Discover how art is inspired by nature.

Illinois Artisans Program

Story By Margaret Buchen

Artists have long been inspired by nature's beauty.

"Nature will bear the closest inspection," wrote Henry David Thoreau. "She invites us to lay our eye level with her smallest leaf, and take an insect view of its plain." Across Illinois, artisans today draw inspiration from the same, natural world which inspired Thoreau more than 150 years ago.

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—Henry David Thoreau

The Illinois Artisans Program, a program of the Illinois State Museum, was formed to promote the work of artisans living in Illinois. More than 1,600 artisans from all over the state are jury-selected to be members of the program. Their creations are sold through the Illinois Artisans Shops, located at four Illinois State Museum sites—Springfield, Chicago, Lewistown and Whittington. Artisans work also is showcased through program events, such as the annual Art and Wine Festival at the Southern Illinois Art and Artisans Center at Whittington and the monthly art sprees in the James R. Thompson Center at Chicago.

*Outdoor*Illinois is proud to present the nature-inspired work of selected artisans in the Illinois Artisans Program.

Laurie Shaman, "Eyes Open, Eyes Closed," Porcelain Teapot

(Photo by Peter Kiar)

Laurie Shaman, a ceramic artisan from Chicago, is inspired by the beauty of Illinois. The surface of her hand-built or wheel-thrown earthenware vessels and tiles often feature a landscape of prairie grasses, flowers and birds—interwoven with other elements to reveal a story.

"I try to combine the drama I see in a simple gesture or gaze with the act of storytelling that occurs when figures, animals and cities appear in a relationship on the surfaces of my vessels," Shaman said.

She loves the tactile nature and receptive surface of clay, and works with three kinds of surface treatment: applying stains or underglazes to create patinas and background atmosphere, using the sgraffito technique to scratch through a colored stain to reveal the clay body underneath, and drawing and painting with glazes or incising images into the clay.

Audias and **Mariana Roldan**, Chicago, paint scenes of Xalitla, their native village in Mexico. Both paint vibrant images of life in the environment they were raised in—people dancing, conversing, buying or trading goods, harvesting crops, carrying baskets of food and playing music. The Roldans paint on paper with a type of acrylic paint, but they also paint on wood, walls and pottery.

"We learned how to draw and paint by family tradition," Audias Roldan said. "This is also our way of life."

Mariana Roldans' series of paintings called "The Wild Forest" uses vibrant color to depict fields of corn or fruit trees. She uses a vertical composition with workers harvesting rows and rows of tall corn stalks. In other paintings, workers pick ripe fruit from brightly colored trees. Mariana also paints expansive village scenes with small figures dancing and playing instruments beside a parade of donkeys and small dogs.

Audias paints people, houses and animals with rounded, flat shapes that crowd the picture space with vivid color. With a keen design sense, Audias creates birds with elaborate patterns of scrolling feathers and tails.

Audias Roldan, from The Wild Forest series, Acrylic on Paper

Andrea Previtali & Lazaro Guiñazú, Hand-woven Basket

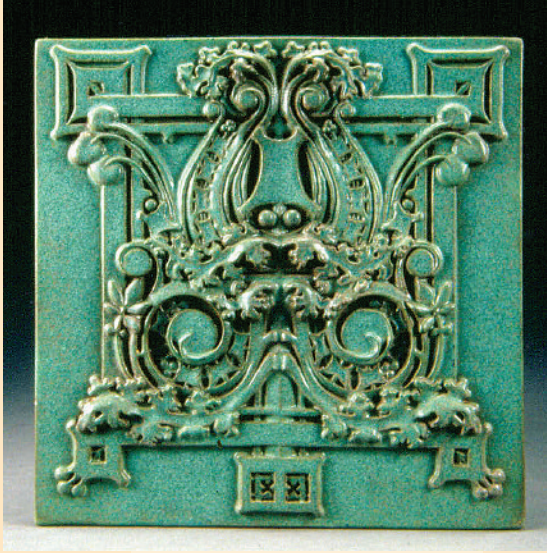
Andrea Previtali and **Lázaro Guiñazú** are extremely interested in conserving our natural environment. Their colorful, functional baskets are created from recycled newspaper. Originally from Bariloche, Argentina, Previtali and Guiñazú formed their studio, Read & Roll, in 2001 after moving to DeKalb from Chile. Making a conscious choice of recycling paper to create art instead of using valuable natural resources, the duo adapts recycled newspaper to traditional basketry techniques by weaving together continuous strands of rolled newspaper. With each basket, Previtali and Guiñazú build the woven paper into intriguing, original forms with layers of color, then seal the baskets with an environmentally safe paste to create strength and durability.

"The spirit of Read & Roll strides toward the idea of creating original and contemporary baskets while leaving the smallest environmental footprint behind," Previtali said.

Mindy Gardner, Steel Door Knocker (Sunfish)

Mark and **Mindy Gardner**, of the Farmer City-based Flood Plain Forge, share a passion for metalsmithing, but have different inspirations. Mindy's inspiration comes from a childhood spent in southeastern Wisconsin. Nature is influential in the design of her metal switch plates, doorplates and large medallions with Illinois flowers or lifelike leaves hammered and shaped into the surface.

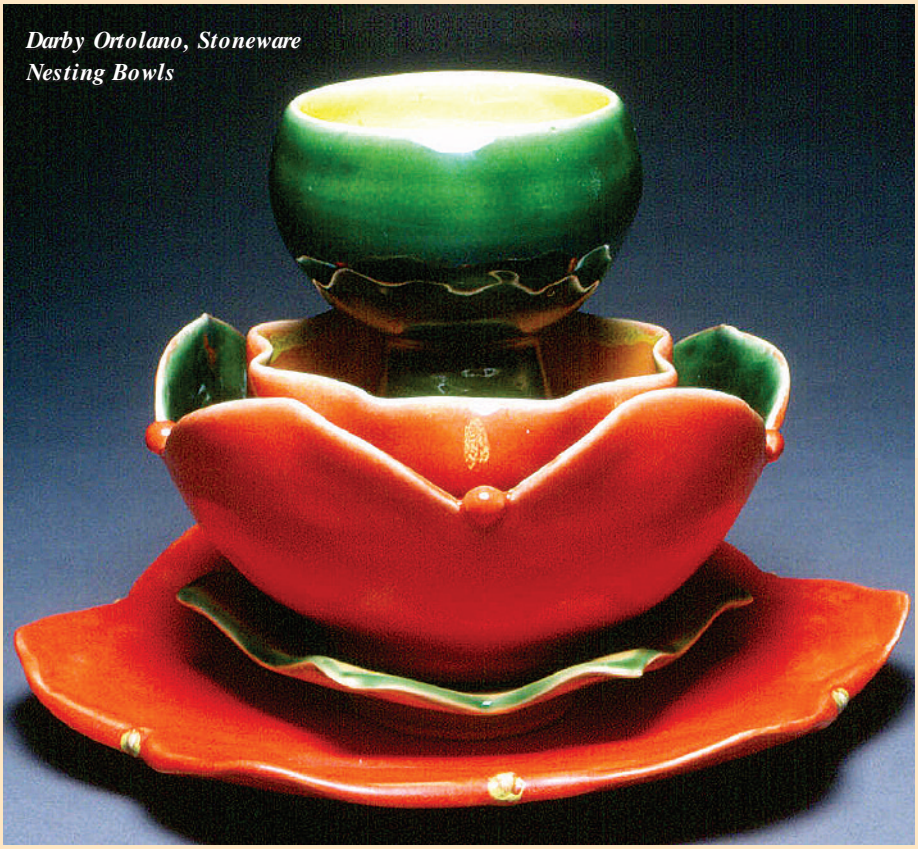
Mark is fascinated by the technical aspects of metalworking, something he developed as a boy after his father bought him a small forge. He now forges original iron gates, trellises, candelabras and lamps and tables with simple, clean lines. Some of his work is influenced by the flowing, organic forms of Illinois plant life. He often collaborates with Mindy in designing original metal pieces that range in size from a small fish fashioned into a doorplate to large, decorative tables.



Michael Skiersch, Ceramic Botanical Tile

Chicago artist **Michael Skiersch** studied at the American Academy of Art and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and combines his love of nature and architecture by creating botanical tiles designed to be displayed in the home. Creating relief tiles with natural forms such as pine cones, oak leaves, dragonflies, irises and gingko leaves, Skiersch forms the clay and carves delicately graceful forms into the soft surface before firing each tile. His work includes original designs for tiles, fireplace surrounds and other interior and exterior architectural features.

Darby Ortolano, Murphysboro, creates ceramic works inspired by the graceful forms observed in her garden. Her wheel-thrown bowls develop into nest-like vessels, her dinnerware resembles groupings of flowers and her vases are an organic complement to floral bouquets. Ortolano's white stoneware vessels are covered with colorful glazes and fired in an electric kiln. Ortolano worked in clay on her own for many years before earning a B.F.A. at the Kansas City Art Institute and an M.F.A. at the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Her current work has the spring-like feel of a bouquet of flowers.



Darby Ortolano, Stoneware Nesting Bowls

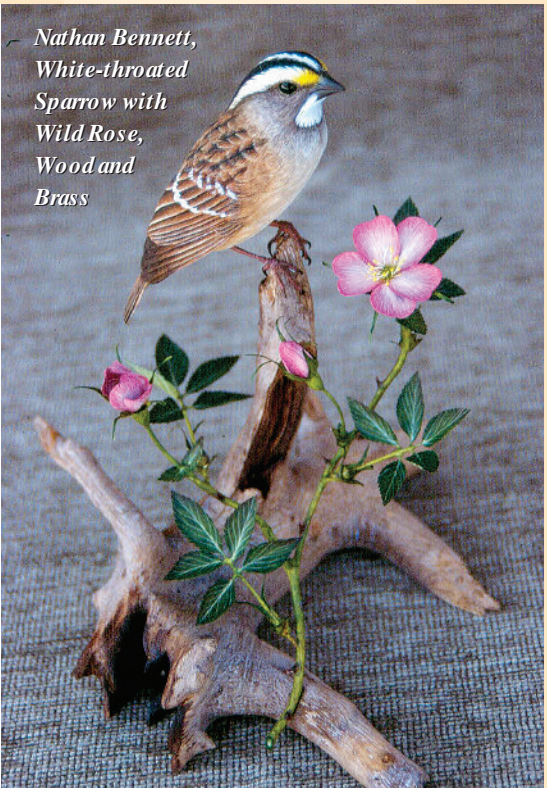
Margaret Buchen is the former program assistant for the Illinois Artisans Program, based at the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago, and is now an artist and writer living in Chicago.

Mary and Spencer Watson, "Green Fish," Pin/Pendant, Sterling Silver

Mary and **Spencer Watson** of Prospect Heights are a couple who work together, and independently, to make sculptural jewelry. Mary designs fine jewelry and has a passion for semi-precious stones while Spencer finds natural beach stones on the shores of Lake Michigan and sandblasts expressive faces into them.

Mary uses traditional metal construction techniques—and techniques she invented—to surround semi-precious stones with sinuous forms fabricated from sterling silver. A variety of textures and patinas are created on the metal to add interest and depth. Mary's fabrication work takes the direction of figurative creations that flow and curve, art that Spencer often collaborates on by creating sandblasted stone faces that fit into the pieces. The expressive faces and flowing metal forms are combined in a sculptural piece that has movement, life and energy—much like the natural world itself.

Amateur naturalist **Nathan Bennett**, Casey, is a self-taught wood sculptor who hand-carves life-size sculptures of birds and mammals based on many hours of photographing, observing and researching his subject. Bennett typically uses boxelder, driftwood or Jelutong wood and places his subjects in a typical pose in their natural habitat. Using hand-carving tools and an electric drill tool for finishing details, he first creates the body of the bird or mammal and then fashions other elements, such as branches. Details often are formed from brass. Finally, the piece is sealed and hand-painted with acrylics.



Nathan Bennett, White-throated Sparrow with Wild Rose, Wood and Brass

The first time **Roberta Elliott** struck iron with a hammer she was smitten. A successful blacksmith who produces functional and decorative work at her Cobden studio, The Velvet Hammer, Ltd., Elliott forges pieces combining her original vision inspired by nature's flowing forms. She forges table lamps, floor lamps, wall sconces and other items that have bold forms as well as soft, feminine lines. Using the blacksmithing techniques of forging and forge welding, Elliott works spontaneously so that each piece evolves and suggests new directions.

"There is something wonderfully indescribable about the energy exchange that takes place while blacksmithing," Elliott explained. "The heat from the fire and the force of the hammer's blow feed and energize me."

Roberta Elliott, Floor Lamp

The work of these established Illinois artisans can be seen at one or more of the four Illinois State Museum sites: the Illinois Artisans Shop, Chicago (312/814-5321); the Southern Illinois Artisans Art and Artisans Center, Whittington (618/629-2220); the Illinois State Museum Store, Springfield (217/782-0979) and the Illinois State Museum, Dickson Mounds in Lewistown (309/547-5924). Call the site nearest you for more information on where you can find an individual artist's work.