like to fish, I like to do art, and I like collecting." These lures aren't meant to be dropped in the water, however. His pieces—which are available for purchase through his self-run company, Old Oregon Lures—aren't intended to fool anyone. "They're folk art... in the spirit of the old antique fishing lures that have become collectible." Crouser's art is meant as much for the fishing enthusiast as it is for the art aficionado. Perhaps what makes Dean stand out both in the folk art and collector world is his respect for the historical aspects of his craft. Coupled with their foundation in the American craft tradition dating back to the 1800s, Dean's lures are born from a personal history that could only begin in Oregon.

A fourth generation Oregonian who grew up and currently lives in Gresham, Crouser began fishing the streams and lakes of Oregon with his father at 3 years old. It didn't take long for these outings to the river to become his primary passion.

"I remember after fishing, I would buy all these fly-fishing magazines and books and just dream about going fishing." The artistic piece of Dean's work is also grounded in his youth: from mowing lawns to pay for oil painting lessons to Sundays spent studying Tony the Tiger Cereal boxes for inspiration. "I grew up doing art, just having fun with it." Art—like fishing—runs in the Crouser bloodline. Dean's grandfather, Enfrid Haggstom, taught him how to carve and planted the woodworking seed for Dean's later life. "My grandfather was a fine woodworker—he came over on the boat from Sweden and made this fabulous stuff: wooden clocks, grandfather clocks... desks and dressers and bureaus and banjo blocks and musical instruments—he could make anything," says Crouser.

A brief respite from art landed Dean at the University of Oregon, setting school records in the shot put and discus, which have yet to be broken. Though his days in college had little to do with fishing, art, or collecting—Dean was a Human Development and Performance major at the University, with intentions to teach and coach—his childhood passions remained just as strong. After launching a vitamin and supplement company with his brother (also, incidentally a record-setter in the discus) and throwing himself into real estate, fishing suddenly became a possibility for a living.

As an avid fisherman and collector, Dean attends the biannual meetings of the National Fishing Lure Collectors Club. At one of those meetings several years ago, Crouser came armed with a little handmade fish he had carved. It caught the eye of fellow lure collecting enthusiast Tony Zazweta, who had a special request for Dean. Crouser relays the birth of his lure-making venture: “Tony asked, ‘could you take this fish, put some hooks in it, maybe a propeller on the nose and a hook in the back and make it like a lure,’ and I said ‘I suppose.’ So I did and I made him a little box and he just loved it. So I sold it to him. The next time I brought two, and I sold them both. The next time I brought 17, sold them all and I thought, ‘you know—I should do this.’” Dean’s first step was to research both the contemporary and traditional emblems of the fishing lure avenue: “I looked at a \$500 lure, and after you see enough of these, you’re kind of going ‘this is nice—I understand it’s old, but they all started to look somewhat the same.’ I thought ‘I could make something that’s far more interesting.’ And he did.

Dean’s lures incorporate the spirit of the Pacific Northwest, handmade with natural, sustainable materials. “I use select basswood for carving, which is the same material used in the old classic duck decoys,” says Dean. Many of his lures’ eyes are 1920s glass versions that Crouser located from leftover stock of old lure companies—reinforcing the pieces’ pure, but vintage spirit. Dean applies his native Oregon emphasis to every aspect of the artistic process, right down to the cedar box with handmade copper hinges that serve as the lures’ packaging.

Crouser’s work also includes large-scale pieces, which feature the same fine details

characteristic of his lures. The high-end denim designers Chip and Pepper Foster recently enlisted Dean to help create the interior of their newly-opened fishing lodge-cum-retail store in Nolita, New York. For this flagship store, Dean carved a six foot fish, inspired by a copper belt buckle from the designers’ collection. To this end, Crouser’s collection includes full size fish carvings, with anatomy and markings representative of species native to the Northwest.

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“My goal is to create something that others can find beauty in and consider special. And if along the way I can make a living at this, well, that will certainly be a bonus,” explains Crouser. Like the artist who makes them, Old Oregon Lures are born and bred in Oregon: Dean’s historical, grass roots approach makes these collectibles the ideal gift for the fishing enthusiast, collector, folk art scholar, or someone looking for that special made-in-Oregon gift. For more details on the process of creation, history of the company, and for order information, please go to www.oloregonlures.com.