

Largo works » Gyotaku Original Fish Rubbings.

Call Gregory Aragon at (727) 639-1848 or visit www.gregaragon.com.

STORY BY CHRISTINA K. COSDON | Times Correspondent

Long before instant photos, Japanese fishermen documented their prize catches with ink and rice paper. The prints created a one-sided mirror image of a fish, an art form known as gyotaku or fish rubbing. ¶ Largo resident Gregory Aragon, 56, saw his first gyotaku print in 1978 while strolling through a small gallery in Key West. A respiratory therapist, he was working at the time at Florida Keys Memorial Hospital. ¶ A lifelong fisherman and art lover, Aragon was captivated by the intricate details of the print and tried to duplicate the art form with his own fish.

"It didn't come out so good," he recalled. Other attempts were equally disappointing and he put it aside.

He often thought of the beautiful print when fishing, especially when his catch included unusual and brilliantly colored fish.

In 1993, he decided to try his hand at fish rubbing once more. After research and a lot of trial and error practice with watercolors and white rice paper, he perfected his own style and developed the art form into a career.

His signature work features spectacular deep sea fish, such as golden tile fish and queen snapper, now painted with more durable acrylics on a black rice paper background.

In the early days, his work found its way into the homes of many of his fishing buddies.

"I've grown fish lovers into art lovers," he said. "The wives love them because the fishermen aren't putting up dead fish on the walls."

For his rubbings, he uses fresh fish kept chilled in ice, not frozen, he said, because freezing causes fish to lose its sturdiness. The fish usually come from local fishermen but



Aragon's fish rubbings, like this bust of a 233-pound tarpon, sell for between \$400 and \$800.



Aragon's rubbing of a golden tilefish.

some are flown in from as far away as Venezuela. After cleaning off the fish, he lets it cool to room temperature.

"Most of the time I do a full color rubbing of the fish," he said. "Six to eight rubbings take up to 16 hours."

Today, Aragon's work is sold as framed art, floor mats, porcelain platters and T-shirts. His art, which generally sells for between \$400 and \$800, is displayed in restaurants throughout the U.S. and abroad in galleries and private collections.

Florida restaurants include Salt Rock Grill in Indian Shores, Middle Grounds Grill in Treasure Island, Moon Fish and Charley's Steakhouse in Orlando, Fish Bones in Lake Mary and Mangrove Grill in Palmetto.

"I've rubbed a lot of fish for charity," Aragon said, like a 233-pound tarpon last season and a 100-pound grouper in an off-shore tournament.

His love of the art continues to grow, he said. His goal: "to immortalize the beauty of the fish."

Chris Cosdon can be reached at ccosdon@gmail.com.



Aragon uses fresh, chilled fish and acrylics on black rice paper for his rubbings. This is a rubbing of a queen snapper.

PHOTOS BY JIM DAMASKE | Times Staff



Aragon peels black rice paper off the snapper, revealing the nearly finished work. When it dries, he'll paint in



Greg Aragon brushes red paint over the base white coat on his queen snapper. This is one of the first steps in a rubbing.