

ART



"Sisters"

José Smolensky is passionate about wood. She has brought along several of her sculptures, as smooth and sensuous as a woman's body. She runs her fingers over the wood, experiencing the grain, the shapes, the texture. As she unfolds her life's story at my kitchen table, her fingers lovingly trace the curves she has carved in the smooth, finished walnut.

This woodcarver started out as a musician. She was born in 1929 in New York to Jewish immigrants.

Her father immigrated to the United States from Smolensky, Russia, and her mother came from Poland. "I always wanted to be an artist," she says, "but my father wanted me to be a musician."

In those days, the Bronx was a Jewish ghetto, and immigrants kept the old ways. "The first child in a Jewish family played piano," Smolensky explains, "so my sister is a pianist. Tradition required the second child to play the violin. There could be no brass instruments, no percussion—too noisy. It had to be a violin."

Never mind that Smolensky didn't want to play violin. But she adored her father and was eager to please him. "There was never a choice."

Back then girls were discouraged from being artists. "Dad didn't approve of nudes, not for girls. Art was not considered a decent profession, not for a female."

Smolensky remembers her father's collection of woodcarvings in their home, but she never attempted any herself in those days. So out of love and obligation she did what was expected of her: She practiced her violin and got really good at it—so good that she won a partial scholarship to the prestigious Juilliard School of Music.

Carving a new niche

It's never too late to follow your heart's desire

BY HERON

"There was no way I could turn down a scholarship to Juilliard," she recalls. She went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in music education.

At the same time Smolensky got married and had four children. A divorce and more degrees followed, including a doctorate from United States International University in San Diego.

She wound up teaching music in all kinds of schools in many states. As a single mother struggling to support her two boys and two girls, she was forced to go where the jobs were.

Smolensky supplemented her earnings by playing in symphonies. "I played in Liberace's band and Judy Garland's band," she recalls.

Through it all, she still wanted to be an artist. "I loved my music, but I always had a piece of wood in my pocket when I took my children to the park or to the library."

Smolensky retired four years ago at age 70 with a nice pension. That's when she finally decided to become the artist she always wanted to be.

These days she and Pat Brown, her partner of 20 years, live in rural Oregon

on four acres in an old farmhouse with dogs, cats, chicken and geese. "Well, not really," Brown corrects. "A fox ate the geese, all but one."

Brown, a retired nurse, helps Smolensky with her artwork. Although she is not a carver, she stains the pieces and helps sell them online.

"She's a very tough boss," Brown laughs. "And there's no *Oprah* in the afternoon."

At this point in her life, Smolensky is making up for lost time. "I carve five hours a day," she tells me. "I always had three jobs; now, carving is my job."

She has created a workshop in the farmhouse attic and loves being there.

"There isn't a thing in the world I want to do other than my work."

Smolensky buys slabs of wood from a retired logger, and she has a lot of it curing in her barn. "I live with [a piece of wood] first before I decide what to do with it," she reveals, closing her eyes and smoothing her fingers over a piece of imaginary wood. "I have to decide when it's right for me to begin. [The wood] tells me what it wants to be. It speaks to me."

Most of her figures are derived from female forms or faces. Many are somewhat realistic with an abstract flair, and some are entirely abstract, reminiscent of Henry Moore. "You have to be able to make realistic features first," she tells me, "then you can elongate, twist, play with the style."

Smolensky also has worked with clay, stone and metal but enjoys the warmth of wood. She has tried many different kinds but prefers the challenge of walnut, a very hard wood.

"I love the discipline," she explains. "If you make a mistake, you're out of it."

To carve the small pieces, Smolensky uses a wood mallet, chisels, rasps, files—hand tools only. "I started that way and just work best with those old favorites," she says. She spends one to four months on the large 20-inch pieces and a few weeks on the smaller ones.

It was Brown who noticed that the living room was getting full of carvings and that the barn was full of wood slabs. That's when she suggested, "Why don't we sell some of this stuff?"

Although Smolensky loves each piece like a mother loves her child, she agreed that the wood was taking over their space. "We'll see," she told her partner.



"Patrice"

Brown rolls her eyes at her lover's continued reluctance to part with her babies. "We still have 26 woodcarvings in the living room," she notes.

Smolensky admits: "I have to decide before I do it whether it's for sale. Then I can't sell it until I am ready to replace it."

All of this can take a while. "I fall in love with each piece," she croons.

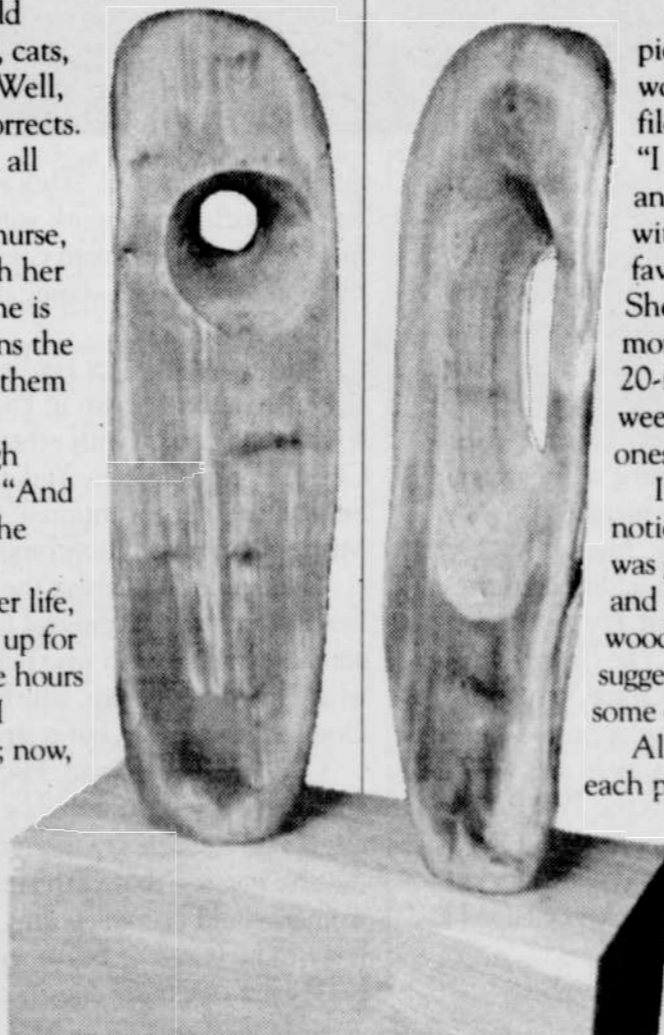
Smolensky shows me her all-time favorite, a bas-relief called "Sisters." It depicts two nude

women who are hugging, face to face, breast to breast, the way lesbians do. Again, her fingers caress the walnut bodies.

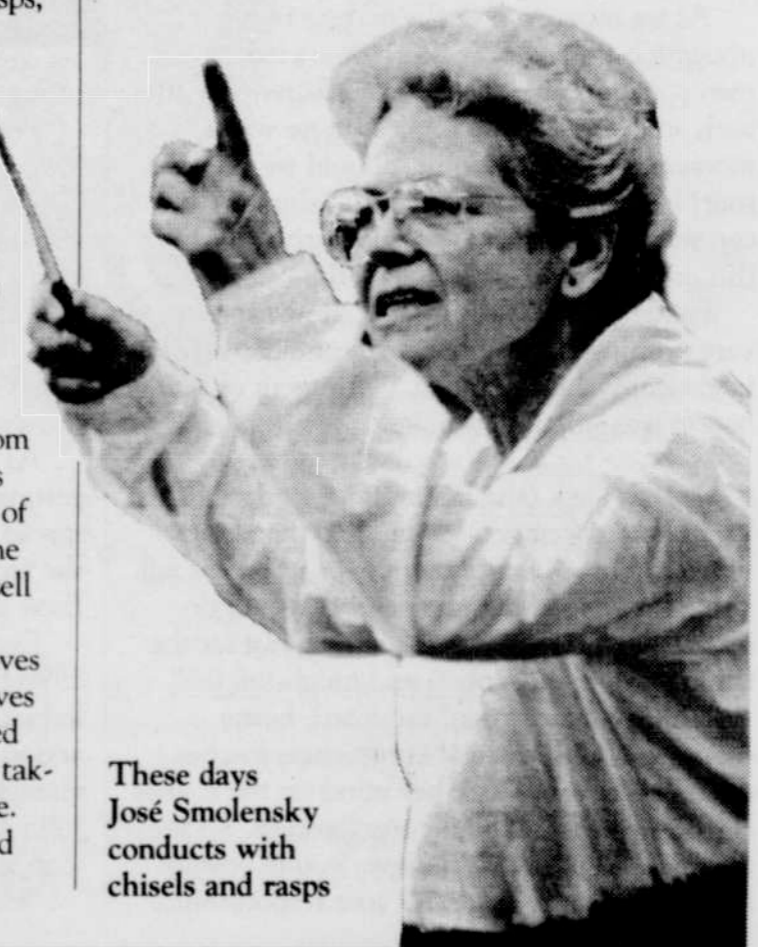
Smolensky has shown her sculptures at galleries in New York, California, Florida and Illinois. In Portland she has a piece at In Her Image Gallery.

You can view other photos of her work online at www.josestrings.com. Then you can start begging her to sell one to you! ☑

HERON is a Portland artist and free-lance writer.



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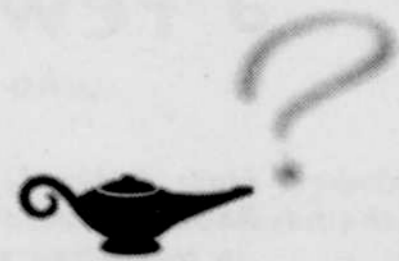
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