



Jack Hatty toughs out his senior season.

Sunday in Living

# LIVING

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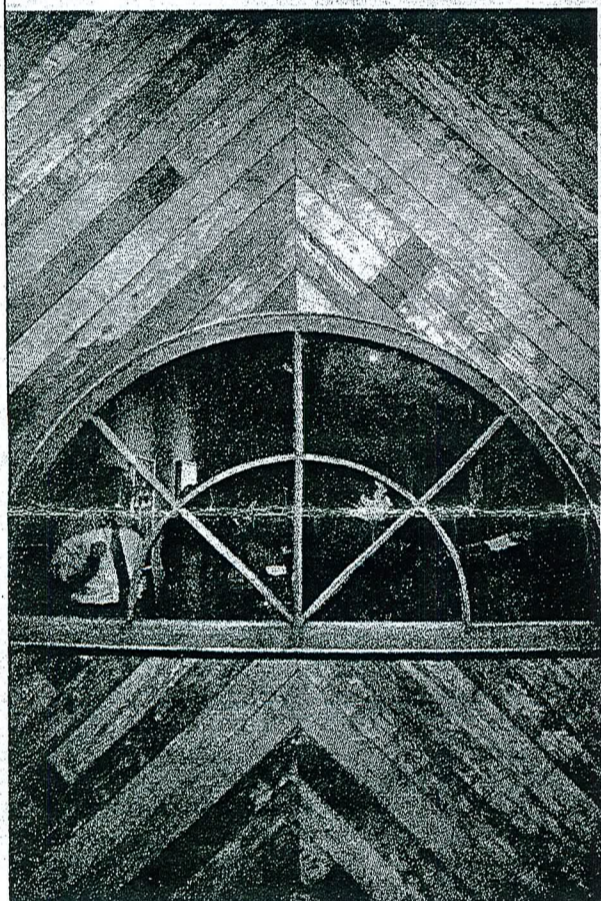
SECTION

**E**

Saturday  
November 16, 2002

# the craftsman's art

**WHAT** are those rusty old axes, hammers and tongs doing on the walls of the New Orleans Museum of Art? They are proving that tools of the builder's trade can illustrate our collective history and humanity every bit as brilliantly as paintings and sculptures.



STAFF PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ZDON

Curators Jonn Hankins, left, and Steven Maklansky, right, lead an exhibit tour through a custom-carpeted arched window and herring bone wooden wall.

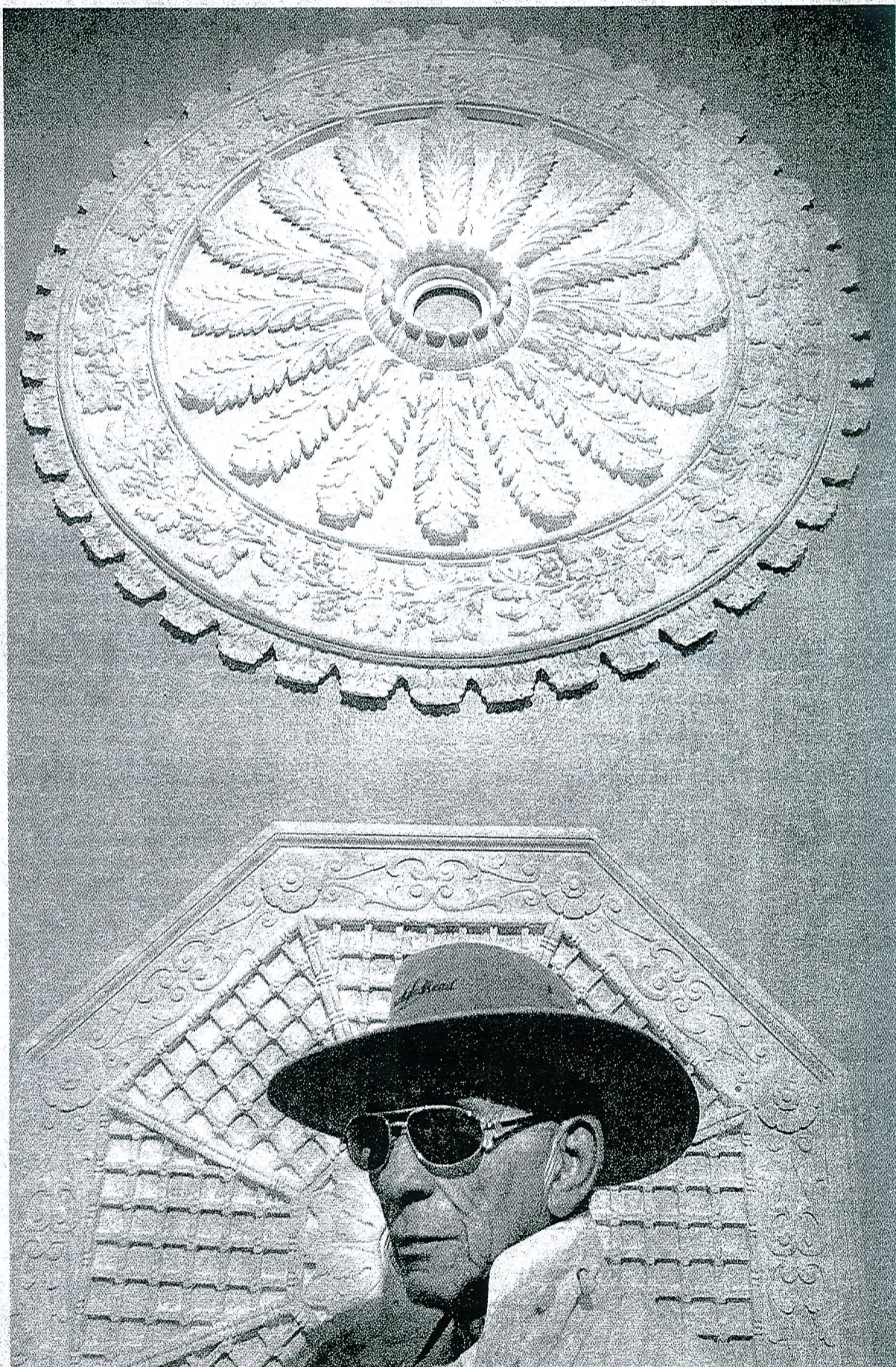
By **Doug MacCash**  
Art critic

**T**he first thing you see is a worm-eaten cypress stump. Next, you encounter an old wooden carpenter's plane, standing upright in a museum case as if it were a Brancusi. Keep walking and you see other worn and rusted tools hanging in rows where paintings by Degas and Monet once hung, plus a custom-built brick fireplace, a hand-made double hung window, a wrought iron banister standing on a pedestal like a Rodin, a huge arched window frame, plaster chandelier medallions protruding from the wall like Egyptian friezes and a few custom-milled, Neo-classical columns, seemingly holding up the roof.

Obviously, it's not your usual museum show. But that is not to say that there are no conventional works of art in "Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts in New Orleans," the New Orleans Museum of Art's eccentric new exhibit. Early 20th-century Impressionist pastels of New Orleans houses by William Woodward line one wall. Another wall is given over to Depression-era Walker Evans architectural

See **EXHIBIT, E-10**

► Program schedule, E-10



▲ Master plasterer Earl Barthé stands beneath the sort of intricate, cast-plaster chandelier medallions that has made his family famous for more than a century.

## Masters of their trade

By **Judy Walker**  
Staff writer

*In New Orleans, artisans have always been artistic*

Most Orleanians know Allison "Tootie" Montana as the maker of the fabulous suits he has constructed and worn as a Mardi Gras Indian Big Chief with the Yellow Pocahontas. What they may not know about Montana is that they are also seeing his work on the

See **MASTERS, E-10**

# Arts and craft

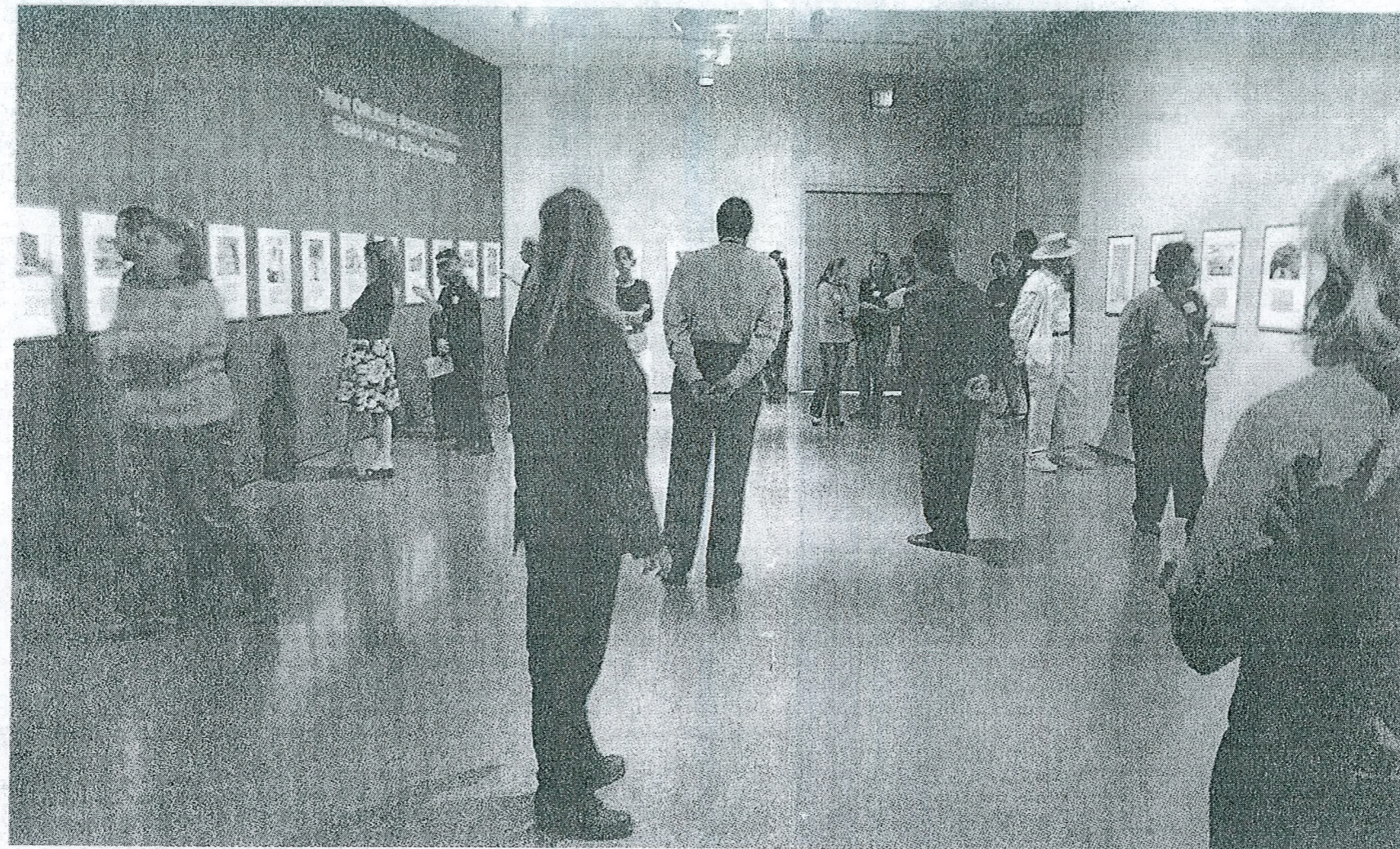
EXHIBIT, from E-1

photos. Still another wall is hung with colorful paintings by modernist master Jacob Lawrence. A trio of conceptualist artist Robert Tannen's giant sheet metal shotgun houses dominate one room, and details of sculptors John Scott and Martin Payton's renowned "Spirit House" sculpture lend a poetic touch to the end of the exhibit.

The fact that these bona fide fine art objects are placed cheek-by-jowl with examples of the building crafts — carpentry, masonry, iron work, lathing and plastering — is the rather radical point of the exhibit. Much of New Orleans venerated antebellum architecture was built by black tradesmen who passed their skills from generation to generation to the present day. Their contribution to the Crescent City's unique aesthetic can't be overestimated, yet it has rarely been celebrated. And it certainly has never been described as a fine art.

But the deep schism between art and craft is a relatively recent development in man's history. Renaissance artists were celebrated for their amazing skills, but stone masons were also held in the highest regard for their almost-mystical abilities to build walls and towers that wouldn't fall down. It was only in the industrial era, when commodities began to be manufactured, not crafted, that fine art rose to its lofty position in society's esteem. The trend continued in the modern era, as fine art assumed the role of poetry and the practical arts were increasingly perceived as entirely prosaic.

For two centuries it has been the job of the museum to distinguish between the high arts and the (presumably) low. But as this show illustrates, the role of the museum, and our perception of art, may be changing. Context — how art is made, why it is made and who



STAFF PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ZDON

The photo exhibit 'New Orleans Architectural Gems of the 20th Century,' encountered in the middle of 'Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts in New Orleans,' provokes comparisons between the city's unique Neo-classic architecture and (frequently) generic modern architecture.

makes it — is becoming increasingly more important than simple connoisseurship. Paintings and sculpture are no longer valuable baubles on the grand scale; they are illustrations of history and humanity. And if you're illustrating history and humanity, then a carpenter's plane or a rusty hammer is every bit as resonant as an oil painting or a marble sculpture.

That's why "Raised to the Trade" is such a triumph. Just the fact that you're standing in a museum lends these long-neglected building crafts the dignity and importance they deserve. The museum imprimatur also suggests that the arts and crafts found right here in New Orleans are as interesting, and a world more pertinent, than the exotica we once expected from museums. By the end of the show, wooden beams joined with pegs and cast iron fence ornaments blend seamlessly with Photo-Realist and Synthetic Cubist paintings. The crafts seem quite artistic and the workmanlike nature of fine art emerges as well.

A show this wide-ranging and ambitious is not without flaws, of course. The romantic

term Creole, which can mean anything from a European person born in the New World colonies, to a person of mixed race, to the New Orleans milieu in general, is always attractive, but it's also always problematic. Part of the intention of the show is obviously to give New Orleans' long-neglected black craftsmen their due, but the exhibit includes at least one white craftsman of Cajun ancestry, which calls the whole political premise into question. Somewhere in the exhibit, the curators — and there are enough curators and scholarly contributors here for a pick-up basketball game — should have defined their use of the word Creole, then held their ground.

But in a show this good, it's hard to dwell on the negative for long. Notice the seemingly incongruent suite of photos of 20th-century architecture in the middle of the show, which subversively emphasizes the charm, grace and uniqueness of New Orleans' old-time Neo-classicism compared to the sterility of modern International School architecture. Notice the series of close-up color photos of the craftsmen's hands, which subtly illustrate

the blending of races that makes the Crescent City what it is.

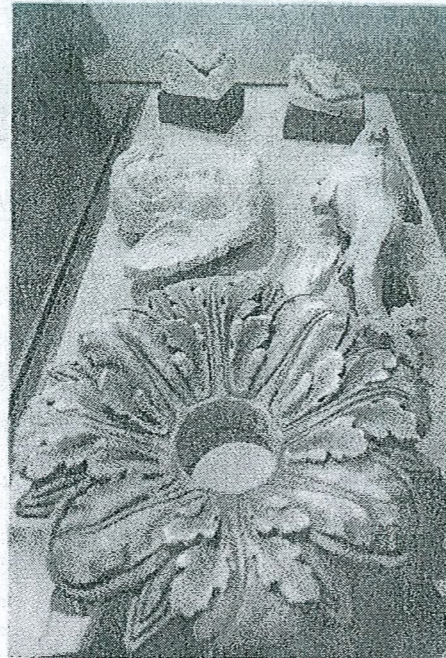
Notice Mardi Gras Indian chief Tootie Montana's feathered suite. Masters such as Montana at applying plaster lath, the thin wooden strips which support old-fashioned plaster work, are said to pound nails in syncretized New Orleans rhythms, the same way Indians pound tambourines. And notice that the bottle of wine installed in the wrought-iron wine rack is Louisiana strawberry wine. Nice touch.

"Raised in the Trade: Creole Building Arts in New Orleans" is an aggregate of hundreds of similarly nice touches. It is a postmodern curatorial masterpiece. Kudos to Neil Alexander, Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, Ray Brassieur, Jay D. Edwards, Nicole Griggs, Nick Spitzer, John Michael Vlach, Laura Renee Westbrook, Jonn Hankins, Steven Maklansky and everyone else involved. NOMA is way ahead of the national pack with this smart, soulful show.

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# In honor of the builders



Plaster ornaments such as these elevated ordinary residences to works of art.

## RAISED TO THE TRADE: Creole Building Arts in New Orleans

**What:** A Post-modern museum exhibit blending examples of carpentry, masonry, iron work, lathing and plastering with paintings, photographs and sculpture.

**Where:** The New Orleans Museum of Art, City Park  
**When:** Tuesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5, through Jan. 12.

**Admission:** \$6 adults; \$5 seniors and \$3 children; Thursdays from 10 a.m. to noon are free for Louisiana residents.

**Call:** 488-2631.

### PROGRAM SCHEDULE

**Sunday, 2 to 4 p.m.,** "Family Workshop: Plaster Masters." Create sculpture with plaster.

**Monday-Tuesday, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.,** "The Building Arts of New Orleans." Scholars present academic papers on exhibit topics.

**Nov. 23, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.,** "A Day of Demonstrations of the Creole Building Arts." Demonstrations by master craftsmen.

**Nov. 24, 3 p.m.,** "Tales of New Orleans' Master Craftsmen." Nicholas P. Spitzer, host of public radio's "American Roots," will conduct interviews with local craftsmen Darryl Reeves, Earl Barthe, Desoto Jackson, Teddy Pierre and Lionel Ferbos.

**Dec. 1, 2 to 4 p.m.,** "Picture Your House." Participants will learn to draw their house on paper.

**Dec. 15, 2 to 4 p.m.,** "Enlightened Environments, The Art of Stained Glass." Participants will create their own colorful panels using Plexiglas, paint and paper.

**Dec. 15, 2 p.m.,** "The Bells Are Ringing." New play pays tribute to the rich cultural background of New Orleans.

**Dec. 15, 3 p.m.,** "Raised to the Trade: Tracing the Builders of New Orleans." Guest Curator Mora Beauchamp-Byrd speaks about the exhibit.

## MASTERS, from E-1

ceiling of the lobby of Hotel Monteleone, and in the prominent bas relief oval and borders adorning the facade of Le Pavillon Hotel.

Montana is a retired lather. He built miles of lathing — the hidden base for plaster — in each house upon which he worked, as well as molds. And if he had his druthers, Montana says he would rather be known for his trade than his Mardi Gras Indian artistry. Montana said he taught plenty of plasterers how to make columns on forms he would create — an idea he developed from working on his Indian suits.

"My trade was my life, that's my life, and I'm living today on my trade, not living on my Indian stuff," said Montana, who is almost 80. "My trade is the cause of me being able to design the suits I do."

This intersection of New Orleans art, craft and culture is at the heart of "Raised to the Trade: Creole Building Arts of New Orleans," a New Orleans Museum of Art exhibit that opened Sunday and runs through Jan. 12.

The show features one of Montana's Mardi Gras Indian suits, which he said has cornice work and three-dimensional work that "I learned from doing on different jobs. My trade was first, and the Indian came after. I didn't start masking Indian until I was 24 years old, and I started learning my trade at 16 years old."

The show had its genesis in 1997 as a joint project between the museum and the University of New Orleans.

"When we decided to look at master craftsmen of the building trades, we found tremendous anecdotal histories, but documents were scattered and scarce," NOMA Project Director Jonn Hankins said. In the catalog, Hankins writes that the exhibit and the book are dedicated to "the ordinary people who make the vernacular culture of New Orleans so extraordinary."

The organizers started by ask-

ing the owners and curators of historic homes and house museums: Who worked on these buildings? Who were the best craftsmen? Eventually, as names were added to that list, an oral history of 55 families was compiled.

The exhibit features the work of only a tiny portion of the men interviewed in the Building Arts Survey, said Laura Westbrook, one of the show's curators and director of the Regional Folklife Program at UNO.

"Some have passed on . . . a couple have Alzheimer's. We are so lucky we got their words," Westbrook said. "The project is going to live on. We have more interviews to do."

The interviews will be available for further study, and books and other work are sure to come out of it, she said.

The show explores so much: the deep African-American roots here and how the architectural styles evolved. Familial ties and training. Skill, pride and elegance of materials. Some of the subjects are more subtle, such as rich everyday creativity and problem-solving, the rewards of work. Glimpses are provided of other elements of New Orleans culture, such as "day and night people."

"Many of the craftsmen were musicians at night," said NOMA Assistant Director for Art Steve Maklansky. "Craftsmen build houses using plans the way musicians use sheet music, as just a suggestion."

Brick mason Teddy Pierre thinks that people will come away from the exhibit "with a sense of awe and a high regard for architectural craftsmen and what we do," said Pierre, who holds a Tulane architecture degree. The exhibit, he said, gives "another layer of explanation of how the French Quarter happened and how it gets maintained. We still have the vestiges of a craft society here. It's

not nearly the size or vigor it once had, but it still exists."

At its heart, the exhibit is really about problem-solving, Pierre said.

"When I go out and talk to young people about what it is I do, I make them realize what we do in crafts is, we are problem solvers. All day long, the craft tool I hold in my hand is simply an implement to help solve a problem. Seldom do we come in and build a wall and walk away from it. There are all sorts of problems that have to be solved," he said.

On site in the museum, Pierre built a combination fountain and cutaway fireplace, with colored lights that indicate the physics of hot and cold air rushing up and down the flue of the chimney. At one point, the fountain had a leak that took some time to resolve. Now, he wishes he had kept a journal of the experience of fixing it. He learned much more than if it had worked the first time, he said.

"It was an opportunity for me to go to many people and seek advice and say, 'How would you handle this?' I got all kinds of advice and directions. . . . It was amazing, the whole human calendar laid out in front of me: 'Here, man, try this, try that.'"

"There's so much more to what these men do than most of us realize," Westbrook said. "To hear the emotion with which they refer to their work is really touching. When we conducted interviews on which these exhibits are based, we were surprised and pleased to hear the joy they take in the work, and the feeling they have for the people who mentor them."

Westbrook said the craftspeople always mentioned who taught them their trade and who they worked with, because, they say, that determines how good you are.

The sheer joy of the work is exemplified in comments from

Dwayne Broussard, a Cajun carpenter from Patterson whose woodwork is in the show.

His work is pure pleasure, he said, and he never stops learning.

"I believe I'm doing a high level of work," he said. "I'm not looking just to satisfy the customer. I want to satisfy myself."

Broussard said that in high school advanced shop class, he found he had a knack for wood.

"I had the love for it," he said. "I could just look at things, point blank, and envision it."

Westbrook said she hopes this showing will call attention to the need to preserve architectural crafts for the future, as systems formerly supported by unions and schools have dwindled.

Overall, Westbrook said, the experience "really changed the way I looked at local architecture. I hope people who come to the exhibit will look at their own neighborhoods.

"We want people to walk out and see our environment with new eyes."

Earl Barthé, a sixth-generation plasterer who helps maintain the Quarter and historic houses, said he also hopes the show opens the eyes of people as to what sort of craftsmanship is still available.

"I always wondered why people spending \$350,000 and \$1 million for homes don't realize what they can really get," Barthé said. "If I could afford a million-dollar home, I'd have ornaments and medallions. . . . If you have hundreds of thousands to spend, you can get beautiful stucco jobs and the interior plaster like you see when you go down on St. Charles Avenue and the Vieux Carre, when houses were built 50 and 100 years ago. Man, it's a dream world."

"Did you see the roses in the fence?" Barthé asked of the ironwork in the exhibit. "If I had a million bucks, I'd have that all over my house."

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