

BEYOND THE BASICS

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Inlay is an art form many appreciate but not necessarily understand or know much of. Dr Terence Tan speaks with Craig Lavin, a well-known and respected inlay artist, to find out more about the art of inlay. Craig's passion and dedication for the craft shines through the short interview featured below.

Let's start at the beginning. What is inlay and how did you get into inlaying as a profession?

Inlay is the act of inserting materials into another material to produce a visual artistic result. Typically, the inlaid material includes precious and semiprecious metals, stones, pearl shells and woods. However, these days, as long as the material is hard enough to work with, anything can be used. I have used over 130 materials in my work, ranging from plastics to pearls to diamonds.

I started doing inlay as a result of the Internet. It was in the mid-90s when I saw these guitars I never knew existed online. Of course, the amazing ones all had custom inlay or something going on with them. I then decided to buy the book *The Art of Inlay* by Larry Robinson – who is unequivocally one of the top, if not the top, living master in the field of our time. I tried inlaying for myself and haven't stopped since then.

Do you think hand inlaying is relevant in today's market where machines with computer numerical control (CNC) or laser etching are becoming more popular?

I do believe that hand inlaying is very relevant because working with pearls

as an art form is something that transcends how good the cut is, or if the pieces fit together tightly. Most materials used in inlay are chatoyant, which means they catch and reflect light in differing ways depending upon how they are laid out or perceived against and among other materials. Also, many of the artists who have taken the craft to higher levels incorporate personal techniques during or after the inlay process. Engraving, shading and tinting inlays all occur after they are sanded down and touched up, and these, except for engraving, are all hand processes up to this day. Even engraving pearl with a CNC unit is pretty uncommon because it requires very specialised bits and very long durations of programming time. CNC is a highly valuable tool for extremely fragile and thin pieces, or for doing things quickly. However, not all things are better if done faster.

Maybe you could bring us through the process of inlaying and the skills it takes to be a professional inlay artist?

Process wise, it's basically making a pattern and then cutting out the pieces and fitting them together like a jigsaw puzzle. You'll need to make

PROFILE



TEXT BY

DR TERENCE TAN

Dr Terence Tan is a full time locum. He has a strong interest in the arts and publishes a guitar and a ukulele magazine with the time that he has outside of work and family. Feel free to contact him at terence@guitarbench.com.

a perfect fitting cavity into the base before fitting in the pieces and gluing them down, and finally sanding it flush. That's the brief basics. Most of the time, it's a lot more than that and artists who are setting the modern standards in the art are doing much more beyond the basics.

The technical skill needed for basic inlay can be developed rather quickly if someone has enough practice. The ability to produce beautiful and creative art is a different thing. Most true full-time professional inlay artists (those who produce actual art rather than just logos and small pieces for companies) are first and foremost artists, who happen to use inlay as their vehicle of expression. That is something that is inside and much harder to develop. It's a constant learning curve on materials, techniques, and developing and understanding the materials and their effectiveness as well as chatoyant properties.

What are some memorable projects you've worked on?

Two of them come to mind. One was a CF Martin dreadnought done for the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) Show many years back. It was the first time the company ever did a showpiece dedicated to marine life; it was exciting to be working for CF Martin and be given the freedom to produce something completely unique of my favourite genre. When I met Chris Martin at the NAMM Show for the first time, he found out I had a degree in marine biology. He said, "You know, I've always wanted to be a marine biologist." I replied, "I don't think anyone knows that..." Apparently, the family business won out and Chris stayed in luthiery.

The second was a pedal steel guitar – the dream instrument for the owner of the company. The entire thing was inlaid as a coral reef. About two years after it was completed, the owner passed away. In a way, that was





Legend

1. Bluebird and sakura on a guitar by luthier MJ Franks
2. Celtic Dog inlay and rosette, pearls, enamels, woods and stones. Special stopped fret design does not pass through the inlay - Charles Scroggins guitar
3. White Tiger with opal eyes, real Hawaiian sand and layered clear enamel resin 3D water effect - Stephen Kinnaird guitar
4. CF Martin dolphins and reef family. NAMM show guitar
5. Craig Lavin engraving his latest work, "Bluebird and Sakura"
6. Mermaid on a Tom Ribbecke Halfing archtop guitar

Photos by Craig Lavin

his life's goal instrument and it was really wonderful that he got to see it become a reality.

What's next on the horizon for you?

I'm starting to work on another sea life electric guitar with Canadian luthier Julius Jahn. There have been a few guitars that I never got to finish for various reasons, so it's really exciting to get started on this. The guitar is half done and the artwork has already been drawn up. It's going to be a fan fretted, quilted maple, drop-dead stunning guitar. Eagle rays, dolphins, sharks and nautilus; every creature in the ocean is going to be on this thing! We will be using a headless design with the strings tuning at the bridge, but a headstock will be added just so we can inlay it without tuners going through it. It's very cool.

What would your advice be for someone looking to work with an inlay artist on a project?

The best advice would be to look at everyone's work and fall in love with an artist's style, then contact them personally to discuss ideas and pricing. Some people want to "shop" for an inlay artist based on price. That's not the best way to work with an inlay artist, or any artist in fact. If you are interested in pricing and not the quality of the work done, the uniqueness or the artwork itself, then maybe a custom artist is not for you. However, if you are looking for an heirloom, done by someone who will give a part of themselves each and every time, then a custom artist is perfect. ♦

