Local sculptors find inspiration in an ancient approach

The contemporary art scene is as susceptible to popular trends, ephemeral fashions and media-fed distractions as any other sphere of our attention-deficit culture. Yet two longtime Northeast Florida artists still find much satisfaction in working with materials as ancient as the techniques required to master them.

On March 9, Crisp-Ellert Art Museum at Flagler College opens the exhibit “Form and Figure,” featuring works by local sculptors Enzo Torcoletti and Joe Segal. During the last few years, the museum has offered some decidedly cutting-edge events, from Warhol film screenings to the 21st-century flavor of multimedia artist Julie Lequin’s “Top 30.”

The newest exhibit, by contrast, is a celebration of some 30 stone and wood sculptures that borders on the classical, monolithic and dense — art anchored in contemplation rather than the whims and bells sensory overload of many current installations. While Torcoletti is a generation older than Segal, their work shares a connectedness centered on a mindfulness of both the materials and the actual process of creation.

A native New Yorker, Segal has been a resident of St. Augustine since 1989 when he received his B.A. from Flagler College, and was a student of Torcoletti’s. “After graduating, I kept in touch with Enzo,” says Segal. “He always very generous with his expertise and lending of tools.”

The elder sculptor also showed his protegé how to find useable materials. “There is really no naturally occurring, indigenous stone that you can carve in Florida,” Segal explains. “We would go to demolished building sites that had limestone windowills and staircases, or monument companies that were unloading tombstones with spelling mistakes.”

Segal says Torcoletti taught him that these resources, especially salvaged pieces of stone and wood, contain their own story — are de facto “time capsules” that command respect. Torcoletti also provided some combat experience by hiring Segal to help with restoration projects throughout the Southeast. “We would carve from first thing in the morning until at night when you couldn’t hold the tools anymore.”

Segal’s work (josesegal.com) fuses wood and stone into impressive totem-like objects, many of which are inspired by the mathematics of sacred geometry. “I have a fascination with the recurrence of cycles,” explains Segal, of the phenomenon of naturally occurring forms that has fascinated everyone from Plato and Pythagoras and medieval alchemists to today’s quantum physicists. “It’s really my spirituality,” says Segal, “and the goal which I believe is to acknowledge systems that are bigger than us.”

While the art of carving dates back to the earliest days of recorded history, many of today’s artists are reluctant to engage in this ancient discipline. “I think of it as a cooperation between the material, the idea and the sculptor,” explains Torcoletti of a process where mistakes can either be blended into the work or kill a project altogether. “I try to control the idea, but the material also dictates what you should do.” Torcoletti cites a recent “conversation” he had with a particular piece of wood. “It wasn’t too happy with the way it looked!”

Now in his late 60s, Torcoletti (moultriecreek.com/enzo-torcoletti.html) has devoted his life to creating pieces that explore the figurative form, an obsession that began when he was still a child in his native Italy. All of the museums displayed fragments of ancient headless and limbless torsos. “Even the fragment of a figure was still pretty eloquent,” says Torcoletti. He was inspired to simplify the shape even further, a reduction when the piece is nearly “no longer” a figure. “How far can you push it before it becomes totally abstract?”

After attending art school in Italy, Torcoletti studied at Canada’s University of Windsor, where he received at B.A. in English literature, followed by a B.F.A. in sculpture and printmaking. In 1971, Torcoletti completed his M.F.A. in sculpture at Florida State University and began teaching at Flagler College. Retired since 2007, the professor emeritus has worked in the permanent collections of the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens and The Mint Museum in Charlotte, N.C.

Julie Dickover, director of the Crisp-Ellert, believes that the audience will respond to the conviction of the show’s creators, pointing out the tactility, attention to detail and awareness of process that sets them apart from many artists. “While they both use these traditional materials and techniques,” she says, “their feet are placed firmly in today’s art scene.”

The opening reception for Enzo Torcoletti’s and Joe Segal’s exhibit “Form and Figure” is held on Fri., March 9 from 5-8 p.m. at Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, Flagler College, 48 Sevilla St., St. Augustine. The artists are featured in a discussion on Wed., March 21 at 7 p.m. The exhibit is on display through April 13. 826-2530.