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DO THE beautiful thing

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David Bowen lives and works in what might be called “a vortex of American history.”

Salisbury Artisans, his wood-working and cabinetry shop, set on the banks of the Wachicastinook Brook at the base of Mt. Riga, places David at the intersection of the fabled iron trade that supplied arms and implements for the War of 1812, a burgeoning Salisbury industrial center that at one time boasted the highest per capita income in the United States and the retreat of artists, musicians, writers, and philosophers.

Parts for guns that supplied George Washington’s army, the chain that stretched across the Hudson River to block British warships from sailing north, the anchor for “Old Ironsides” may have been produced in the idyllic setting, but what is delivered from this carbon-neutral workshop, today, speaks to domestic tranquility and quiet respect.

An operating philosophy

“Proportion, the appropriateness of style and recognizing the beauty of the wood. Those are the things that make up my aesthetic,” emphasizes David as he steps back from a finished chair of classic design.

With a calmness that transcends the fury of history around him, David creates furniture and fine cabinetry in his former wood-working factory that is both peaceful and purposeful.

A casual conversation about the journey that brought David and his wife, Priscilla, to this place in their lives reveals a great deal about the mood and character of his work. His grandfather, Axel Benson, built fine cottage-style homes in suburban Boston. As a child, David spent time in and around the building sites. “I was a ‘gopher,’” he muses. “You can pick up a lot when your grandfather shows you how things are done.”

His jobs during and after a college career found him in high-end woodworking shops along the Connecticut coast until the lure of “Go West!” took him across the country to San Francisco. “There was a Housing & Urban Development program in San Francisco that repositioned and restored Victorian

homes at the intersection of Fillmore and Sutter.” The memory is fresh with detail. “There were Menonite families that specialized in moving houses through the streets,” he recalls, whimsically. “I remember they had a dog that would circle the slowly moving buildings, making sure no one got too close.”

Well learned skills refined

Inside those repositioned homes, David Bowen demonstrated the skills he had learned over his extended apprenticeship. “I restored the millwork in those homes – making sure they were historically accurate.” History and an appreciation of the aesthetic ... two imposing forces that would shape David Bowen’s career.

The story moved forward. David met Priscilla. They settled into a home in Marin County. David created fine interior woodwork for homes and vineyards from Nob Hill to Palo Alto to Napa and Sonoma. He began working for a firm prophetically called Nutmeg Kitchens, rose to be the foreman



Above, top to bottom: Ebonyized cherry bench. David Bowen.

and seemed to have settled in, until “the Nutmeg State” called, and the couple moved east.

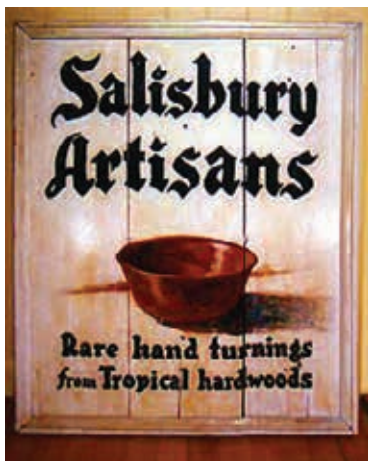
“We opened Lakeville Woodworking on Farnam Road and continued what we’d begun in California.” There were historic homes that needed restoration based on an appreciation for their original design. There were new homes being built to exacting specifications that required high-end artisanry and great attention to detail. And, there was furniture.

“It’s an interesting cycle,” he reflects. “People come up from the New York area to buy or build a second home. In some ways, those homes become their hobbies – always something to be done, to be added, to be improved. We’re honored to engage with them over 15 to 20 years.”

Salisbury Artisans

“In the late 90s we had the chance to buy this historic wood shop – Salisbury Artisans.” David has carefully upgraded both the home and the shop on his property, but the sense of history remains. Solar panels are subtly integrated into the roofline and the emphasis on a “green” environment is pervasive. “This was the Salisbury Cutlery Handle Factory from before the Civil War,” he says while finding some artifacts from that period. “When the Holleys began making pocket knives in the heart of Lakeville, this factory supplied the wood, bone, and antler handles.”

From knife handles to “treen,” the products made of wood by turning on a lathe, the factory expanded



into pieces that were widely appreciated – bowls, candle holders, and pepper mills crafted from the Rosewood and Cocobolo that had been used in the fabrication of knife handles. Early advertising in the Tanglewood Festival program and inclusion in The Museum of Modern Art’s Christmas gift show enhanced the reputation. The tradition of fine craft – pieces of art in their own right – has certainly continued at David Bowen’s Salisbury Artisans.

Realizing the artist’s vision

David Bowen’s furniture expresses and elegant reverence for its ultimate setting, the use for which it is intended and the carefully selected materials he uses to create pieces that grace homes, public buildings, schools, churches and libraries. Although quite comfortable with more modern pieces and mid-Century designs, his sensitivity to the historic context and tastes of his clients tends to be solidly traditional. He has created dramatic pieces from the legendary “Twin Oaks” as well as a highly revered 16-foot meeting table fashioned from a 300-year-old white oak that had fallen in the Salisbury Town Grove.

From a childhood learning about home building from his grandfather through years working in specialty woodworking and cabinetry shops to establishing his own well-regarded business creating profoundly elegant furniture, David Bowen has learned and refined an impressive set of skills. “I’ve been fortunate to work in custom design, reproduction, modern, mission, studio/art furniture and architectural woodworking,” he reflects with profound humility. A cursory look at his portfolio provides complete validation. David is a true artist.

The continued success of David’s work in elegant furniture making has as much to do about its history as it does about an age in which broadly available electronic communication has become the norm. “I’m honored that my clients keep coming back for additional pieces,” says David. “I’m also well represented in Houzz.” The online directory



Above, top to bottom: Trestle table in the studio. Mahogany table and chairs. Below, left: The Salisbury Artisans sign.

of creators and practitioners of every aspect of creating, furnishing, and maintaining a home has been a steady source of contacts for Salisbury Artisans. The fact that all of the reviews posted about David’s work have awarded him five “stars,” the highest designation, is part of that positive connection. “People can see the work, hear comments from customers and get in touch with me very easily,” he muses. “It’s the way things work.”

An invitation

For those more inclined to a face-to-face encounter with the artist and his work, David’s studio has been selected to be part of the Northwest Connecticut Arts Council “Studio Tour” on June 24 and 25. You’ll be stepping into a bit of history when you enter David Bowen’s studio. History as fresh as the latest piece he’ll have on display.

One need not believe in ghosts to honor the spirits that surround us. Downstream from Forge Pond on Mt. Riga, the spirit of elegant woodworking lives on in David Bowen’s Salisbury Artisans, where the operative mandate is “Do the Beautiful Thing.” ●

To explore David Bowen’s portfolio, visit www.salisburyartisans.com or call (860) 435-0344 to schedule a visit to Salisbury Artisans. Are you an artist and interested in being featured in Main Street Magazine? Send a brief bio, artist’s statement, and a link to your work to arts@mainstreetmag.com.