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ARTIFACT ARTISTRY

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When Bert Mazac found another arrowhead at the deer lease, he used to toss it in the cup holder of his pickup, where it bounced around until he chunked it into a plastic bag with the rest and slammed them into a drawer at his home in China Grove. Then he met **Lori Timberlake**, who had a better idea of how to treat the ancient tools -- and informed Mazac that a tiny chip out of one of his "perfect" points may have cost him \$9,000.

"And I'm the one who chipped it," he said with a shrug and a smile. "She said it was 10,000 years old and would have been worth \$10,000.

"Before they were just rocks. Now **Lori's** got me putting them in tissue, wrapping them up all nice and neat, storing them in film cans ..."

That's not all **Timberlake** is doing.

She is turning artifacts into art by using real pieces to make arrows, spears, tomahawks and knives, and she hooked Mazac and hundreds of others on turning their finds into one-of-a-kind displays that grace walls throughout Texas.

While her mainstay is making weapons from her own artifacts, she also custom builds them from customers' finds, pulling them out of musty boxes and making them into conversation pieces that not only turn heads but honor the men and women who chipped the stone tools that carved out their existence thousands of years ago.

"**Lori's** craft glorifies the ancients, takes them to a higher level than an arrowhead sitting on a shelf or in a shadow box," said Tony Raggio of Canyon Lake, one of top artifact authenticators in the state. He writes a certificate of authenticity for each of **Timberlake's** pieces that includes details right down to the craftsmanship of its maker.

"She's the only one in the country who has her authentic artifacts certified and papered," said Raggio, who believes Comanche blood runs in his lineage. "The people who made those stones would love to see them glorified the way she does it."

Timberlake, a Spring Branch resident who also breeds birds, attaches the stones to stained oak dowels and decorates her pieces with a variety of feathers, leathers and hides, from Rio Grande turkey and pheasant to buffalo, mink and rattlesnake.

Most are mounted on weathered wood for display.

"I would say mine are more along the lines of the ceremonial pieces but not at all fashioned after that.

This is my own style I came up with, and no two pieces are alike," said **Timberlake**, who is part Choctaw but not a tribal member.

She began collecting arrowheads -- or artifacts, as collectors call them, because only the tiny pieces are arrowheads, and the most common ones are spear points -- about 17 years ago but never thought of using them as art until she decided to change her home décor to a Western motif.

An interior decorator who took time off to raise her two children, she visited a number of stores before deciding to build her own furniture, including boxes and small tables, a large dining room table and a weathered-wood television armoire complete with a tin roof that would look more at home on the range.

As for the American Indian stuff for sale, "they had these really fake looking points, tempura paints, store-bought feathers," she said. "Most of the things I was seeing looked cheesy, like these little kids' play toys.

"Then I started thinking about all these artifacts I have. And all these feathers. And I just started making them myself."

Visitors to her home marveled at them. She sold two to a friend in June 2003. Then more wanted them.

By the fall of 2004, she was cranking them out and hitting the craft shows and American Indian powwows.

Now a single mother, she's been making a living with her art ever since and has expanded her markets to prestigious Western events including Red Steagall's Cowboy Gathering, outdoor shows such as the Hunters Extravaganza and the annual, glitzy fundraisers of the Texas Deer Association and the Texas Wildlife Association.

A small bedroom in her rural home that serves as her workshop looks like it could be the altar of a voodoo priestess, with bones, teeth, feathers and hides all over, but mostly tucked neatly in boxes and on shelves, except for the works in progress -- a spear over here, a bow and two arrows on the floor and a couple of piles of mysterious materials.

"Sometimes I go to bed at 4 and get up at 6 and do it all over again," said **Timberlake**, who gets help with her Web site -- www.indiancreekgallery.com -- from her daughter, Brittany, 13, and with carpentry duties in the barn from son Zech, 12.

A closet serves as a storeroom for dozens of different styles of necklaces and earrings, with many featuring reproduction arrowheads.

She works with several area flint knappers who provide reproductions for the jewelry and a line of reproduction arrows, spears and tomahawks.

"Until I got into this, I wasn't aware that people could make such wonderful reproduction blades -- awesome, just like a real artifact," **Timberlake** said. "I asked some to make reproduction knives that I could haft and sell, and one flint knapper followed me to the next show to make sure I wasn't going to sell it as the real thing. They call people who do that 'artifakers.'"

That's when she learned about artifact authenticators, eventually met Raggio and hooked up with him to assure clients that what they bought were the real things.

"I didn't know how popular this all had become -- and the price of authentic artifacts keeps going up every year," she said.

The most valuable artifacts she mounts would be in the \$300 range, and her most expensive pieces rarely top \$400.

On the open market, a rare artifact can sell for more than \$250,000.

Her reproduction arrows can sell for less than \$50, with earrings and necklaces going for less than \$25.

Reworked arrows -- those with points with minor flaws corrected by flint knappers -- sell for around \$100.

"I don't sell artifacts. I sell artifact art," **Timberlake** said. "I've never sold an arrowhead by itself."

Neither has Raggio, who charges about \$25 to authenticate an artifact through his company, Brand X Indian, www.brandxindian.com.

There is no certification process for authenticators -- just a hard-earned reputation.

Raggio found his first arrowhead at age 6, studied it under a magnifying glass and wondered about the person who made it. That began a five-decade quest of learning while digging in the dirt and puzzling over new finds.

"I don't believe it's ethical for me to trade or sell," he said. "I'm here to give my opinion, appraise and place a value -- but all artifacts are priceless."

Just ask Mazac, who doesn't really care that his point got a \$9,000 ding.

"It's still worth a thousand bucks," he said. "But everybody who comes over to my house and sees **Lori's** stuff just goes nuts over them because you don't see things like this anywhere else. I know it's her business, but this is fantastic stuff, real artwork, and I'll be taking her some more arrowheads before long.

"I used to not really look for arrowheads, but I'm looking for them a little more now."

And, **Timberlake** was pleased to know, Mazac nowadays keeps some tissue handy.

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1. **Lori Timberlake** uses authentic American Indian artifacts such as these tomahawk and spear points to create art that not only provides unique displays for their owners but also honors the original makers. PHOTO: PHOTOS BY JOHN GOODSPEED/STAFF 2. ABOVE: Using a more modern-day cutting tool, **Timberlake** trims the hide on the spear shaft while turning an artifact into art. LEFT: **Timberlake** uses a variety of materials to haft the authentic artifacts to shafts so the items can be prominently displayed. 3. ABOVE: A row of necklaces made with reproduction arrowheads hangs in **Lori Timberlake's** workshop. UPPER LEFT: The microscope's light shows the translucence of this arrowhead. 4. Bert Mazac displays one of the projectile points that he found on his deer lease and took to **Timberlake** for her to make into artwork for his home. PHOTOS BY JOHN GOODSPEED/STAFF

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