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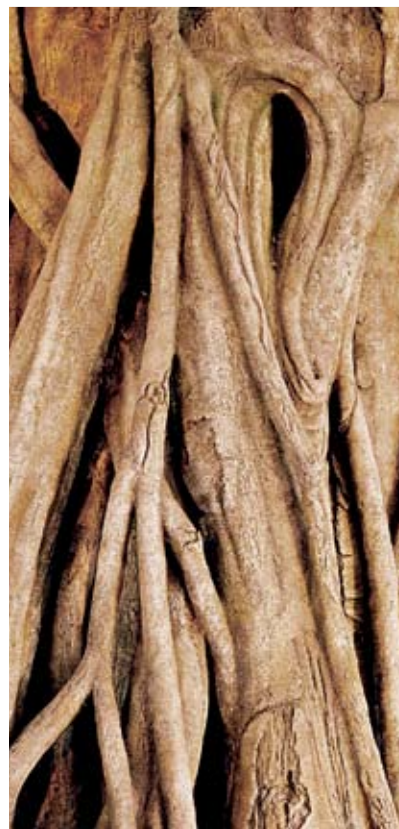


Through the Trees

NatureMaker's steel creations
stand the test of time.

BY KATE WAFER

IN THE 1960S, THE LATE ECO-ARTIST Bennett Abrams began creating artworks of small flowers and plants incased in wax. Influenced by Egyptian mummification techniques and other preservation methods, he focused on capturing nature's beauty with a fine, microcosmic lens. Abrams and his partner, Gary Hanick, began working together in the '70s, exploring ways to recreate elements of the outside world; and in 1982 founded NatureMaker. They were able to transform the delicate appearance of Abrams' small representations of nature and grow them to stunning heights in the form of steel art trees.



Top: A steel bristlecone pine by NatureMaker anchors a San Diego County residence. Above: Bark, rendered in realistic detail.

“They are a luxury item, and bring the outdoors in,” says Hanick of the super-realistic trees that adorn homes and hotels, and add life to the inside of buildings around the world.

Abrams died in 2004, but as co-founder and president of NatureMaker, Hanick continues to produce trees with his collaborative venture. NatureMaker now employs between 30 and 40 full-time artists on its creative staff. They can manufacture a telescopically connected steel skeleton and fabricate a bark compound that is malleable enough for sculptors to hand-carve a trunk and branches that mimic aging and weathering. “The methodologies and techniques were started by Bennett, but a new generation has taken over his work,” says Hanick. “We’d never dreamed on these levels.”

Hanick and his team recently completed an ancient-looking bristlecone pine for a San Diego County residence. The barren conifer stands 15 feet tall with gnarled limbs that reach 15 feet across the window-lined atrium of its contemporary home. The owner, who is an artist, says, “My architect wanted a waterfall, but I wanted a more sculptural feature. I was looking for something native, yet clean and minimal.” She brought her concept for a tree sculpture to NatureMaker. Hanick and design director Jim Paul came back with “The Oldest Living Bristlecone Pine”—a realistic rendition down to its charred bark with signs of insect infestation.

Other steel trees are not only stand-alone art pieces, but structurally engineered to act as load-bearing columns, carefully camouflaged by artists with the knots and burls of an oak, cypress, white birch or numerous other specimens. For example, the heart of a Maryland home was designed around a 25-foot-tall banyan tree, the trunk wrapped around a structural column with limbs, branches and foliage extending into three rooms. “Forty percent of our work involves cladding or covering columns,” Hanick points out.

While many clients choose trees that are monumental in size—they can be crafted to reach 80 feet in height or cantilever out as much as 60 feet—NatureMaker has also created furniture on a very human scale. In one



A 25-foot-tall, 25-foot-diameter steel banyan tree conceals a sculptural column and reaches into three main rooms of a residence in Maryland.

New York residence, the roots of a strangler fig support a simple glass surface to become a six-foot-wide desk. The company’s versatility, as well as confidence in their ability to make bark and other details so realistic, has NatureMaker returning to its roots and the delicacy of Abrams’ original creative vision.

Abrams joked that his works of steel art would outlive him, and now some trees made by NatureMaker may one day outlast the living species. “Bennett chronicled a moment in nature,” says Hanick, “a record of what is, or may be, to future generations... or what was.” ☐

NatureMaker, 760.438.4244, www.naturemaker.com