

THE SHAPE of HISTORY

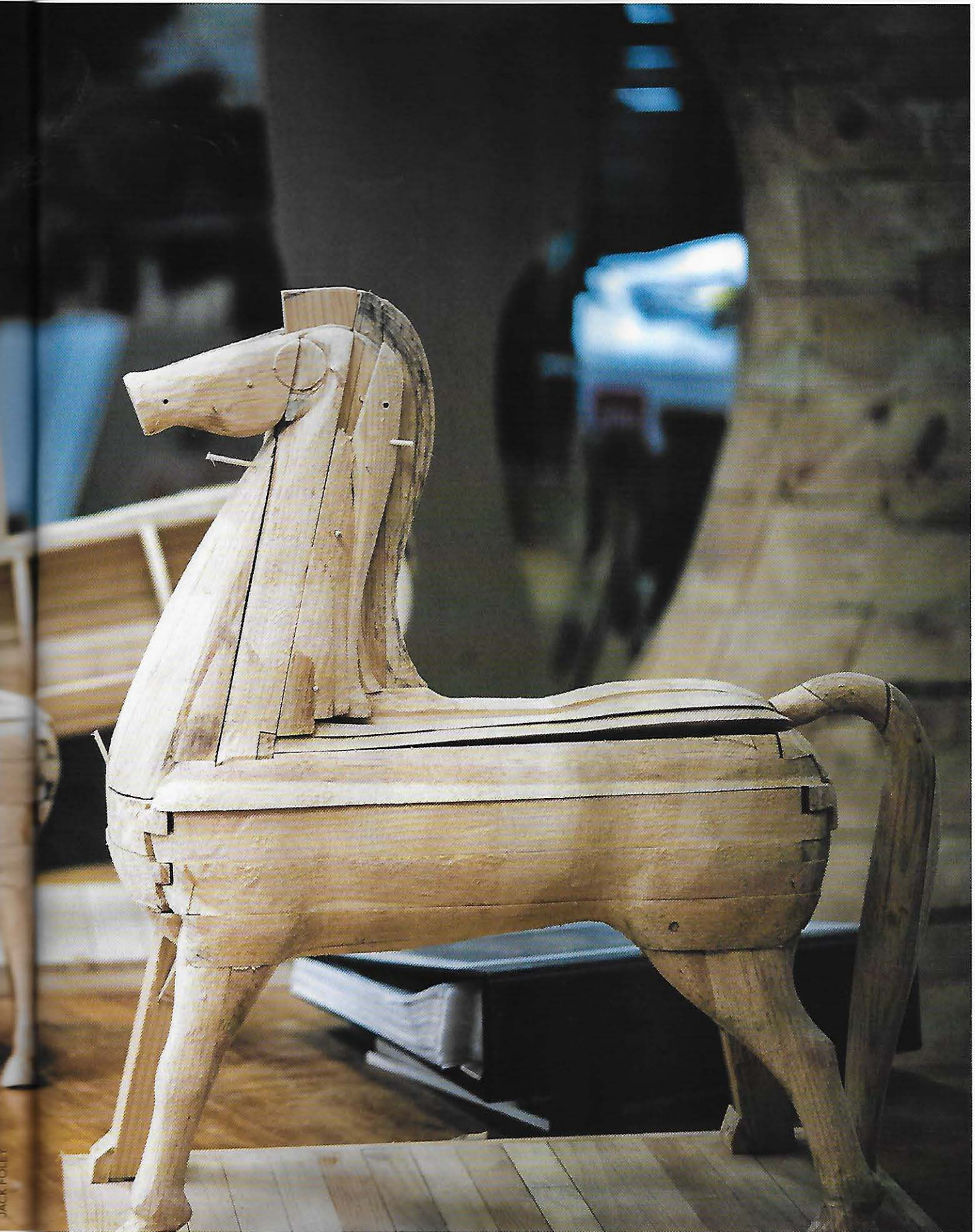
*SCULPTORS RICK AND LAURA BROWN'S
INVESTIGATIVE ART CLASSES
ENCOURAGE STUDENTS
TO MAKE CULTURAL
DISCOVERIES.*

"How often do you get a chance to reach deep into history and bring something back?" asks Rick Brown, who together with his wife, Laura, operate the nonprofit educational organization Handhouse Studio. The Norwell residents are professors of sculpture at Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt) and are internationally recognized for their innovative hands-on approach to teaching that explores history, science and culture through the creation of art.

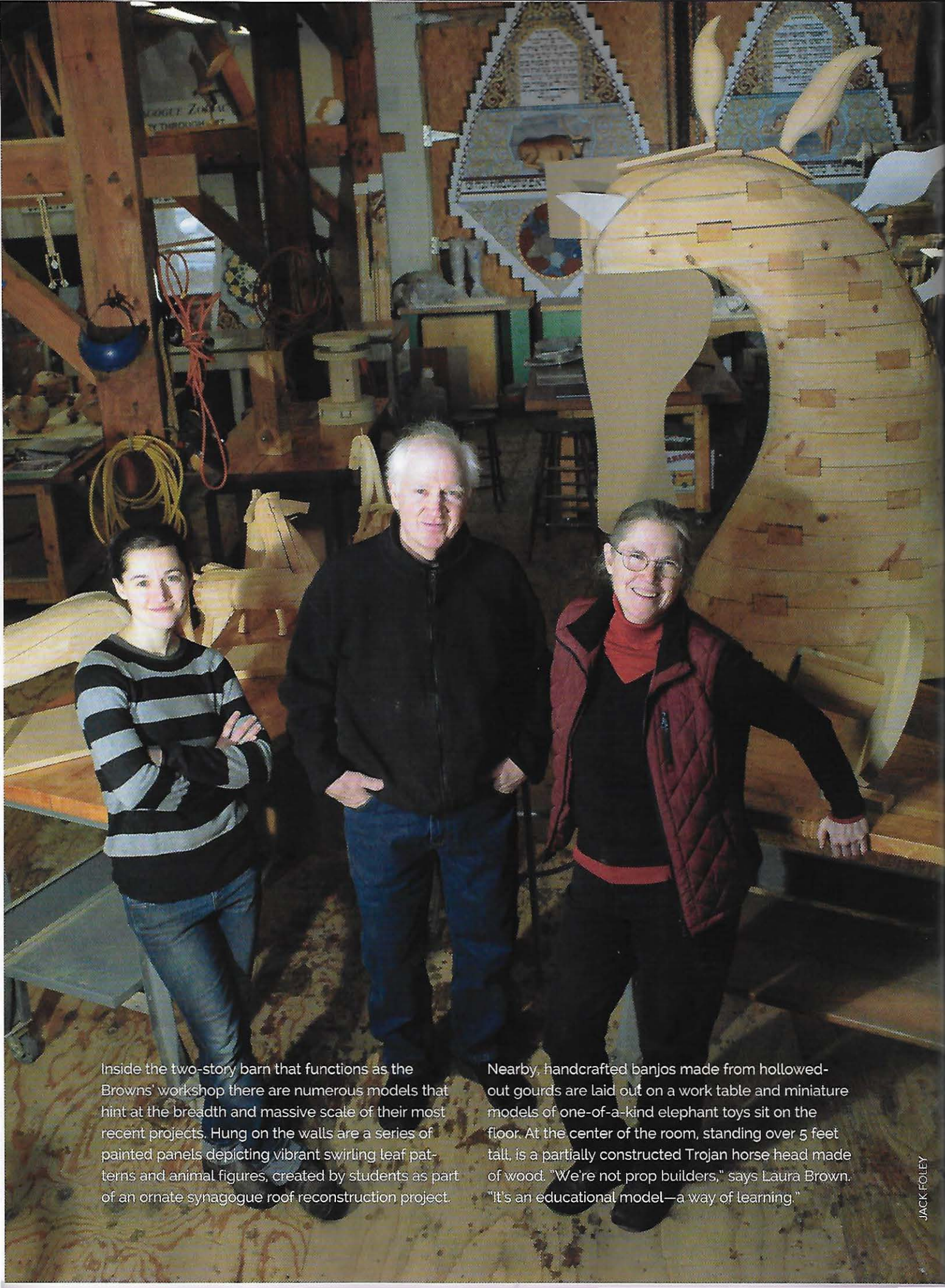
BY MARIA ALLEN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK FOLEY
AND CARY WOLINSKY



JACK FOLEY



JACK POLEY



Inside the two-story barn that functions as the Browns' workshop there are numerous models that hint at the breadth and massive scale of their most recent projects. Hung on the walls are a series of painted panels depicting vibrant swirling leaf patterns and animal figures, created by students as part of an ornate synagogue roof reconstruction project.

Nearby, handcrafted banjos made from hollowed-out gourds are laid out on a work table and miniature models of one-of-a-kind elephant toys sit on the floor. At the center of the room, standing over 5 feet tall, is a partially constructed Trojan horse head made of wood. "We're not prop builders," says Laura Brown. "It's an educational model—a way of learning."

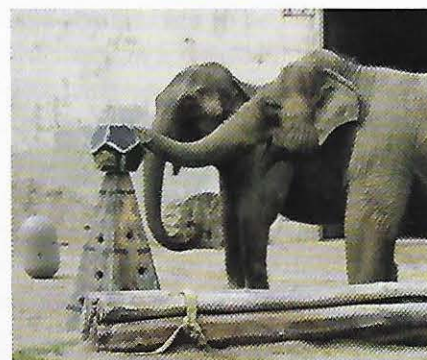
TOYS for ELEPHANTS



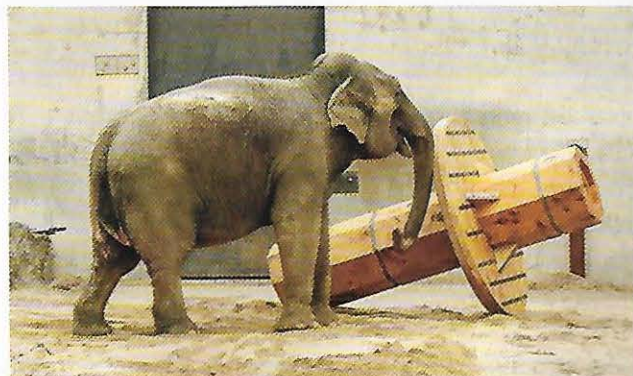
For the past eight years, one of the Browns' most popular elective art classes has been their Toys for Elephants project. Each year, students are tasked with designing one-of-a-kind educational toys for a pair of beloved elephants who live at the Buttonwood Park Zoo in New Bedford. At the beginning of the semester the students visit the zoo and meet Emily and Ruth, a pair of senior Asian elephants with distinct personalities. The students learn about the animals and design toys that are both indestructible and stimulating for the animals.

"In the wild, the animals would spend 18 hours a day foraging for food," says Laura Brown, showing me one of the models her students created, based on the shape of Archimedes' screw. "It's like a puzzle. There's an inner chamber where oranges and apples can be inserted. The elephants figure out that if they roll the spool around a treat will fall out."

The students return to the zoo to get feedback on their models and a winning design is chosen. Previous classes have created instruments—massive metal chimes, similar to those you might find on a preschool playground—and a large wooden pillar with a series of rods and bolts covering chambers filled with treats. "Emily loves to unscrew things," explains Laura, noting how



the elephant nimbly uses her trunk to twist the bolts until the food falls out. Members of the public are invited to visit the zoo in May when the students deliver their final projects to the elephants.





RAISING the ROOF

The Browns love to learn about the architectural structures created by different cultures around the world. They were particularly fascinated to discover images of elaborate Jewish synagogues that existed in 18th-century Poland. Destroyed by the Nazis in World War II, these iconic buildings were all but lost to history—until Handshouse Studio got involved.

What followed was a 10-year-long project that stretched all the way from the classrooms at MassArt in Boston to the hillsides of Poland. With the help of hundreds of students from 46 universities in 11 different countries and a team of professional craftsmen from the Timber Framers' Guild, the Browns set out to reconstruct the elaborate roof and painted ceiling of



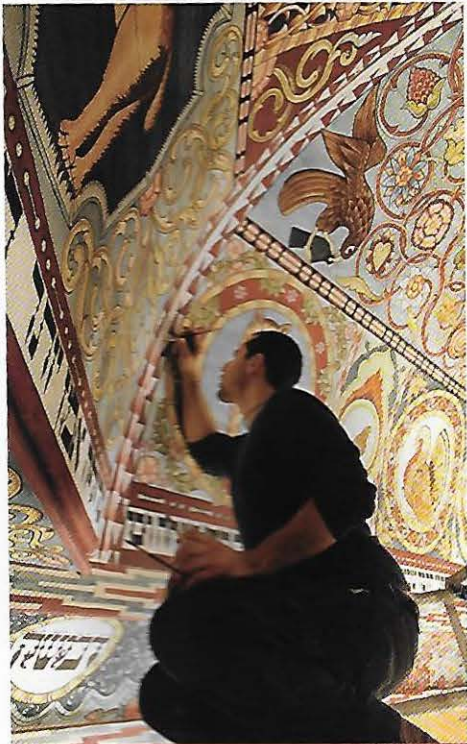
A team of students and professional craftsmen from the Timber Framers' Guild assemble beams for the synagogue roof structure.

the Gwoździec Synagogue. They also built a full-size replica of the synagogue's intricately carved altar called a bimah.

The team based their structural

designs off black and white photographs and drawings of the historic synagogue. They used traditional tools to transform 200 freshly logged trees into timbers and mixed paint

colors for the ceiling mural based on a color study of a single panel and off pigments known to be used in the region. "The animals are all symbols," explains Rick, pointing to a backward-facing deer on one of the practice panels. "We conducted very serious research and documentation of the entire process. Students would write down the formulas and the story of how they lay the paint on. Every single object has been documented in this way." In 2014, the completed synagogue roof and bimah were donated to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, where it became a centerpiece exhibit.



"The feature documentary "Raise the Roof," produced by South Shore residents Yari and Cary Wolinsky of Trillium Studios, documents the entire synagogue project. The film will be broadcast on American Public Broadcasting through 2019. Check your local listings for dates.

BUILDING A TROJAN HORSE

When it comes to monumental wooden structures, few things compare to the legendary tale of the Trojan Horse, built to secretly transport Greek warriors through the gates of the ancient city of Troy. Whether the events detailed in the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" were based on true events is hotly debated by historians. But Rick and Laura Brown are believers, and they think they know how the craftsmen of the period pulled it off.

"All of the images that you see of the Trojan Horse were done by artists of the period in which they lived," says Laura. "We wanted to make the most accurate representation of the Trojan Horse ever." Unlike the robust siege machines often depicted in Hollywood films, the Browns believe the horse would have had a more graceful and mythical form. The couple traveled to Greece with a team of students on two occasions to collect as much visual data as possible, looking specifically at the artistic style of the Bronze Age Mycenaeans, who were the early Greeks. The students gathered hundreds of images of horse drawings on vases and analyzed the shapes of little clay horse figurines traditionally given as gifts and used as offerings at Mycenaean burials.



In the summer of 2017 a team of volunteers assembled at Handhouse Studio in Norwell to construct a wooden model of the Trojan Horse head.



participate. "We asked art teachers to have their students look at the images we provide and make their horses as accurately as possible," says Rick. The 1,000 Horse Project with 1,000 or more miniature votive horses slated to be exhibited in Washington D.C. in 2019.

"I think people really enjoy working with their hands and learning history by producing something," says Marie Brown, educational director at Handhouse Studio and one of the people who rolled up her sleeves to help build the head of the Trojan Horse. "The students come to see that they're part of this much bigger thing. It's very profound." As the name Handhouse Studio suggests, each sculptural project is the "work of many hands" and that is forever part of its legacy.

Back at MassArt, students set to work copying the images on paper and then creating small clay and wood models in order to understand the form better. These artistic studies are now being used to design a full-scale Trojan Horse that could eventually be exhibited at the new International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

In the summer of 2017, a team of local artisans assembled at Handhouse Studio to begin work on the horse's head, basing their building techniques off what is known about the shipbuilding tech-

niques used at the time. As with all Handhouse projects, every step of the process is an opportunity for the participants to learn something new about the history and the culture of the people who made the object. "Because this was the Bronze Age, we've had students replicate period tools, like the axes that would have used," says Rick.

To help expand the Trojan Horse project's reach to a greater audience, the Handhouse team launched The 1,000 Horse Project and invited art educators and professional ceramists from across the country to

For more information about Handhouse Studio projects, visit handhouse.org.