

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF MASECRAFT

# WHEN MOTHER NATURE NEEDS AN ASSIST

## MASECRAFT SUPPLY

**M**asecraft Supply is in a position where it must always find ways to create new materials. Operated by brothers Chris and Phil Hartman, the company not only supplies materials for the knife industry, but the guitar, bagpipe, billiard, fishing rod and custom furniture industries, too. "If you produce 10 new materials a year, three are going to hopefully stick and the other seven will teach us what not to do again," Chris explained.

For instance, he said it can be difficult to make a synthetic replacement for the pearlescent greens and pinks of real abalone. "Sometimes Mother Nature gets it right and we cannot compete," he admitted. If Mother Nature needs an assist, Masecraft counters with a material such as ALVS, which laminates a layer of real abalone or other types of shell within acrylic. As Chris noted, the material has become successful while maintaining the natural beauty of real shell with the additional benefits of lower cost, workability and color enhancement options.

While phenolics such as G-10, linen, paper and canvas Micarta®, and carbon fiber are popular among knifemakers, the Hartman brothers have combined one more of these materials with what was popular in the past and also in other industries—real shell custom inlays. "We can offer all types of custom inlay work like this in a variety of different materials," Chris said. "The possibilities are endless."

For 35 years Masecraft has provided

material for some of the biggest names in the knife industry. Every year, Masecraft handles nearly \$2 million in sales in various markets. It's a lot for a company run by a five-person team from a building with a loading dock out front. However, behind that operation is a network of factories and sources that reaches around the world.

Masecraft began as a subsidiary of another company in Meriden, Crown Plastics, an injection molding outfit for which Chris and Phil's mother, Marjorie Hartman, worked. That's where companies such as Buck, Case, Schrade, Utica, Camillus and others sent their knives for injection-molded imitation stag and bone handles. From that experience, Marjorie witnessed the knife companies' need for real stag, shell and bone. This is how Masecraft began, growing from customers' needs and a small metal tool shed within Crown Plastics.

Marjorie researched concerns that dealt with natural handle materials. In the halls of the World Trade Center in New York City she met "Mr. Cho," an owner of a South Korean factory that turned raw shells into inlays and laminates, and who was looking for U.S.

*Assorted inlays glow from the black cloth of linen Micarta®. "We can offer all types of custom inlay work like this in a variety of different materials," Chris Hartman said. "The possibilities are endless."*



*The friendly Masecraft staff consists of, clockwise from left: Jim Dirck, Carol Masse, Chris Hartman, Amy Hartman, Phil Hartman and Rupert the Bernese Mountain Dog, mascot and head of security.*



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Masecraft makes the ALVS acrylic laminate veneer sheets from a layer of authentic shell. An uncut version of the latter appears at upper left. ALVS is real shell laminated within acrylic.

customers. That chance meeting began a three-and-a-half-decade relationship turning out millions of shell parts for knives and guitars.

Phil and Chris grew up working at Crown Plastics, sweeping and painting floors, loading injection-molding hoppers, packing and shipping orders out the door, and more. Knifemaking giants and greats walked through their lives. BLADE Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Fame® member Bob Loveless made a custom letter opener for Marjorie. Many other legendary makers sent her knives, and customers from other industries sent guitars, cue sticks, etc., all of which the brothers have on display today. "There must be over 200 pieces in the collection and every show we go to we still have customers reminding us of how great a person our mom is and was to them," Chris noted. The brothers continue to add to the collection, and Chris said the most important collectibles to him are the knives made by 12- and 18-year-olds just getting started, the Lovelesses and Doziers of tomorrow.

The plan was for the brothers to eventually take over Masecraft, but that day came sooner than expected when Marjorie suddenly became ill over eight years ago. Phil was already working at Masecraft and helping his mother run the business, and during that time Chris and Phil's wife Amy were brought in to assist. The brothers faced a lot of challenges. "Due to her illness, Marge wasn't able to leave us in the best situation," Phil said.



When India banned Sambar stag exports in 2005, the Hartmans took their best pieces and created pewter molds for when the natural supply ran out—"Which is pretty much now," Chris Hartman said. Masecraft's Stag-Alike (above) is a synthetic version of real stag made from those molds.

There was debt and some unfortunate things had occurred.

Chris and Phil went to work. They sold their sister company, GPS Agencies, built a new website, designed new catalogs and created much more aggressive ad campaigns in assorted markets. They focused on several things: Who they were as a company, who they wanted to be, and why they did things the way they did them. It worked. "Now we're bigger and better than ever," Phil said. "We deal with manufacturers from around the world in many different markets." Added Chris, "Masecraft will always be bigger than the two of us, and we are very respectful of what our mother created."

Through it all, Masecraft remains a small, family-owned business. Chris handles the website and packing for shows, dealing mostly with the guitar and billiard industries. Phil manages sales and the international contacts. Amy handles accounting and assists the two brothers. Carol Masse fields the major-



Marjorie Hartman saw the need knife manufacturers and others had for handle materials and Masecraft was born. Phil is at left and Chris at right.

## MASECRAFT SUPPLY CO.

attn: Chris Hartman  
Dept. BL3, 254 Amity Street  
Meriden, CT 06450  
203-238-3049  
800-682-5489  
chris@masecraftsupply.com

**SPECIALTIES:** Knife handle materials and inlays, both synthetic and natural, including but not limited to ALVS (real shell laminated within acrylic), G-10, assorted Micartas®, alternative ivory and horn, Stag-Alike, carbon fiber, bone, C-TEK, decorative acrylics and polyesters, exotic resins, horn, polyester pearl, reconstituted stone, shell blanks, wood and more

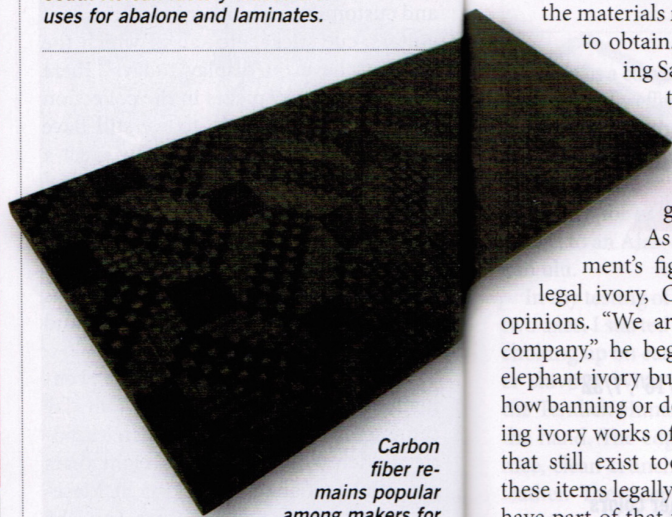
## SUPPLIER PROFILE |



Brightly colored G-10 is among the many scales in the Masecraft line.



A worker processes shell in the South Korean factory Masecraft uses for abalone and laminates.



Carbon fiber remains popular among makers for knife handles. Masecraft offers it in an unusual pattern above.

ity of phone calls and website orders, and assists with all company system operations. Jim Dirck manages the shop, cutting and filling customer orders. Rupert, the 100-plus-pound Bernese Mountain Dog, serves as security and mascot. "Our floor has never been more secure," Chris smiled. "As long as Rupert's laying on it, it's not going anywhere!"

While Masecraft began as a natural materials supplier, things have changed. Increasingly, only high-end knives sport natural materials because laws have made the materials more and more difficult to obtain. India stopped exporting Sambar stag in 2005. Due to international import and export laws, the brothers said it's nearly impossible to get ironwood.

As for the federal government's fight against the sale of legal ivory, Chris has some strong opinions. "We are an elephant-friendly company," he began. "We've never sold elephant ivory but we simply do not see how banning or destroying already-existing ivory works of art helps the elephants that still exist today. Why not have all these items legally registered for a fee and have part of that fee go towards protecting the elephants?"

"They should make it illegal not to register your existing ivory items. Now you are doing some good and using the departed elephants to protect the living

ones, not destroying the same elephant twice with no benefits to man or beast. Jobs, revenue and actual protection could all be created without destroying or illegalizing anything."

Masecraft has a synthetic alternative for every natural material, including *alternative ivory* for ivory. Chris said Masecraft developed it so it has not only ivory's color but the same grain as well. He indicated the material has been used by several museums worldwide to restore authentic ivory artifacts.

When the news broke that India banned Sambar stag exports in '05, the brothers took their best pieces, created pewter molds and stored them for when the natural supply ran out—"Which is pretty much now," Chris said. Today Masecraft produces Stag-Alike, a synthetic version of real stag made from the molds and double-dyed amber and brown, just like the real thing.

To develop new handle materials, the Hartmans send samples of their ideas to top customers for feedback. According to Chris, the brothers try to brainstorm materials that will work in many industries. Often, they work closely with designers that already produce materials they like and fine tune them for their markets.

As Masecraft officials have done in the past, the Hartmans listen to their customers' needs. They also have developed their own facility to make wood laminated products. At press time, they were in the process of beginning to sell new textures in G-10, plus other new twists to popular materials.

"Knifemakers are open and friendly about their craft," Phil observed. "Sometimes when a customer places an order, we will throw free samples into the package just to give them an opportunity to try something different they may have not tried otherwise."

And you never know—that "something different" might turn out to be yet another of the many hot handle materials for which Masecraft has been so well known the past 35 years.

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