

Richmond sculptor puts own spin on outdoor art

BY JANET CAGGIANO
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

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Allen Jessee's walkways slither like a snake in the garden.

The sculptor prides himself in bringing nature to life in his work. "It's so creative," Jessee said. "You can tell a story with it. It's like stained glass on the ground."

A former engineer, Jessee created "Walks of Art" two years ago and introduced the concrete creations at the Maymont Flower & Garden Show last year. He will be back at the 18th annual affair, which will open Thursday at the Greater Richmond Convention Center.

"I love creating something different," he said. "People at the Maymont show want to be wowed."

Opened business

When Jessee opened MCS Design & Production in Ashland in 1978, he primarily painted signs and molded displays for businesses showcasing their goods at trade shows.

More recently, his attention has been focused on art for the home and garden. In 1995, he began shaping aluminum into graceful fish, osprey and turtles for garden gates and wall hangings. He spent two years working on "Walks of Art" before debuting it. A patent is pending on this custom-designed walkway system.

"It can take years to work out one idea, but that's the fun part," he said. "You get to create something no one knows about." Jessee uses molds to set each concrete piece of the walkway. Then he adds vibrant color -- a pigment powder -- before the concrete dries so that it sets all the way through and won't fade. The pieces are then assembled like a jigsaw puzzle. The finished product can be anything from a serpentine snake to a square dragonfly.

Idea came from walkway

He came up with the idea when he and his wife, Vicki, wanted a new walkway for their Ginter Park home. "It was a lot of trial and error," said Vicki Jessee, who works alongside her husband at MCS Design. "He's the king of experimentation."



Allen Jessee is an Ashland sculptor who makes garden gates, walkways and wall-hangings, among other things. Here, Jessee shows how he works on a new walkway built around a centerpiece in the shape of a dragonfly.

Express Yourself

When working art into the home and garden, Allen Jessee offers these tips:

Be you: Work your personality into the decor. Love horses? Choose metal sculptures featuring galloping stallions.

Inviting spaces: Use arbors as entrance points into your garden.

Water garden: Sculptures of fish, birds, and turtles work well around a water feature.

Rustproof: Choose aluminum over steel -- it won't rust and is lighter.

His studio is filled with tools, scrap metal, concrete and molds. While he enjoys the creativity behind welding metal into garden gates, wall hangings and bookshelf sculptures, he continues to create projects for parks, corporations and small businesses. His studio, for example, made the aluminum buildings in the Children's Garden at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

Trees of metal

He has also created metal trees (they look like real wood) for libraries, bronze sculptures for golf courses and wax figures for trade shows. "I like the mixture," Allen Jessee said. "It's all creative."

Jessee, 56, grew up in Richmond and dabbled in sculpture as a teenager. He studied engineering at Virginia Commonwealth University, earning an associate's degree in 1971. While working as a salesman, he read about foam vaporization casting and taught himself how to do it. The art involves carving out Styrofoam, covering it with sand and then pouring molten metal over it to vaporize the Styrofoam.

He fell in love with the concept and seven years later opened his studio. In the early years, his work was primarily commercial. But in 1994 he made a steel garden gate for his mother-in-law and was impressed by the outcome. A year later he took one to an art show in Annapolis, Md. People liked the idea, he said, but didn't have anywhere to put such heavy art.

With that feedback in mind, he scaled down the designs and made wall hangings. And he switched from steel to aluminum to make the gates lighter and rustproof. His gates sell for \$450 to \$5,000; his walkways, \$50 to \$100 a square foot.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything as attractive," said Judy Turbeville, a Henrico County resident who has purchased three gates for her summer home in Virginia Beach. "It's realistic, yet has so much whimsy to it." The designs work well around the perimeter of her oceanfront house. "The heron gate leads to the beach," she said. "It all fits together."

That's exactly what Jessee had in mind. "There's no limit to the design possibilities," he said. "It's like a tattoo. You can express your individual self."

WHERE: 10980 Richardson Road, Ashland.

DETAILS: Visit www.mcsdesignandproduction.com/allenjessee or call (804) 550-1000.

Contact staff writer Janet Caggiano at jcaggiano@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6157.