

living treasures



Mending BROKEN ARTS



Pam Neville finds a team of artists who restore sentimental treasures

PHOTOGRAPHS: MATTHEW WILLIAMS

Courtesy of NZ House & Garden magazine



THIS PAGE: A wartime photograph restored after a house fire. Cane prams are a speciality. A ceramic Maori mask awaits restoration. Broken lacework on Dresden figures requires painstaking repair.

FACING PAGE: Ross Stewart and staff artist Eason Chen in the workshop. The nativity scene at the Ellerslie Catholic Church.

In a tradition that has continued for more than fifty years, a highlight of every Christmas at the Catholic Church in Ellerslie, Auckland, is the unveiling of the nativity scene. Sculpted figures of Mary and Joseph look down on baby Jesus in his manger surrounded by the wise men, shepherds and animals.

A priest brought the sculptures from Europe, possibly Belgium, in the 1950s but no one is sure of their exact history. The parish believes, though, that theirs is one of the biggest and most beautiful nativity scenes in New Zealand.

There are sixteen pieces all together. The larger figures are almost as tall as some of the children who attend the parish's Immaculate Conception church. Damage to the characters isn't uncommon, given the annual packing and storing and unpacking plus the bustle of Christmas crowds – on one occasion the culprit was a snaking vacuum cleaner cord.

To the rescue comes Wrightway Studios from the neighbouring suburb of Mt Wellington. The restoration artists at Wrightway have on different occasions done major repairs to almost all the figures of the nativity scene. It's impossible to see where broken pieces have been joined, where chips have been filled and missing segments replaced, or where new

paint has been applied. But the results warm the hearts of young and old at the church every December.

"We deal with a lot of sentimental pieces," says Ross Stewart, the owner of Wrightway Studios. "People come in with their broken treasures and the same stories. The damage usually comes down to three things: cats, kids and cleaners."

Ross has a team of ten skilled artists and restorers, mostly Asian immigrants who have been trained in delicate hand work in their own countries or who learn on the job in New Zealand. One has a fine arts degree, another is an engineer. Each has his or her own specialist field, such as painting, china, glass, marble, photography metals, ivory and jade, or wood. Work is also sent out to any of thirty other experts.

In his spare time Ross, a former policeman, is a painter but he insists each of his staff is more skilled than he is. "I'm just the office boy around here."

Before Ross bought it about twelve years ago, Wrightway Studios had grown from a one-man restoration service to a full-scale business because of an insurance claim. When a car crashed into a Lladro showroom and damaged \$40,000 worth of fine porcelain, Wrightway needed more staff and a bigger workshop to repair it.



Lladro and Dresden ornaments, fine china plates and glass vases are the "bread and butter" of the business. But at the moment restorers are working on dolls, an antique rocking horse, a headless ivory statue, a burned photograph, an old Bible, a cello, a 200-year-old picture frame, even a Victorian high chair. Experts in restoring old prams are particularly busy.

"There's a renaissance going on with the old cane prams that were made by the Blind Institute and returned servicemen after World War II," says Ross. "You can't buy them new any more. People are realising how great they were so we have dozens coming in for restoration." ■
Wrightway Studios, (09) 570 5741 or see www.restoration-artists.co.nz.