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HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP: 'Artisans' do woodwork at Statehouse

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By John Tredrea, Staff Writer

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Michael Pietras (left) and Eric Saperstein on a break from their woodwork at the New Jersey State Capital Complex Assembly Chamber with their business, Artisans of the Valley in Hopewell Township. Mr. Saperstein's father, Stanley,

Artisans of the Valley, now in its second generation in Hopewell Township, recently added an impressive feather to its cap — repairing and maintaining the woodwork in the New Jersey State House in Trenton.

"We work in the Senate and Assembly chambers and in the rest of the building," said 37-year-old Eric Saperstein, whose father, Stanley, started Artisans in the Valley years ago. "We're in there a few times a month. We maintain the finishes, carve and replace moldings that have been knocked off. The color matching of the finishes has to be very precise. Part of the work is to minimize future damage. If you don't maintain that kind of work, especially inlaid stuff, the carvings fall off. There's a myth that you're never supposed to touch antiques. That's not true. If you don't maintain them, they fall apart."

Besides caring for and fixing all kinds of antiques, Artisans of the Valley build things that look like antiques and redo whole rooms to make them resemble another century.

"We do a lot of work over in Princeton in addition to the Hopewell area," Mr. Saperstein said. "We built a credence table for communion services for Trinity Church in Princeton. Solid oak. It's a modernized Gothic style, similar to what some folks call New Wave Gothic. It's not as ornate; doesn't have as much detail as the original Gothic style."

Another example of their work is in Timberlane Middle School in Hopewell Township — it made the howling wolf mascot in the school lobby of the school; its teams are known as the Timberwolves.

A portfolio of its work can be seen at the website, www.artisansofthevalley.com.

Some of the work is small — sculptures, walking sticks, boxes and other things. They're hand-painted as well as carved from scratch.

"One of the boxes we did was for a marriage proposal," Mr. Saperstein said. "It had a carved ring and carved rose on top."

A famous client was the rock star Ted Nugent, who loves to hunt.

"We did a wall panel for him with a sunrise and white-tailed deer," Mr. Saperstein said. "It's a relief carving, all oak. We did it in 20 to 30 hours and delivered to him ourselves. Then he took us hunting with him for a week. That was fun."

Mr. Saperstein said he followed in his father's footsteps in doing this kind of work because "it's an artistic outlet. It's creative. You're preserving heirlooms and history — that's how you feel when you're doing so you get pretty obsessive about doing it just right."

An old friend, Michael Pietras, a Central High School grad like Mr. Saperstein, recently moved back to this area from the Cayman Islands and has re-joined Artisans of the Valley.

"That enables us to branch out," Mr. Saperstein said. "Having Mike will let us do more onsite work and expand into modern furniture, which he's really good with. He's very talented, very experienced. Having him with us will make a big difference."

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