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CREATIVE CONVERSATIONS



Lance Daniel Aulffo: Michelangelo of the doors

BY CAROLYN MALES

Lance Daniel Aulffo eased the first of the heavy ten-foot wooden doors of the Baptist Church of Beaufort off its hinges and laid it across the sawhorses. Through these portals, crafted in 1844, generations of families had entered the sanctuary. Then when Federal troops took over the town in 1861, the church became a hospital for wounded Black soldiers. Over the following years the doors had been stained, varnished, painted and faux-finished, while Mother Nature battered them with sun, humidity and hurricanes. Now Aulffo, a master wood restorer, had the job of bringing all eight doors back to their original beauty.

Before starting the job, he'd spoken to a historian who'd mentioned that the wood beneath all those layers was probably oak. "I knew that just by stripping those doors, I could shed light on a bunch of stuff nobody knew about," he says, looking back on that day. It would be an easy job, he thought. He thought wrong.

"So I start stripping them and getting down to the wood. But it's another faux paint job. And there were ten more layers to get through. There had to be eighteen in all!" he exclaims. "It turns out the doors aren't oak but cypress, which does not stain well." To complicate the process, he discovered cracks, some eight feet long, that had been patched with all manner of fillers, including Bondo, a material used to repair cars.

Meanwhile the clock was ticking. Aulffo had to get the doors rehung in time for Sunday church services. And he did. That same week the parishioners walked up the steps of the Greek Revival building and entered through its newly refurbished entry.

On the home front

Which brings me to my own front door. It was a mess. Uneven fading, some warping, cracks tattooed the Honduran mahogany. We'd had maintenance done over the years, but sometime after Hurricane Matthew we'd let it slide. Who was the guy to reach out to? Lance Aulffo, we were told. So



we sent him photos. Yes, he could fix it.

But there was a waiting list — a very long waiting list — that stretched from Hilton Head to Charleston to New York and beyond.

Months later Aulffo pulled up in his van and cast his expert eye on the damage.

Then he got to work. Over the next five days we watched his meticulous, multi-step process. Once stripped down and repaired, the doors, even in their naked state, had begun to look (dare I say it?) attractive, elegant even. Standing back, Aulffo gave his handiwork a critical once-over. Like most doors, the panels were made of different pieces of wood. So putting one stain all over wasn't an option. Or at least it wasn't for Aulffo, who is a perfectionist. Thus, a meticulous tweaking of color ensued, adjusting it so each panel matched.

"Ah, you've hired the Michelangelo of the Doors," a friend exclaimed as we later detailed the restoration. Yes, even though he wasn't lying on his back painting Biblical scenes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Aulffo had turned out to be a fine artist who has found his life's work in this unusual specialty.

So I couldn't help but ask questions. I recently caught up with Aulffo at an unusual time. He'd just finished a big job up on Long Island, working on twenty doors of the Hampton Synagogue, known for its dramatic architecture and art, including installations by glass artist Dale Chihuly. But now Aulffo had taken two weeks off — a rarity for this confessed workaholic — to nurse a problematic shoulder back to health. From there, it would be over to Sea Pines to work on twenty-one Sapele Mahogany doors at the Plantation Golf Club.



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As soon as I stopped waiting for that pat on the back, that's when I got really good at what I do."



[LOCAL Life] It's not every day I run into a master refinisher who specializes in wooden front doors. How did you get started?

[Lance Daniel Aulffo] Basically for four generations everyone in my family has done wood refinishing or painting. It wasn't just my great-grandfather, my father and two of my brothers; it's every cousin and every uncle. My great-great-grandfather started his business in Chieti, Italy, and my grandfather came over to Vineland, New Jersey, right after the Depression. My mom was a hairdresser, so after school I'd get dropped off at my uncle's shop because no one was home. At twelve, I started dabbling, painting wooden shutters or repairing screen doors — simple stuff I couldn't mess up — while I waited for my dad to pick me up. Summers I worked full-time on job sites, which was interesting until you hear about the waves your buddies were catching surfing over in Sea Isle City. Then by the time I was 20, I had my own business, refinishing wood furniture, doors and kitchen cabinets.

[LL] What drove you toward the more artistic kind of restoration that you do today?

[LDA] In the late '90s, anyone who had a paintbrush in their hand, if they were smart, got into faux finishing. I learned a lot from an uncle who was a landscape artist and great faux finisher. Then when faux finishing really took off, I said, "No more refinishing. I'm a decorative artist." That was around 1995. I went to school in Bardstow, Kentucky, to learn about techniques and new products. I became known for Venetian plaster on columns, walls and ceilings, so if you wanted Venetian plaster, you called me. I ran with it for ten years, working in New York, Philly, St Louis, Florida — all over the country for high-end designers. My last name got me jobs. I never needed to have a website or advertise.

So flash forward to moving to Hilton Head eight years ago. When I arrived, I would have cleaned your gutters, and I did. Anything that would keep money coming I was doing. That didn't last long.

[LL] Faux finishing to cleaning gutters to wooden front-door restoration — that's an interesting career progression.

[LDA] My fiancée, Diana, always wanted to leave New Jersey, but I didn't. When she moved to Hilton Head, she asked me to visit. I hadn't had a vacation in five years, so I

came down that summer. Then I went back home to live at my mom's, sleeping in my little bed, trying to figure things out. And I find I'm going out to the same bars I went to when I was 21, but now I'm in my 40s, hanging out with the same guys. So I think I've got to try moving. If it doesn't work out, I'll come back. What do I have to lose?

[LL] And you stayed this time.

[LDA] I came here in November 2014 and basically it was a slow start. I didn't come here to go back into my business, so I left my van and all my tools with my dad. I was going to be a bartender on the beach, but I never even applied. As soon as I started doing a little bit of door refinishing work and saw how starved this place was for somebody like me, that was it.

[LL] What is it that makes you love refinishing wooden doors?

[LDA] In August when I'm in a mask, goggles, hat, rubber gloves and long sleeves and slacks, I don't really like it. But that's the worst part. Once I strip and sand a door and get to the coats and I can see where it's going. I'm thinking, yes, this is going to work. When I stain, that's when I can see if I need to adjust anything or if I nailed it. I'll even get a sander out in the middle of a job and go to work on a board because I know it will look better. No one in their right mind would do that. I used to stain the whole door and then adjust. Now as I'm stripping and sanding the door, I can see what's missing for each board, and I can go 'this one needs a little of this and a little of that color,' and I'll adjust each board as I go, which takes a lot of time.

[LL] You're clearly a perfectionist.

[LDA] You know when I got really good at this? When I stopped listening to my customers tell me I'm good. I have to say it's good because I know what I'm looking at. So as soon as I stopped waiting for that pat on the back, that's when I got really good at what I do, because it was about my eyes, not anyone else's. I spend hours and hours because I want to be proud. If you're the customer, you have to be happy, but I have to be happy too.

[LL] About that waiting list...

[LDA] I've pared it down because I've started turning down jobs. I want to do doors that when I'm done, I'll have pictures showing where I took the wood from a bad state to a beautiful state. I like the big turn. The before, during, and after pictures are my life. *LL*