

Antlered Art

by Mike Raykovicz

photos by Gale Farley

For centuries, Native Americans have used deer antlers to fashion tools, to craft buttons for clothing, or even to create play things for their children. In modern times, craftsmen turn deer and elk antlers into belt buckles, knife handles, chandeliers, and a plethora of craft items.

It took Utica artist Tom Yacovella years to turn his passion for white-tailed deer and his heterogeneous collection of shed antlers into a one-of-a-kind work of art—but all indications are that he's made a lasting impression.

WHITE-TAIL ENTHUSIAST

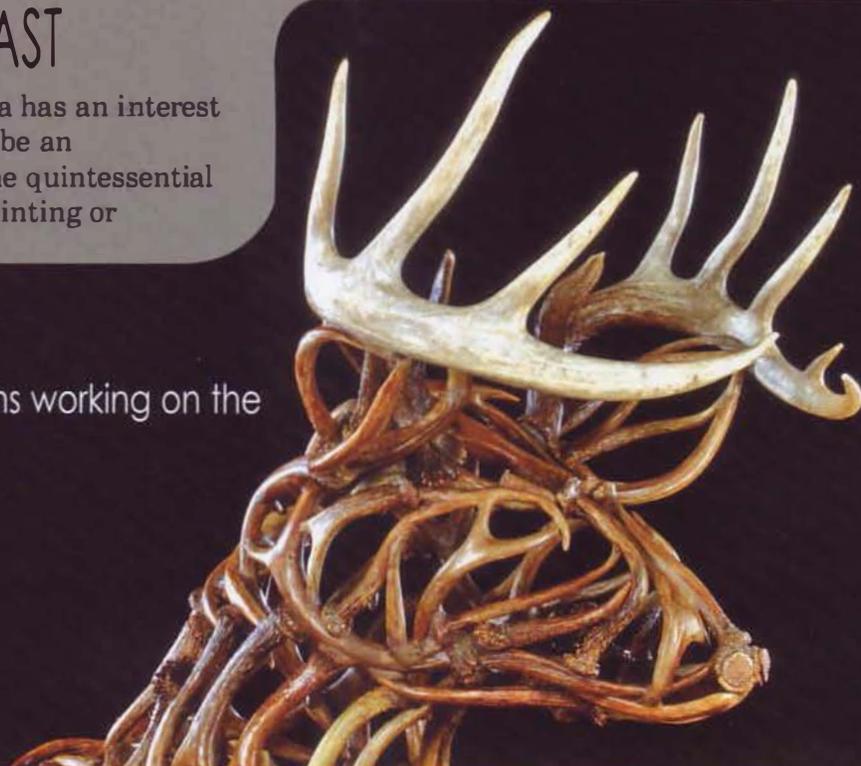
To say wildlife artist Yacovella has an interest in deer and deer antlers would be an understatement. Yacovella is the quintessential outdoorsman. When he isn't painting or

photographing deer, he is probably thinking about them. As a youngster, he constructed the likeness of a white-tail buck using toothpicks and those who saw it thought it was an amazing creation for a person in his early teens.

WHAT IS A "SHED?"

After the mating season in November, a white-tail buck's testosterone level decreases and ultimately, its antlers fall off. This phenomenon of antler shedding begins as

Yacovella spent two months working on the head section alone.



Naturally broken antlers were used to form the buck's nostrils.

early as the middle of December, and by the middle of February, almost all bucks in New York have shed their cranial adornment. The "sheds" lie where the bucks lost them and while mice or other rodents may quickly consume them, those who know where to look can often find them.

In 1952, while hiking in the Adirondacks, Yacovella discovered a shed deer antler. This was the first of more than 300 he's discovered since then. Most people would find the discovery of a deer antler curious at best and continue on their way, but not Yacovella. "If there's one there must be more," he reasoned, and so, every spring for more than fifty years, he has searched for additional sheds.

Yacovella concentrates his searches in known deer "yards"—areas where white-tails concentrate around a food source in an effort to survive the harshness of winter. Yacovella begins his annual search by looking for

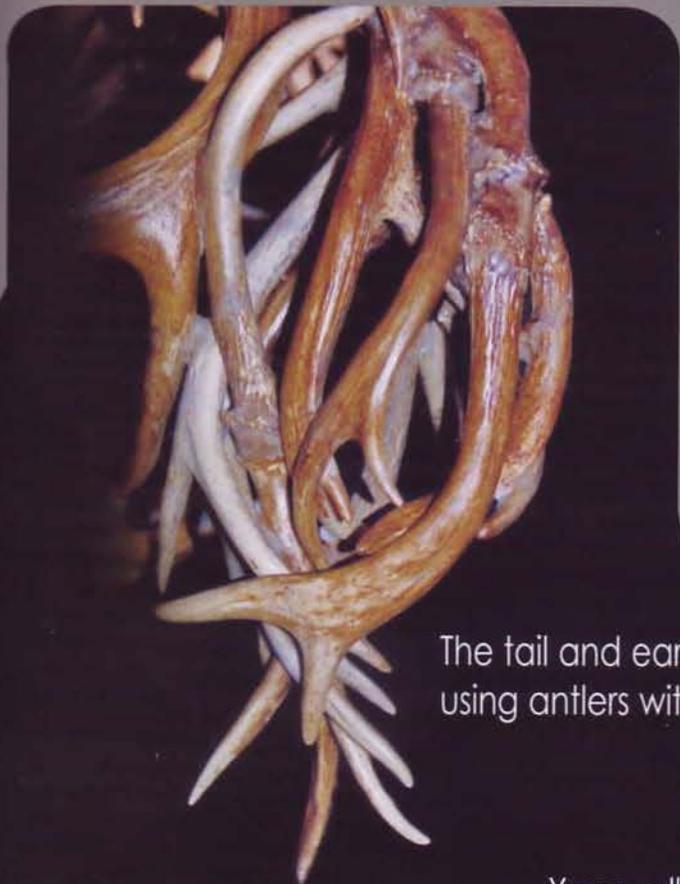


well-used deer trails. Once he locates a good one, he concentrates his search approximately 40-60 yards from the leeward side, where bucks are likely to travel.

IDEA IS BORN

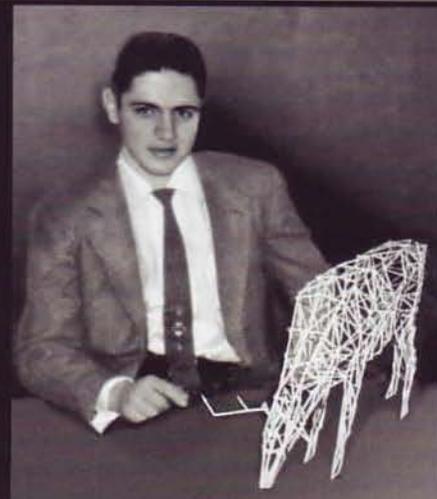
In early 2001, Yacovella began thinking about what to do with the massive pile of antlers he had accumulated. He remembered the deer sculpture he had constructed out of toothpicks almost fifty years earlier, and the idea to sculpt a life-sized, mature, white-tail buck using his antlers was hatched. Yacovella usually works in watercolors and acrylics, so at first, he was apprehensive that a three-dimensional sculpture might prove to be overly challenging. Nevertheless, he was determined to use his knowledge of deer and deer anatomy, along with his artistic ability, to create *Tribute to the Whitetail*©.

As he began the project, Yacovella looked at each antler as a piece of a puzzle. To retain the



The tail and ears were created using antlers with fine tines.

Yacovella as a teen with his original toothpick sculpture.



dignity and grace he saw in each antler, he was adamant that no antler would be cut or altered in any way. He did, however, use partial antlers for specific sections—but only if the antler was broken naturally. He was able to form gentle curves and even muscle groups by methodically searching through his large collection.

TWO YEARS OF LABOR

Yacovella began by crafting the buck's head and ears. It took more than two months to painstakingly epoxy the carefully selected and naturally shaped antlers into position but, by that time, Yacovella was convinced the rest of the piece could be finished. The sculpted buck's lower jaw was crafted from flat, palmated antlers, while antlers with a less pronounced palmation formed the hooves.

The tail and ears were created using antlers with fine tines; antlers with a pronounced curve or curl formed the orbits of the eye sockets. He used long, straight, spiked antlers to create the back legs and antlers from larger bucks to form the bone and muscle. Naturally broken antlers were used to form the buck's nostrils.

After two years of almost daily work, the buck

was complete. Looking at the sculpture, it is clear Yacovella succeeded in his mission to capture the look and the spirit of a living deer. Its head is alert and its "muscles" are tense, conveying the feeling the buck is ready to spring to life and bolt to heavy cover at any moment.

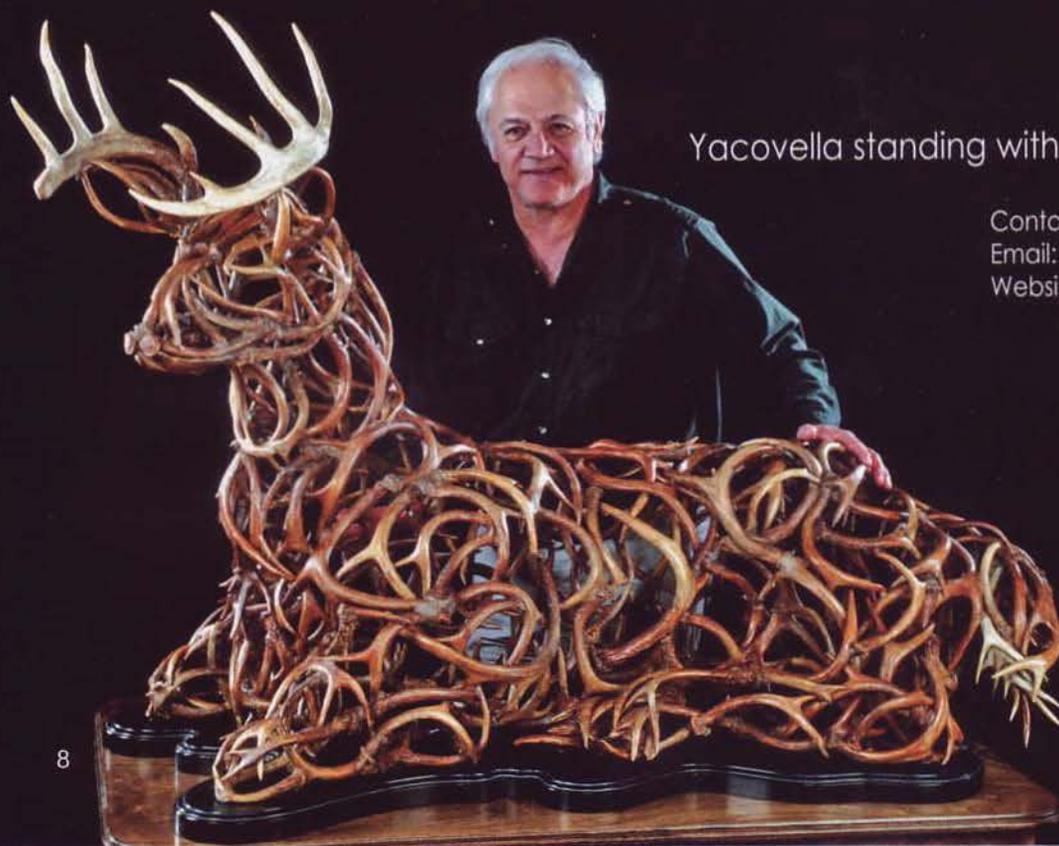
GROWING ACCLAIM

The sculpture is gaining recognition and national attention and is believed to be the only piece of its kind in existence. In 2003, the sculpture was exhibited at the New York State Fair in Syracuse and was honored with the People's Choice Award in the wildlife exhibition. In addition, *Tribute to the Whitetail*® was a finalist in the 20th annual *Artist's Magazine* art competition, placing higher than 13,000 other international entries.

Half a century after finding his first shed antler and after making his first deer sculpture from toothpicks, Yacovella has achieved another milestone. It embodies a lifelong passion for the white-tail—and its tribute in art.

Outdoor writer Mike Roykovicz is a frequent contributor to *Conservationist*.

(Editor's Note: For further reading, see *Searching for Sheds* in the April 2005 issue.)



Yacovella standing with his *Tribute to the Whitetail*®.

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