

# TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

## ***Nick Toth***

*The following text is a written summary of the interview with Nick Toth on behalf of curator.*

---

**In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?**

Toth enjoys building diving helmets because it is a skill that he learned from his grandfather. Building the helmets keeps him close to his grandfather's spirit; it also keeps him closer to his family's heritage and the history of the Greek community in Tarpon Springs. As he continues to make diving helmets Toth is honoring his family and heritage.

Toth, like his grandfather, worked as a marine engineer, repairing engines and mechanical equipment on fishing boats. He feels there are others that can repair fishing boats better, but no one can make helmets as well as he does. He feels that making the helmets allows him to follow his creative impulses rather than satisfying the demands of a fisherman.

**What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?**



***Nick Toth-Sponge Diving Helmet***

***Photo by Museum of Florida History,  
Department of State***

Toth's work is undeniably influenced by history. The helmets he makes are similar to helmets that were designed 150 years ago. All of the media that he works with plays an important part; the sheet of copper and brass used in the construction of the helmets are the same material used by his grandfather. Additionally, the polished copper of the helmet reflects the light and its surroundings which draw the viewer to the object. When a helmet is displayed in Tarpon Springs it literally and figuratively reflects its history.

**Can you describe your studio practice? Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?**

Nick Toth spends approximately five to six hours a day working on his helmets; after spending that much time in the workshop he feels that fatigue sets in and mistakes are more frequent. He works in isolation but often feels the presence of his grandfather as he works. The support from the community also plays a role in his practice. Tarpon Springs' Greek sponge fishing community realizes the importance of Toth's work when representing them and constantly offers support and appreciation of his helmets.

**How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?**

Utility and function are central to Toth's work. While he builds the helmets to suit his aesthetics, the fact that it is a fully functional diving helmet makes it complete.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there? How long have you lived in the South?**

Nick Toth has lived in Tarpon Springs all of his life, except for his time in college at Appalachian State University and the University of Florida.

**If born in the South, how do you think you've been influenced by it?**

Though he was born in the South, Toth has a deeper connection with his Greek heritage than his Southern heritage. His grandparents came from Greece and he grew up in a Greek community. Growing up in a Greek community in the South of Florida has insulated him from "mainstream Southern culture."

**Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or the landscape? If you do, please describe?**

Toth's area is intimately connected to his work place. Tarpon Springs' economy was built upon sponge diving. His helmets come directly from that tradition.

**In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish your work being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country or world?**

His helmets are such a personal expression of his individual experience and his family's history that he feels that his helmets could come from no other place.

**How has your work changed? Is your work evolving?**

He has changed his grandfather's helmet design so the portholes extend a little further from the helmet. He is careful to attach the portholes by soldering a smooth "flowing connection" between the portholes and the helmets. Additionally the helmet's copper surface is polished to a mirror finish. Toth is currently experimenting with applying a finish to the helmet, which will maintain the mirror-like sheen without having to polish the helmet.

**Describe your relationship to community or family? Are there groups of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?**

Toth is still a part of the community of fishermen and Greek sponge divers in Tarpon Springs. He serviced and repaired the fishing and sponging boats of his community but ended that service in 2005. The people of the community recognize his helmets as symbols for their community and are supportive of his art.

**Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would like your legacy to be?**

Toth believes his helmets are symbols of Tarpon Springs' Greek sponge diving community. He is very proud of his community and feels honored to keep their story alive through his helmets. He feels that the helmets he makes will tell that story even after he is gone.

**How did you learn your craft?**

Nick Toth learned to make helmets from his grandfather. He started playing in his grandfather's shop at the age of three. As he grew he began helping his grandfather repair fishing boats and helped in making machine parts. His grandfather taught him to learn the "feel" of the trade, rather than just relying on measurements and numbers. After graduating from college Toth returned to Tarpon Springs and asked his grandfather to teach him how to make diving helmets. Toth grandfather believed that teaching him to make a diving helmet would teach him all the skills he needed to be a master machinist and craftsman.

**Do you share your knowledge with others – the next generation of artists?**

He believes that anyone can learn to make a helmet but it would take a life time of learning to make a helmet the way that he does. Toth's son is not interested in learning his father's skill.

**Can you explain the process of making a diving helmet?**

First the brass fittings are turned on a lathe.<sup>1</sup> Next the shoulder plate is cut from a sheet of thin copper. Then the copper goes in a cast-iron form and is pounded into shape with a wooden mallet or peg.

The helmet is also made of copper and is spun on a lathe forcing it around the pattern and giving it its shape. Next the four holes are cut in the helmet for the portholes. An additional smaller hole is cut in the back for air to enter. On the right side of the helmet another hole is cut, which is used as an outlet valve. The portholes use ¼ inch plate glass and are fitted with leather seals to make them watertight. The brass neck rings (for attaching the helmet to the breastplate) and the portholes are soldered to the helmet. All of the other parts from the air valves down to the smallest wing nuts on the breastplate are fabricated in the shop.

**What materials do you use?**

Copper, brass, solder, leather and glass.

**What tools and/or equipment are used?**

Toth uses many of his grandfather's tools. The mallet, peg, and mandrel, used for shaping the breastplate, and lathes are the same tools his grandfather used. An oxyacetylene torch is used to solder the portholes to the helmet. The helmet is turned by another machine shop, using his grandfather's pattern.

**How long does it take to complete a helmet?**

About 140 hours.

**How do you know when you're finished?**

The helmet looks finished, with the right proportions and the proper sheen.

**Can you describe the significance of your helmets to the Greek community in Tarpon Springs? To your family?**

Nick Toth's diving helmets were once part of the vital sponge industry in Tarpon Springs. Now the sponge industry is more important as a tourist attraction than a viable industry. As the sponge diving industry has become a symbol of the Greek

---

<sup>1</sup> Lathe n. - A machine for shaping a piece of material, such as wood or metal, by rotating it rapidly along its axis while pressing against a fixed cutting or abrading tool.

community, Toth's helmets have become a symbol for the sponge industry. His helmets represent sponge diving and his family's part in the sponge diving community.

**How do you see the future of the sponge diving industry, in general and your work, specifically?**

The future of the sponge diving industry is not bright, and regardless of its future working sponge divers will use less expensive, less cumbersome scuba gear rather than diving helmets. Toth plans to continue making his helmets as objects of art and symbols of the past.