



GREG DERR PHOTOS/THE PATRIOT LEDGER

■ Rick and Laura Brown in their Handhouse Studio, standing behind a small-scale replica of a ceiling panel from the centuries-old Gwozdziec synagogue in Poland.

## THE ART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

At their in-the-woods Norwell studio, a husband and wife resurrect objects largely forgotten by history

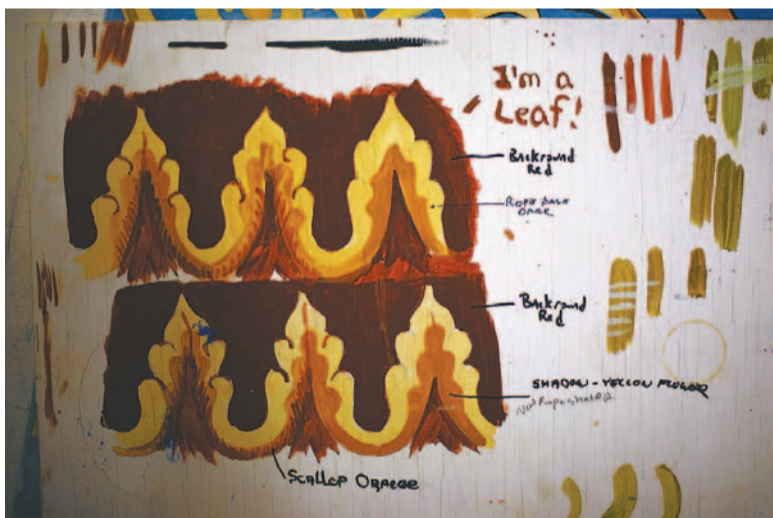
By Neal Simpson  
THE PATRIOT LEDGER

**I**N a clearing at the end of a mile-long dirt road skirting Norwell's Stetson Meadows, Rick and Laura Brown have built an open-air gallery of objects nearly forgotten by history.

There's the 18th-century wooden submarine built from a written description; the 6-foot-tall limestone nose of the Great Sphinx, believed to have been chipped off and lost centuries ago; and pieces of a human-powered wooden crane like those that built France's stone bridges before their mechanized counterparts were invented.

"Culture is actually imbedded in the things you make," said Rick Brown, a professor of sculpture at Massachusetts College of Art who founded Handhouse studio in Norwell with his wife, Laura, in 2002. "It's anthropology — it's about how people, societies, organize themselves."

In the decade since the Browns started their work in the Norwell woods, Handhouse Studio has developed an international reputation for working with artists, historians and students to replicate manmade objects that were nearly lost to human memory. Their projects, which have drawn the attention of National Geographic, the Discovery Channel and the BBC, have been narrowly focused on the tools, buildings and inventions for



■ The Browns' efforts to recreate the Gwozdziec synagogue ceiling have included traveling to Poland, partly to strive for color accuracy. At right is one of Handhouse Studio's previous re-creations, a wooden bell tower.

which detailed records were destroyed or never existed.

Now the Browns are preparing to complete their object of obsession for the last seven years: the elaborately painted tent-like ceiling of the centuries-old Gwozdziec synagogue, which was destroyed, along with more than 200 other wooden synagogues in Poland by German troops during World War II.

Their nearly life-size version of the ceiling, which was built and partially painted in workshops held inside several Polish synagogues last summer, is slated to become a central exhibit of the new Museum of the History of

Polish Jews in Warsaw, Poland. The private-public museum will open on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto early next year.

"The significance of it is to create a space where people will feel they've been transported back in time to a typical synagogue, with extra beauty with all the hand painting, and to make them feel what the richness of the Jewish culture was like before almost everything was let go after World War II," said Jeanette Friedman, director of communications for the North American Council of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Like all Handhouse projects, the



Gwozdziec synagogue did not come with a set of instructions. The Browns used a collection of black-and-white photographs that only hint at the vibrant colors used in paintings of animals and zodiac symbols that once illustrated the Hebrew inscriptions on the building's vaulted ceiling, Rick Brown said.

To get a sense of the colors that may have been used, the Browns and their collaborators have led college students on six research trips to Poland to document the paint colors found in nearby historic Christians churches and may have been painted in a style inspired by synagogues of the time.

Back in Norwell, the Browns and their students have used natural dye pigments — similar to those used by painters in the 1700s — to make palettes of color.

The process, which began in 2005, sometimes requires the Browns to make assumptions. They believe, for example, that Jewish painters of the time may have had access to more sophisticated blue dyes than their Christian contemporaries, who had to use a gray paint to approximate blue.

The first few of the eight ceiling panels were painted in a series of workshops last summer and have been kept in storage in Poland, along with the dismantled roof structure, over the winter. The Browns plan to complete the paintings this summer.

Rick Brown said the synagogue replication and other Handhouse projects are built on the increasingly accepted discipline of "experimental archaeology," which aims to unlock information about little-understood historical objects through the process of replicating them.

"The whole process is open-ended, and you follow the avenue of inquiries as they come up," Brown said. "In some ways, we've retrieved lost knowledge."

Neal Simpson may be reached at [nesimpson@ledger.com](mailto:nesimpson@ledger.com).

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■ See a photo gallery of the Handhouse Studio work at [PatriotLedger.com](http://PatriotLedger.com).



■ Rick Brown walks past a rendering of what the Great Sphinx's nose may have looked like.

### Other Handhouse projects

■ **The Turtle:** A wooden submarine designed and built by a Connecticut man in the 1770s as part of a plan to attack British ships blockading New York Harbor. Handhouse Studio, working with the Massachusetts College of Art and the U.S. Naval Academy, developed a design for the sub and later, in 2003, successfully launched the vessel in Duxbury's Snug Harbor.

■ **Wooden synagogues:** While some masonry synagogues at least partially survived after the Nazis invaded Poland in World War II, all of the country's roughly 200 wooden synagogues were destroyed. Handhouse Studio began working on a small replica of the Zabłudow synagogue in 2003, focusing on the wooden structure, and later moved on to projects involving the painted ceiling of the Gwozdziec synagogue.

■ **Cranes:** Massive human-powered wooden cranes like those used in construction from the Middle Ages through the 18th century. Working with students from three colleges in Boston's Fenway neighborhood, the Browns, in 2002 and 2003, built two versions inspired by French cranes of the 18th century. The studio helped build another crane for an exhibition in the Czech Republic in 2006.

### How to help

■ Norwell-based filmmaker Yari Wolinsky is trying to raise \$55,000 for a documentary film about the Gwozdziec synagogue project. To contribute, go to [tinyurl.com/wooden-synagogue](http://tinyurl.com/wooden-synagogue).