

MASTER CRAFTSMAN



COURTESY JEAN-MICHEL ANDRIOT

MASTER CRAFTSMAN JEAN MICHEL ANDRIOT, FINE BACKGAMMON BOARDS STUDIO JEAN-MICHEL

Home is the place where we rest our heads, store our belongings and cook our meals, but the most elevated abodes are also gathering places for family and friends, full of laughter, joy and bonding. Whether it's with a simple deck of cards, grand rooftop tennis courts or a

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backyard putting green, games have long been part of recreation on the East End.

Such contest and carousal takes many forms, but when it comes to games, discerning Hamptons homeowners want something more sophisticated and recherché than paper, plastic and cardboard. To fill this need, Westhampton Beach woodworker Jean-Michel Andriot found inspiration in one of the world’s oldest games—backgammon.

“This started like a hobby, totally randomly,” Andriot says in his thick French accent, explaining how he went from custom furniture and restoration to crafting fine backgammon boards and tables. “Now it takes a lot of my time, which I really like.”

A native of Antibes, between Nice and Cannes on France’s Côte d’Azur, Andriot was exposed to European craftsmanship through his woodworker grandfather and architect father. He learned to work with and love wood before eventually meeting the American who would become his wife, Tracy, and following her back to New York in 2004. After nearly a decade making and restoring furniture for French restaurants in the city, Andriot and his wife moved to Westhampton Beach, where he launched Studio Jean-Michel.

“We were just out here a lot,” Tracy says, pointing out that Andriot was frequently in the Hamptons seeing friends or working *Continued on page 30*



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Tiny surfboards mimic full size versions in the owner's collection



for clients, and it offered them a chance to open the studio and be closer to nature, especially the water—something he missed since leaving France. “It made sense to move here.”

Andriot’s skill for complex furniture restoration and building custom pieces to client specifications drives his bread-and-butter business, but his passion has clearly turned toward backgammon, an enduringly popular, 5,000-year-old game he knew very little about. Oddly, it’s not so much the game itself—Andriot still hasn’t learned to play—but the beautifully symmetrical boards that captured his imagination.

“I like the object,” he says, noting that he watched some friends playing and couldn’t stop thinking about how he might improve and embellish the board. The artisan has since delved deep into a rabbit hole of ideas and experimentation with results dazzling enough to attract both Quogue Gallery and Noted Gallery in Southampton to represent him.

First, Andriot replaced the 24 slender triangles, called points, with alternating surfboards, sometimes leaving classic points in between. These new shapes are set against rare wood backgrounds in tasteful colors, and then sealed under a thick layer of pourable epoxy. “I’m trying to give it a third dimension, with the water,” he says, describing how his small surfboards appear to float beneath the clear resin.

As the work evolved, Andriot began adding uncommon materials, like rare quilted maple veneer, which presents the illusion of textured beach sand in its natural state, or a choppy ocean surface when stained blue or green. “To find the right piece can take a week,” he says of the scarce wood. “It’s very difficult to source.”

But Andriot gets his thrills from exotic materials, especially when assembled in surprising combinations. While he continues the surfboard series, Andriot’s penchant for innovation has led to new backgammon boards with delicate, hand-poured pewter points, copper teardrop points with gorgeous green patinas, and slightly more traditional boards with points in a variety of enticing woods.

He’s already delivered a number of commissioned boards made according to his clients’ desires, matching the colors and materials in their home, adding their names or initials to boards or personalized chip and dice caddies and boxes, along with other, more creative requests. “People come with their own ideas and it’s up to me to make it happen,” he says.

Andriot made a set with surfboards in two shades of blue for Westhampton’s Dune Deck Beach Club, their name perfectly printed in the center, and it’s attracted members, including some celebrities, to play regular games. “They have a drink and play,” he says, recalling how surprised the club owners were at backgammon’s popularity. “It’s a conversation piece; it puts people together.”

Another client tasked Andriot with making every other point a tiny copy of a surfboard from her collection, and he didn’t miss a detail. “It was a real challenge to do that,” he says of the one-of-a-kind board, adding, “Art is a school of patience and humility; you never know where it’s going.”

Moving forward, Andriot is continuing to try new things and enjoying the spirit of invention that got him this far. “I will work with new materials. That’s what I like—there’s so much to learn,” he says. “Now I’m thinking about chess.”

— Oliver Peterson