

LM BEACH *Plus*

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Staff photo/LOU TOMAN

WONDERS IN WOOD

Morris Cohen, 80, of Delray, who has sold and exhibited more than 200 works in New York, New Jersey and South Florida, lectures on the art of carving today at the James L. Knight International Center. **33**

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

He does wonders in wood

Sculptor preserves old-world approach

By LORIANN CAMPBELL
Staff Writer

Wood shavings cover the Cohens' garage-like snipped hair in a barber shop. Exotic tree trunks from around the world are stacked shoulder to shoulder along the wall. A female body half-way between wood and woman stands on the work bench.

"This is my studio, my workshop, my everything," said Morris Cohen, 80, throwing his arms up in his domain. "I've put in 18 to 16 hours a day here. There's nothing else. It drives me."

Cohen, who has sold and exhibited more than 200 works in New York, New Jersey and South Florida, lectures today on his craft at the James L. Knight International Center in Miami. He will teach his art this fall at the Armory School and Visual Arts Center.

With his white goatee, pink cheeks and European accent, Cohen almost seems like Gappetto, wood-carver of Pinocchio.

Using only his intuition, a gauging chisel and a mallet, he seemingly brings to life dancers, women, birds and trees from the wood they came from.

"He has an old-world sense of approach to his craft," said David Edgar, Armory School director. "That's not easy to come by these days."

Cohen laboriously sanded the arch of a ballerina's neck stretched backward until he formed a ridge with satiny indents on the sides of her throat.

He centered the swirls of Brazilian rosewood's grain into the pupils of his 6-foot sculpture, Abraham.

His 2-foot sculpture of Romeo embracing Juliet, attached only where they hold each other, has rough, sinewy strokes on Romeo's body and smooth, curvaceous strokes on Juliet's. He carved the lovers out of a horizontal mahogany trunk, so the wood's lines would run down their outstretched arms and legs.

"Sometimes the wood suggests what to make, or it's the other way around," Cohen said. "You get it because you go and see various things, sculptures, forms. Everything is all around you, movement and motion."

His favorite shapes to create, he said smiling, are ballerinas.

"He's absolutely crazy for ballet," his wife of 50 years, Eve, said.

They've had ballet season tickets for most of their married life to ballet companies including the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater,



Morris Cohen, 80, chisels away at a sculpture of gymnast. He has sold and exhibited more than 200 works in three states. Staff photos/LOU TOWMAN

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the American Ballet Theatre, and most recently to the Miami City Ballet.

Among the woods he uses from around the world, including ebony, zebra, teak, zero wood, and temawood, Cohen loves Brazilian rosewood the most because of its diverse lines and its smell.

"It has so much life to it, it's so aromatic. Every now and then I pick up shavings and give a good whiff," he said.

A Polish immigrant at age 13, Cohen began sculpting wood about 30 years ago in the Bronx, only after he had become financially successful from owning an auto body shop and selling real estate.

A friend in the wood-import business gave him an exotic piece of wood, which drew him to the New York City Harbor to peruse imported wood in the holds of ships.

He studied sculpture and eventually began showing his work.

At the Bronx Museum, people stood 10 deep looking at his 6½-foot sculpture called *Two Faces*.

"They kept saying, 'I know who that is, I know who that is,' and then someone shouted, 'Malcolm X!' and everybody said, 'Yes, that's it!' I had no idea I was creating Malcolm

X when I made it," Cohen said, chuckling.

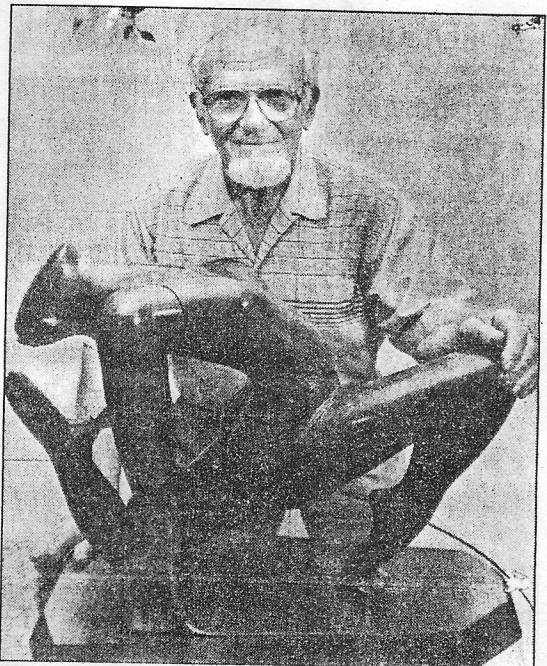
A tall french man stood in front of another Cohen sculpture, a two-dimensional bird that stands 5-feet-5, with a simple oval body, a round head and an uplifted beak. He stared at it, then turned his head up to the side like the bird, and announced, "De Gaulle!" referring to the tall, French patriot who happened to have a big nose, Cohen said.

He won first place at the Lincoln Center Outdoor Exhibit, and sold his most valuable sculpture for \$5,000.

He continues to exhibit his works in South Florida, but has stopped selling them. He now creates his sculptures for his children and grandchildren, and for his and Eve's enjoyment in their Coco Wood Lakes home.

"When you finish," Cohen said, running his rough hand down the smooth torso of one of his ballerinas, "it gives you a really good, sensuous feeling."

Today's lecture at the James L. Knight International Center in Miami is from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and costs \$6. For more information, call (305) 372-0277.



Morris Cohen displays the finished work. He lectures today at the James L. Knight International Center in Miami.