By Neal Simpson THE ART OF ANTHROPOLOGY

At their in-the-woods Norwell studio, a husband and wife resurrect objects largely forgotten by history

Rick and Laura Brown in their Handshouse Studio, standing behind a small-scale replica of a ceiling panel from the centuries-old Gwozdziec synagogue in Poland.

Back in Norwell, the Browns and their students have used natural dyes produced in the 1700s – much richer than their mechanized counterparts were invented.

The Browns’ efforts to recreate the Gwozdziec synagogue ceiling have included traveling to Poland, partly to strive for color accuracy. At right is one of Handshouse Studio’s previous re-creations, a wooden bell tower.

“The process, which began in 2003, sometimes requires the Browns to make assumptions. They believe, for example, that Jewish painters of the time may have had access to more sophisticated blue dyes than their Christian contemporaries, who had to use a gray paint to approximate blue.”

The first few of the eight ceiling panels were painted in a series of workshops last summer and have been kept in storage in Poland, along with the dismantled roof structure, over the winter. The Browns plan to complete the paintings this summer.

Rick Brown said the synagogue replication and other Handshouse projects are built on the increasingly accepted discipline of “anthropological archaeology,” which aims to unlock information about little-understood historical objects through the process of replicating them.

“The whole process is open-ended, and you follow the avenue of inquiries as they come up,” Brown said. “In some ways, we’ve retrieved lost knowledge.”

Neal Simpson may be reached at nsimpson@ledger.com