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# An Eye For Detail

ARTIST ED CORTEZ BRINGS HISTORY TO LIFE  
WITH METICULOUSLY RESEARCHED AND BUILT  
MODEL SHIPS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR ERA

WRITTEN BY MARY BETH VALLAR  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTORIA SEMPSROTT

Cortez's model of the Rattlesnake,  
one of the private ships outfitted as  
warships during the Revolutionary War  
to fight against the Continental Navy



Ed and Karen Cortez moved to Vero Beach four years ago. Between them is his model of the Rattlesnake, and on either side are paintings he has done since moving to Vero Beach, focusing on Florida's water birds.

Ed Cortez has been an artist virtually his entire life. And it is his love of history that has powered the direction of his art and stoked his passion for creating exquisitely intricate and accurate models and drawings of Revolutionary War-era ships. He arguably devotes as much time to researching the ships and the period as he does in building his models, so they are as historically authentic as possible, down to the finest detail.

Taught to draw by his older brother, Cortez drew constantly as a boy, often on whatever surface was available. This included his sheet music tucked in a white binder for rehearsals. The Brooklyn native was a member of the prestigious boys' choir of the Church of the Transfiguration in New York City. It was his choir director, who was also his godfather, who drew Cortez's attention to nautical art.

"He had a sailboat and took me sailing on Long Island Sound, which was how I first became interested in sailing and sailboats," Cortez says. "He was a brilliant man and

interested in many things, and we would often go to the Mystic Seaport to see the Morgan." The Charles W. Morgan, a whaling ship built and launched in 1841, is on display at the Museum of America and the Sea in Mystic, Connecticut.

That is where it started. "I became a history buff, and my love of ship model building is supported by my love of history."

Cortez's skill in building historical ship models recently caught the attention of the Smithsonian Institution. A representative of the Smithsonian

contacted him via his website to commission him to build a 4-foot model of the Philadelphia. The Smithsonian needed a model quickly, to present to the retiring director of its National Museum of American History, whose favorite exhibit in the museum is the gunboat Philadelphia. The ship sank in Lake Champlain in October 1776 in the Battle of Valcour Island against the British Navy. It was raised in 1935, and its remains are in the permanent collection at the museum in Washington, D.C.

"You're in luck," he told the Smithsonian. "It's one of my favorite ships and I have a model in my living room."



In his home studio, Cortez works on a color pencil drawing of a nesting sandhill crane.



The artist holds a book that includes drawings and plans for the *Bonhomme Richard*, a ship that was captained by John Paul Jones during the Revolutionary War. "The *Bonhomme Richard* will probably be the next ship model I build."

"They asked if I could build the model in eight weeks," Cortez says, "which would have been impossible because it takes many months to complete a model. But I said, 'You're in luck. It's one of my favorite ships and I have a model in my living room.'" He adds that the museum is also his favorite, and he had seen the exhibition of the gunboat *Philadelphia* many times before building the model, using the plans made available by the Smithsonian.

Cortez agreed to sell his model to the museum, and a few days later he boxed it up and hopped on an Amtrak train heading out of Sanford, Florida, for the overnight trip to personally deliver the model. "I was in a sleeper car," he says. "I had the top bunk and the ship had the bottom."

A few weeks later, Cortez and his wife, Karen, traveled to Washington for the unveiling at the director's retirement dinner.

Cortez's models have been displayed at the Remsenburg Academy on Long Island; the Artists Guild Gallery in Vero Beach; and the Icon Galeria in Alexandria, Virginia. He crafts his models using thousands of pieces that he cuts and

shapes, along with some pre-molded metal items.

What is the scope of each project? (In order to understand the following description, the reader may find the following definitions helpful: A shroud is a heavy rope that holds up a mast; a deadeye is a circular piece of wood involved in anchoring the shrouds; and a ratline is a transverse rope attached to the shrouds to form the step of a rope ladder. Now you are ready to proceed.) Cortez explains, "I've never counted the number of parts in any ship model, but to give an idea, a single shroud will have two deadeyes; a thin rope that holds the deadeyes together; two thinner ropes that bind the shroud around the top deadeye; a wire that holds the bottom deadeye to the chain; the chain itself; the nail that holds the chain to the ship; the shroud itself; lines that bind the top of the shroud, and 20 or so ratlines. That's about 30 pieces I have to cut, shape and glue.

"A three-masted ship, for example, might have 32 or more shrouds, meaning that the shrouds alone might have 900 pieces. Each cannon has about 40 pieces, so a 20-gun ship would have 800 pieces just for the cannon.



Cortez's ship models are extraordinarily detailed; he estimates that a medium-sized model contains more than 10,000 pieces.

"Using this calculation, I'm guessing the same ship might have more than 1,000 planks. Each one has to be cut into a curve to fit the rounded sides of the ship, then steamed so that it bends to the shape of the hull, and finally glued and clamped to the side of the ship to dry. I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that a medium-sized ship model might have more than 10,000 individual pieces."

His focus is the Revolutionary War, not only to emphasize the importance the ships played in the war, but also to recognize all the Americans who died in that war. "They helped create this country. We honor the veterans of all the other wars and conflicts, and this is my way of saying, 'Don't forget about these veterans.'"

Building accurate depictions of ships of this era is challenging because few, if any, plans of the ships exist. However, if a ship was captured, Cortez might be lucky enough to find the plans. "The British often made plans of the ships they captured because they wanted to know about our ships. But if the ship wasn't captured, if it burned or sank, I have to make some educated guesses."

He has an extensive library in his studio at his Grand Harbor home, where he begins his research. "When I build a model, I start by reading as much as I can by the generally acknowledged experts. Howard Chapelle is my go-to resource. In fact, I have never built a model that is not included in his 'History of American Ships,' which was written in 1935."

Records from the ship, if they can be found, provide a valuable source of information. "John Paul Jones was one who kept copious notes," he says. "His logs may say something about the number of men on the ship, how much storage was available for provisions, or how much water it drew. From this you can get a general idea of the dimensions."

Cortez searches for such records in libraries, where they are often obscured in journals, and at auction houses. And he searches often. Karen Cortez quips, "We have been to more libraries than you can imagine, wherever we travel. And I'm talking about the catacombs of the libraries, where they give you white gloves in case you touch anything."

This meticulous research pays off in more ways than one, Cortez says. "I served on the board of trustees of the Cold Spring Harbor Whaling Museum, and it had acquired ships' logs over the years and stored them in the basement. But no one took the time to read them." Not until Ed Cortez, that is.

"I would go down there and read through them. It was not only fun, but profitable, because I found a passport for a ship to sail out of New York Harbor. It was signed by John Tyler and Daniel Webster. At the time one was the president of the United States and the other was the secretary of state. I have since learned that every ship that sailed had to have a passport signed by the president and the secretary of state. So, the museum sold this passport at auction for something like \$15,000, which was quite a boon to the non-profit organization."

In looking for a place for retirement, it was the arts, and especially the Vero Beach Museum of Art, that sold the couple on Vero Beach. They moved here from Long Island close to four years ago, and today the museum is an important aspect of Cortez's life here. He enrolled in the art school and now adds the painting of Florida's water birds to his artistic range. In addition, he volunteers with the museum's education program and takes his art and music to the Senior Resource Association Adult Day Care Center.

"I bring my guitar with me, and, after we complete an art project, we sing songs. I have gotten to know which songs many of the participants love. Many have difficulty remembering events in their past, but music triggers memory. When we sing, an amazing thing often happens. Some of the people who have difficulty remembering will sing with me and will remember every word."



A metal musical toy in the shape of a ship represents two of the artist's passions: music and nautical art.

Music has been a part of his life as much as art, he says, and was responsible for many of the fortunate turns in his life — one being his membership in the aforementioned boys' choir at the Church of the Transfiguration. He stayed in the choir from age 8 to 13, when his voice changed, and at one point he traveled to Europe aboard the Queen Mary to perform with the group.

Singing in the choir was also a well-paying gig, which helped his family. At union wages, he sometimes earned more than his father, who was working as a kitchen helper in a New York City cafeteria. The choir experience resulted in a scholarship to the elite St. John the Divine elementary school, which in turn helped him succeed in high school and earn a scholarship to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

He was determined to study art in college, but says a wise counselor encouraged him to pursue a more practical course. With a degree in psychology, his career path led first to education; later to the education of deaf children; then to the position of assistant commissioner of education for the state of New York; and eventually to the position of director of the National Center for Disability Services, located on Long Island, from which he retired.

To his already loaded retirement schedule, Cortez includes performing as one of the lead male vocalists in two

bands. Rip Tide is a seven-piece band that performs dance music from the '50s, '60s and '70s; Ebb Tide is a three-member band that features mellower music. "The three of us are also in the other band and we call ourselves the 'softer side of Rip Tide.'"

Cortez concludes, "Everything I do relates to music and art." In his retirement, he has found the ideal place for both. ✨

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