Jim Goodwin is a man obsessed with bottles. Walking through the basement of his Charlotte home, one might imagine he has a drinking problem. There are hundreds of empty bottles boxed and stacked along the floor. He talks warmly about Hennessy cognac, Cuervo 1800 tequila, Jim Beam, even Mad Dog 20/20. But Goodwin doesn’t care about liquor. For him, a large, empty, well-shaped bottle is a canvas waiting for a masterpiece.

More at home in coastal gift shops than museums, ships in bottles have never garnered much attention in the highbrow art world. But a few dozen craftsmen, Goodwin among them, have achieved true folk art status with their intricate and historically accurate pieces.

Goodwin’s addiction to craftwork began in his teens with model airplanes and boats and continued on from there. A Charlotte native and professional geologist, he worked in the oil industry for 18 years on wells and offshore oil rigs around the country. “There’s a lot of downtime on an oil rig, and there’s obviously nowhere to go, so I made a lot of crafts and read a lot of books,” Goodwin recalls.

He began working in his current medium about six years ago. “I read two books, … tried a few [projects], and got hooked,” he says. “I’ve been ‘hitting the bottle’ ever since.”

Goodwin focuses primarily on re-creating ships with a connection to the Carolinas, whether they were built here, commandeered by local pirates, or wrecked off the coast. In addition to his well-regarded ships, he also makes replicas of local lighthouses and even Orville and Wilbur Wright’s flyer — which he suspends in midair inside its bottle.

A history buff, Goodwin enjoys researching the story behind each creation as much as building the scale models. His home is filled with books on maritime history, pirates, boats, and the Carolina coast. He also teaches geology part-time at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, but his artwork has grown into a passion as well as a business. “It’s an obsession,” he admits, “But it’s paying the bills, so that’s fine with me.”

Secrets ahead

When you see a piece of Goodwin’s work, the first thing that comes to mind is “How in the heck did he get that in there?” Here’s the secret: Everything is made outside the bottle. Yep, everything.

Goodwin crafts each hull from Carolina red cedar. Each piece that goes into the bottle must
Message in a bottle: Jim Goodwin’s intricate creations attest to his patience, skill, and eye for detail.
fit through its mouth, so larger pieces are made in two layered parts that fasten together with dowel pins once they’re inside. He carves the hull and then either paints it or laminates it, depending on the details of each particular vessel. The mast actually attaches to the deck on a hinge so that it can lie flat.

Next, Goodwin goes to work on the ship’s rigging. The hull is attached to a working jig to hold everything in place while the intricate lines are run. Using sturdy quilting thread, Goodwin labels each as he works — jib, foresail, aft sail — to make sure he doesn’t pull the wrong one and wind up with a tangled mess on his hands. The sails are cut from cotton paper. Goodwin stains them with coffee for an authentic, weathered look.

With the ship mostly finished, Goodwin finally starts to work inside the bottle. He makes the “ocean” out of modeling clay, mixing blues, greens, and even browns to represent the silt in our waters.

Now, it’s time to put it all — very carefully — inside the bottle. Goodwin is the picture of concentration. Like the rigging step, this is another point where hours, or even weeks, of work can go awry. Using odd, mostly homemade tools that range from modified surgical instruments to knitting needles, he first affixes the ocean to the bottom with glue. The hull, mast, and sails are wrapped together and pushed gently into the bottle’s neck. Everything is secured with glue. Then, magically it seems, Goodwin pulls the right strings, and the mast and sails rise into position. He patiently curls the sails until they billow outward. Finally, he glues the strings in place and cuts his creation free.

Goodwin likes to complete many of his displays with a lighthouse, since ships were so dependent on them off the hazardous North Carolina shoals. Like his ships, they are exact replicas of the real thing. He seals the bottle with wax and often presses in a statehood quarter for a final flourish.

**Take home a piece of history**

Just as interesting as what is inside the bottle is the story Goodwin pastes to the bottom of each creation. His most popular pieces are the pirate ships that sailed off the coast. “Piracy pays,” he chuckles.

The *Queen Anne’s Revenge* is a favorite for Goodwin and collectors. Most likely built in England around 1710, the ship gained notoriety as the flagship of Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard. The famed pirate trolled for booty in the Caribbean and along the Eastern Seaboard until the ship met its demise about a mile off Beaufort in 1718.
Goodwin also gets many requests for privateers and war ships. Captain Otway Burns of Swansboro commanded the privateer schooner Snap Dragon during the War of 1812. This impressive ship and its crew captured or plundered more than 40 British ships, and Burns is remembered as one of North Carolina’s greatest naval heroes. After the war, Burns served as a state legislator and later as a lighthouse keeper near Portsmouth.

One of the best stories, by far, is the mystery of a beautiful five-masted schooner, the Carroll A. Deering. Launched in Bath, Maine, in 1919, the 255-foot ship ran aground on a harsh winter morning in 1921 at Diamond Shoals off Cape Hatteras. According to records, the ship was under full rigging and sail. Even the galley was set for a meal, but the only signs of life found on board were three cats. Many have speculated on what happened to the 11 crewmen — some say pirates, others guess a mutiny — but superstitious sailors say the Carroll A. Deering was cursed from the beginning. The ship was launched on a Friday, christened with flowers, and had cats aboard — all traditionally very unlucky.

**But is it art?**

Bottled art has been around since the 1800s and, in the hands of master builders, it has begun to gain a new level of respect in recent years. Goodwin’s ships are on display at galleries along the North Carolina coast, and his work has been featured in a number of shows and festivals. The San Diego, California, Maritime Museum held a six-month exhibition of ships in bottles last year. Goodwin submitted two pieces that brought plenty of North Carolina flavor to the event. The first was a one-gallon bottle that included the Queen Anne’s Revenge and two other ships from Blackbeard’s fleet. The other was the Hattie Creef, a boat out of Elizabeth City famous for carrying the Wright brothers to Kitty Hawk.

In his basement, Goodwin glances around at all the empty containers and smiles. “I’ve got more glass than time,” he says. This work is a painstaking process that requires an artist’s eye, a surgeon’s hand, and a professor’s mind. That’s a perfect fit for Jim Goodwin, and if his basement is any indication, there are plenty more ideas for ships in his head just waiting to find a home inside a bottle.

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