



FACULTY FOCUS

## OBJECTS OF DESIRE

SCULPTING PROFESSORS CARVE  
OUT HISTORICAL NICHE

Tucked inside dense woodlands twenty-five miles south of Boston is a place where the past comes alive in unusual ways.

It's a place where architects, sculptors, historians, and students work side by side to recreate centuries-old objects out of stone, wood, and metal. A place where production companies such as the Discovery Channel and PBS search for answers to history's mysteries. A place where "learning by doing" is the guiding principle. It's a place called Handhouse Studio, a non-profit educational organization that's the brainchild of MassArt sculpture professors Rick and Laura Brown.

The massive timber-frame facility, which the Browns designed and built almost entirely by themselves from 1995 to 1999, provides the space they need to bring together multi-disciplinary partners to construct unique projects – a Revolutionary War American submarine, an eighteenth century French crane, a seventeenth century Polish synagogue.

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“Our projects are cross cultural, from different time periods,” said Rick, a full-time MassArt professor since 1988. “We’re not fixed on any subject matter. We look for objects that we could potentially start with as a point of departure for a learning adventure.”

Although not formally affiliated with MassArt, Handhouse often serves as a training ground for MassArt students who are able to incorporate Handhouse projects into their program. A recent example includes a nose job for the Great Sphinx of Giza, which was part of a project for PBS’s popular science show, *Nova*. The Handhouse team, which includes several MassArt students, chipped, chiseled, and polished a 6-ft. block of limestone for two-and-a-half weeks into a giant nose to give viewers a better understanding of how long it likely took to build the giant statue.

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The students learned about the craft of sculpting as they learned about ancient Egyptian history, including how to forge the copper chisels and stone hammers used by the Egyptians 4,500 years ago.

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Members of the Handhouse team with the Sphinx nose  
OPPOSITE: Rick Brown at work on the Sphinx nose

said Laura, sculpture '93, who has taught at MassArt part-time since 1996. “It’s a real high to show them what they can accomplish when they work as part of a team and open their eyes to a new way of studying something.”

The Browns’ largest Handhouse endeavor to date is a project they’ve been working on for six years – reconstructing seventeenth and eighteenth century Polish synagogues, elaborate wooden structures destroyed by the Nazis in World War II. They will be traveling to Poland over the next three summers to collaborate with an international team of builders on a full-scale replica and hope to include students.

“There are certain things you can learn only by doing,” said Rick. “And as we tell our students today, you can make history.”