

Etching a place in history

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Sam Shortes is a man with a flair for art and history. The Highland Village resident has an engraving career that spans 32 years. But, what Mr. Shortes does is not your average type of engraving; he creates drawings on guns and knives like Van Gogh painted sunflowers on canvas. Born in Waurika, Oklahoma, his family soon moved to Fort Worth, where he grew up. He attended Abilene Christian University and the University of Texas in Austin. Mr. Shortes began his artistic career with Texas Instruments, where he worked as a researcher for 16 years.

Artistry was in my DNA but as a member of the TI research staff, I was purely technical, inventing things, getting scores of patents, writing technical papers. TI was a pivotal experience in that I developed the underlying technical basis allowing a totally new approach to practicing a 600 year old art form. When I did eventually leave to start up a company, it reconciled the two loves of my life; art and science, into a single thing.

Along the way, he met Jack Kelby, who won the Nobel Prize for inventing the computer chip. "Jack was a giant among giants. He was older and I regarded him a mentor; a person I deeply respected. He was wise and the most humble man I ever met. He regarded his fame as accidental."

When Shortes left in 1975, he started his own engraving business. "It was called Aurum Etching and we had no competition because no one did this type of etching," he said, during an interview at The News Connection office. "There are two fundamental approaches to engraving, both are centuries old. I basically did it like Rembrandt and Goya except with modern materials. They would have done it that way too had the technology been available. Though primarily painters, they were prolific etchers/printmakers.

"They would dip metal plates in bees wax creating a protective layer. With a sharp needle, they would cut a design through exposing the metal which would then etch when placed in acid. I did the same thing but with modern materials which made the work less costly and with considerable improvement detail, the same detail found on banknotes. It still required an artist's eye. The other method, direct removal, used tiny chisels and hammers in much the same way as a wood sculptor works except in miniature. It is slow and very expensive, with few "masters."

Mr. Shortes' artistry brought him to the attention of Ronald Reagan, first as Governor of California, then as President. In addition, he once spent some time with Hollywood icon, John Wayne. He had been commissioned by Wayne's son Michael to create some etchings.

"When I began working formally with the Wayne family, Michael had already taken over Batjac Productions and they seemed to primarily re-distributing old John Wayne movies and beginning to do "John Wayne Commemoratives," Shortes said.

"The NRA was among my earliest customers and was a collection of celebrities and icons. Smith and Wesson was the first, Buck Knives were the second, and the NRA was the third. That was how I first linked up with Reagan when he was governor of California. He bought an engraved knife from the NRA and I tucked a note in the package. The relations began there and continued until he left office. The NRA was very accomplished at finding celebrities to represent their cause. I first met Reagan at an NRA function as well as Charlton Heston, John Wayne, and Ted Williams.

I remember like yesterday being in a NRA convention when Charlton Heston appeared at the end of a long isle of exhibitors in the conventions center. As he and his party moved down the 20 feet or so isle, people would move out of the way in mass to either side. I turned to a friend and said, "Now I know what the parting of the Red Sea must have looked like."

When asked if he had a photo with him and the "Duke," Shortes said, "No, he was very particular about posing for photos." However, the master engraver did have several photos with "the Gipper." On one visit to the Oval Office, he asked Reagan if he knew John Wayne. "No one knows John Wayne," the president replied. Reagan added: "He's a very private person and he doesn't even live and mix in the Hollywood set."

"John Wayne was a private person but not unfriendly. He simply thought film was his job but his life was his own," Shortes said. "His son, Michael Wayne, was the one who ran the studio. He was a good businessman." In 1987, Mr. Shortes went to the White House to present a gift to President Reagan from the City of Highland Village. "There were two items in the Highland Village Sesquicentennial presentation and totally Texan. One was a classic 13 inch Bowie, engraved on both sides, a Rosewood handle with a scrimshawed ivory inset. The second was an engraved, legendary Colt-Walker saddle pistol from the Republic of Texas era."

His current project commemorates the historic Denton County Courthouse and benefits the Museum-on-the-Square. The engraved 1892 Winchester replica is contemporary with that period. The limited 50 unit edition is offered only to elected officials of Denton County, its cities, and their employees.