



As part of her high school art class up in Mililani, HI, in 2012, **Sarah Balmilero** explored creating art with different mediums and found out she liked woodburning the best. The craft reminded her of a relaxing campfire. Her teacher encouraged her to continue the practice even after she graduated high school.

While an undergraduate student at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, she continued woodburning as a hobby and eventually decided to branch out into craft fairs, selling her art. She attended events associated with powwows and an alternative craft fair in New Hampshire called Wrong Brain. To boost her sales, she would often create art that she believed people would like, such as characters and themes from pop culture, including several characters and scenes from “Avatar: The Last Airbender,” Miyazaki movies like “Spirited Away” and Disney characters like Stitch.

During her early college years in 2015 and 2016, Balmilero created a business called Eros Embers and started taking commissions.

Over the years, that has become a big part of her business. Her favorite thing to woodburn is animals, and she has woodburned pieces featuring koi fish, wolves, a bird native to Hawaii, and a jaguar. She often gets pet commissions but finds that she has less creative freedom with that because the owners usually want the burn to look almost exactly like the photo.

“You can get really, really detailed with the animals and have some more liberties than with the pets,” Balmilero said. “If you do an animal, you can set it in a scene.”

She mainly creates pieces between 5-by-7 inches and larger 8-by-10-inch pieces, though she’s even done 4-by-4-foot signs. She said 5-by-7 pieces can take about an hour or less to burn, while 8-by-10 pieces can take around two hours. Larger pieces can take much longer.

She typically uses “a balsa type of wood,” that is light-colored and softer-grained, because it is easier to burn and make clean straight lines on. She gets the wood from online retailers, big-box stores with craft sections and, for her larger pieces, goes to stores specializing in plywood.

Her process is methodical and based heavily on reference images. She usually starts with an existing photograph, illustration or other reference

Sarah Balmilero shows off one of her creations.



rather than drawing an image from scratch. She sometimes edits photographs into black and white or more monochrome images because doing so makes the major lines and tonal differences easier to see.

Balmilero places carbon paper between the reference image and the wood, then traces the design and transfers the image onto the wood before beginning to burn. For animal pieces, she keeps the reference nearby while working so she can check the proportions and details.

Once the design is transferred, she outlines it, then works on the darkest shadows before gradually adding lighter shading. “If I start with the lighter stuff first, and then work to dark, if I go too dark from the beginning, then the whole piece is going to be dark in relation,” she said. “Kind of like painting and drawing, if you start with your shadows and then work your way out, it’s a little bit easier.”

The machine is essentially a heated pen. The tip heats up and she draws on the wood with it, using the dial to adjust the temperature and the pressure she applies to the pen to change the darkness of the mark in the wood. Over the years she has improved her craft by upgrading her machine to one that goes up to 60 volts to allow her to create pieces more quickly and cover more ground, although she said the upgraded equipment gets “really, really hot.”

While making mistakes with woodburning can be difficult to undo, Balmilero has been able to learn ways to disguise mistakes.

“You can’t really erase it necessarily,” Balmilero said. “It’s just on there already.”

If a burn isn’t too deep, she can lightly sand the surface to make a line less noticeable, although doing so can alter the appearance of the wood grain. She can also darken surround-

ing areas to incorporate an imperfect mark into the overall design.

Balmilero’s most challenging project was creating two large woodburned signs for the sides of a work truck in 2021. The signs were roughly 4-by-4 feet and included the company’s logo, contact information and a Tongan flag to connect to the owner’s cultural heritage.

“So, that one, just because of the sheer size of it, was probably the most challenging,” she said. It took her about a week to complete.

The project is still meaningful for her as she continues to see the truck driving around Hawaii.

Not all her work has been commissioned. One of her friends, Jackie, has had several French bulldogs. After the dogs died, Balmilero woodburned portraits of them and gave them to Jackie as gifts. Balmilero often watched the dogs when Jackie was out of town, so she had a personal connection to them. She tries to gift friends and family with woodburned portraits of their late pets to commemorate the relationships they had with them.

Balmilero was honored to say that Jackie placed the portraits above their urns.

“That’s been pretty meaningful for me that they feel it’s worthy enough to be next to the dog for their final resting place and stuff like that,” she said.

Since 2021, Balmilero has been a letter carrier and is a member of Wahiawa Branch 4837. She initially took a temporary holiday clerk position and enjoyed it, which led to her getting a full-time job for the Postal Service. Part of her route is on a military base, so she is constantly interacting with new people as they move in and out of the base. She especially enjoys interacting with creative people on her route.

“I have a lot of small business owners, a lot of people who bake or cook

An example of a mail tray Balmilero made for a fellow letter carrier



or have businesses where they create things,” she said. “I think that it has been fun that I’ve gotten to connect with people like that.”

The role has given her the opportunity to decorate wooden mail trays for co-workers. She has decorated about seven 12 inches by 16 or 18 inches postal trays for sorting mail for her co-workers, incorporating personalized designs such as names, Star Wars and Warhammer 40K symbols, Magic the Gathering game, pets and BTS—a South Korean boy band—references. Although doubtful she can facilitate a large number of orders for mail trays, she says readers can contact her by direct messaging her on Instagram at @eros_embers for custom order inquiries.

In the future she wants to make more time for woodburning and to complete more personal projects she is excited about.

Overall, Balmilero is happy and relaxed when she is woodburning.

“It’s very serene,” she said. “Like, I get in a zone.” **PR**