



Engraving The

*Master engravers
across the state touch
lives far from home.*

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For the beginning artist, it would be like standing beside Norman Rockwell while he painted ... for a novice writer, like hovering over Hemingway's typewriter as words magically formed on a page. That is the closest I can describe the feeling I experienced while watching Lisa Tomlin engrave the hair on the back of an elephant—an elephant which serves as the focal point on the receiver of a shotgun. Her work is that detailed, that exacting.

Many high-end gun manufacturers, whose business it is "to know," consider Lisa Tomlin to be one of the top engravers in the world. You would think that someone with that much talent would be easy to find. She is not. You might say it was divine intervention that led me to her. Dr. Raymond Spence, an avid sportsman and former defensive end for the Louisiana State University Tigers, retired in 2007 after 45 years as the pastor of Second Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. In tribute to his years of service, he was given a retirement gift by his congregation: a special gift, a one-of-a-kind Parker Brothers shotgun engraved by Lisa Tomlin. Knowing how much I would appreciate such a work of art, he kindly invited me to see it.

It is not often a man is given a gift which bestows on him such extreme emotions: pride in the fact that he



now possesses a true treasure, enhanced by a true artist, and humility, kindled by the love and admiration of his congregation who presented him with such a thoughtful token of appreciation.

Engraved on Dr. Spence's 20 gauge Parker A-1 Special shotgun were his two favorite bird dogs, his dead-rise fishing boat, and his church, along with the initials LSU on the trigger guard. Outside of his dear wife of nearly 50 years and his two sons, Lisa Tomlin had captured the very essence of the man and what he loves. One cannot help but marvel at the detail of Lisa's work on Dr. Spence's Parker. Lisa even added the shade from a standing oak tree as it cast its shadow on the right side of Second Baptist Church, as well as the links in the chain fence in front of the building.



Above: Lisa Tomlin transfers art to the metal to begin the engraving process. Her engravings capture the spirit of the hunter in a personal way. **Bottom left:** Art nouveau has been engraved on a Winchester Model 53 for a collector in Idaho.

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While admiring the engraving on Dr. Spence's gun, he informed me that Ms. Tomlin had also engraved guns presented to former President George H. W. Bush, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and General Chuck Yeager. My first thought was, "Who in a Richmond Baptist church knows world-class engravers, and in what city across the globe does she live?" Then Dr. Spence informed me that Lisa Tomlin hails from the small hamlet of Evington, Virginia, just south of Lynchburg.

In the early 1980s, Ken Hurst, who at the time was a master engraver for Colt, owned an engraving production company out of Concord, Virginia. Hurst's company not only engraved knives and guns, but also performed commemorative work for Quail Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited, among others. Engraver Jack Jones, Jr. of Forest, Virginia, who





Jack Jones, Jr. inspects a Colt Single Action .45 caliber revolver that he has engraved.

worked for Hurst, stated, "The Lynchburg area, at that time, had more engravers per capita in the world, with the exception of Italy."

Jack, who books his business mostly by word of mouth, has customers all over the world. He has just finished engraving a Scottish family's castle on a Ruger 30.06. When Ken Hurst closed his production facility, a number of Virginia engravers such as Jones, Tomlin, George, and Davidson went out on their own.

Tim George of Altavista, Virginia, specializes in knife engraving and may complete only one gun a year. George feels that artwork on guns is usually limited to the traditional. "With knives, I can do Deco or Nouveau styles. I have been able over the years to develop my own style of scroll work, and I am proud that my customers recognize it as being particular to me. Engraving guns, to me, is like writing a novel. Engraving knives is like writing po-

etry." Tim must be quite a poet, because there is often a two-year waiting period for his knife work.

Tim, who also teaches engraving, says his work does not seem to be affected by the economy. "It is one of the few things we are *exporting*. American engravers are known throughout the world."

For those who would like to work at home, it may be the kind of profession one is looking for. "If you are artistic and can sit for 40 hours a week, you can be an engraver," said George.

Jere Davidson, another engraver from the Lynchburg area, engraves for Dakota Arms and also, Connecticut Shotgun Mfg. His biggest fan, however, may be Edmund Davidson (no relation) of Goshen, Virginia, and one of the premier knife makers in the state. You can find Edmund's knife work and Jere's engraving in the book, *The Art of the Integral Knife*.

"I have used Jere as my engraver

for 18 consecutive years," said Edmund. "My knife work is just another form of art. It is 'art with an edge.' I have a number of collectors in Virginia, but I ship knives all over the world. I chose Jere to do my engraving because he is totally, and always, creative. To me, Jere's engraving 'flows' and it works extremely well with my art. He has never done a knife for me that was the same pattern."



In the early 1990s, Lisa Tomlin was “discovered.”

Lisa’s talent for drawing got noticed, and it was then recommended she put that talent to use as an engraver. “I went to Ken and asked him for a job. He said he wasn’t hiring anyone at that time, but he gave me a piece of paper the size of a quarter and asked me to draw an elk on that paper. After he saw my drawing, he hired me,” Tomlin related.

Working on a piece of steel or gold which will be part of a high-end product requires focus and great attention to detail. There is little room for error.

“I learned using the hammer-and-chisel method, the way the Italians engraved many centuries ago. With a hammer and chisel, the engraver has to be very careful that the chisel does not slip. It is one of the hardest things an engraver has to learn when using that method. I bet I had to make *one thousand* commas before Ken would let me work on a real engraving,” Lisa emphasized.

Tomlin is aware of the newer tools used for engraving and explained, “Some engravers today use an air tool called a Graver Max and I may use it on rare occasions for a background, but I still prefer the hammer-and-chisel method. It just works better for me, and I believe it makes my work more personable.” Lisa also makes her own engraving tools.

It was around this time that John Bolliger, well-known custom gun maker and founder of Mountain Riflery, was looking for someone to do a



Tim George sets up to engrave a Warren Osborne knife. He will engrave the bolsters, part of the knife handle on both sides of the jade, shown below.

special project—the annual auction gun for Safari Club International. A bull elephant was to be engraved on a bolt action rifle as the last animal engraved in a collection of guns titled, the “Most Dangerous Game Series.” At auction, the gun brought \$165,000.

Bolliger described the importance of an engraver this way: “Although our guns are artwork, they are designed to be used. Some will hunt with them. Some want them as a

display. Our market is the top two to three percent of those individuals buying guns. We just supplied a gun to the King of Spain. That is why the skill of an engraver is so important. I have built guns whose value was diminished by a poor engraver and whose value was enhanced by a skilled engraver.” Bolliger’s company, at this writing, holds the world record for the most money paid for an American-made rifle.





Here (and shown below) Jere Davidson engraves a red stag on a Dakota Arms Model 76 rifle.

Another custom gun manufacturer, the John Rigby Company from California, was commissioned to build a gun which would be a gift to former President George Bush. Lisa Tomlin was hired to engrave that gun. Geoff Miller, managing director at the company, feels that an engraver must be able to do at least four things well. "Their artwork must fit exactly and correctly on the piece that is to be engraved. They must be excellent at producing a believable game scene. They must be able to do scroll work. And finally, they must be able to do the lettering. Lisa can do all four, and do all four extremely well. I think if Lisa is not *the* top engraver in the world at this moment, she is definitely in the *top three*."

Because of the time it takes to engrave a shotgun well, Lisa can produce maybe five guns a year, and because of the demand for her work, the value of her engraving increases 15–20% each year. As Miller put it, "Let's say she keeps engraving for another twenty years. That is only one hundred guns. Her work, to the collector of fine guns, will be as famous as a Picasso."

The engraving that these individuals do is truly art. It should not be confused with what we call engraving when we go to the local mall to have our initials scratched into a Jefferson Cup. Nor is it a mass-produced, computer engraved plate which is added to a mass-produced gun or knife you find at your local sporting goods store. No, this is an



original. It may take weeks or months to complete. And just like any fine art, it builds its own cadre of worldwide collectors who are willing to wait years just to have a masterpiece created by these select engravers. It is hard sometimes to comprehend, while watching these artists sitting hunched over a table wearing huge Opti-Visor goggle-like glasses, that they delicately hammer and chisel something as fine as the hair of an elephant on metal no larger than a fifty-cent piece.

Lisa Tomlin probably speaks for all engravers across the state when she said, "I believe my engraving ability is God-given. I am passionate about the detail of my engraving and the accuracy of the animals in the engraving." Maybe that is what people see in their art. Maybe that is why presidents and kings wait patiently for their work. There is nothing like having a God-given gift and being passionate about it! □

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their Web site at www.clarkecjones.com.