

WRITTEN BY Kathryn Boughton



In Salisbury, Working Wood

In 1825, Lambert Hitchcock of Riverton came up with a new idea. Instead of making a chair or table piece by piece, he would have many workers turn out individual pieces, such as a leg or spindle, doing the same task over and over. Meanwhile, other workers would assemble the piece, which would be made from different kinds of woods, all painted a uniform black and made beautiful with decorative stencils.

Take out the skill of a trained artisan who created each piece by hand, substitute “scrap” woods and the cost of furniture plummeted. So, too, did the number of trained furniture makers working in small shops. Before long, furniture, like most other things in the United States, emerged only from production-line factories.

David Bowen of Salisbury Artisans in Lakeville has taken a giant step back from this produc-

tion-line standard and has returned to the concept of individually crafted furniture made of fine woods and finished with carefully applied hand finishes. The quiet, meticulous artisan works alone in a historic shop on Factory Street, carefully avoiding the 21st-century pressure to worker faster and faster.

He explained that his interest in woodworking had its genesis in his grandfather, a carpenter who came to Boston from Sweden, and who instilled in his grandson an appreciation for doing a job right. “He was so kind, so straightforward, so hardworking,” said Mr. Bowen in his soft voice. “I was like 8 years old, but I saw that you can do something you enjoy and do it

right until you die. He would come home after work and after dinner he would go to the cellar and sharpen his chisels and saws. I can still smell his pipe as I watched him file every single tooth on those saws. There was something about his calmness—I remember it when I find myself rushing. It is so easy to get into that nowadays. I have found my equilibrium and it seems to be a balanced life for me.”

Mr. Bowen holds tight to the example set by the older man, and his attention to detail is evident in every line and every joint of the exquisite furniture he creates in his cabinet shop. He directs a visitor’s attention to a

‘I make furniture that people can give to their children and their children’s children.’

special piece, a silverware chest ready for shipment to his client.

Crafted from hand-rubbed African walnut, with inlays of ebony and claro walnut cut from a burl, the cabinet is flawless in its execution. His client has an interest in naval history and wanted a chest that recalled the campaign chests of the 19th century. Accordingly, Mr. Bowen designed the chest along classic lines, with inset brass campaign handles on either side. He set the gleaming chest on an austere base of matching woods.

The creation of a piece appropriate for specific clients is part of the joy of his work for Mr. Bowen. “I like to get to know people. To know someone I am building furniture for is a treat for me. When your clients come to trust you, it frees you [to explore design] and things come out better.”

He now designs his furniture on a computer, which enhances the

level of communication with the client. “I can draw fairly well,” he said, “but I now do 3-D drawings on the computer. It’s hard to ask for a two- or three-thousand dollar deposit based on a stick figure. It’s like night and day when the client can actually see it.”

The computer has also eased communication with clients at greater distances. “I’ve done work for clients in Washington [D.C.] and Providence [R.I.] where we just talked on the phone and I showed them designs over the computer and we got it three-quarters done before ever I met them. I have done several pieces where we never met,” he said.

Handcrafted tables, chairs, cabinets, beds and the like can be done long distance, but some of his work requires a presence. Mr. Bowen also designs and installs kitchens, libraries, media centers and the like. He recalls with particular pride some local jobs



Facing page, an "audio sideboard," top left, and bottom left and right a trestle table and maple bed made by David Bowen of Salisbury Artisans in photographs that he provided. Mr. Bowen is photographed outside his studio/workshop by Walter Kidd. Above, a tiger maple dining set by Mr. Bowen in a photograph he provided.

where he designed and installed rooms for clients, creating just the atmosphere they desired.

One such venture was undertaken for a neighbor who owns one of the oldest buildings in Salisbury, dating from the 1730s. In that house, he carefully installed distressed bookcases and a gallery made from reclaimed antique floor joists that were resawn and kiln-dried. "I made a simple crown molding and followed the curve of the ceiling and every curve and crack of the old walls. And then I finished with a brown English wax that creates a great patina. No one can believe it wasn't there all the time."

In another instance, he took a coldly austere modern house recently acquired by his client and recreated the warmth of a wood-lined library for her.

While those jobs called for him to recreate traditional looks, the craftsman is equally happy producing modern designs. He likes to frequent Berkshire Hardwoods in nearby Ashley Falls, Mass., where he can buy exotic woods from around the world. And sometimes those woods inspire the ultimate form of the object he creates.

He recalls one desk for which the wood directed the design. "We went to market and found a beautiful slab that was just the right size and we decided to do a Nakashima-like slab [for the top] on a C-shaped trestle base," he

said, referring to George Nakashima, an influential furniture maker whose post-World War II designs were often created from large wood slabs with smooth tops and unfinished natural edges. "That idea came out of the ► 48



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A SALISBURY CRAFTSMAN USES TIME-HONORED METHODS TO WORK WOOD

◀ **47** market and that [kind of design] can happen when you have great trust from your client.”

Trust can be an important factor because the woods used in the furniture are expensive. He said the wood used for a table can cost \$1,000 or \$2,000 if taken from a single tree.

While he designs his own pieces, he said it is not unusual to find that an idea has been used somewhere else in the past. He remembers when he was sent a picture of an antique table that closely resembled a Swedish trestle table he had recently built. “I hadn’t copied it,” he said. “Concepts are just out there, floating around in the mixing bowl of ideas.”

When a piece of furniture has been built the finish is its crowning glory. Mr. Bowen applies finishes that both show the beauty of the woods he uses and are durable. “I don’t want to give out my formulas,” he said, “but I start with a Tung oil primer and then maybe a little shellac. I might or might not put on a glaze; then I put on four coats of urethane, use pumice and rotten stone and wax it. A lot of people use lacquer, but modern urethane is so durable. You can put a hot cup down on it and not have to worry. My concern is that I make furniture that people can give to their children and their children’s children.”

His furniture, made with mortice and tenon joints, is designed to last for the ages and he shakes his head over craftsmen who take shortcuts. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Why don’t they do it right? You see things held together with screws—screws are sharp pieces of



metal that cut wood every time it moves. Mortice and tenon joints work with the wood as it moves with the seasons.

The shop where the artisan creates his furniture has a long history. Built on Factory Street, the barn he occupies was erected in 1800. The Salisbury Cutlery Handle Factory located there in the 1860s making stag and exotic wood knife handles for cutlery companies.

Eventually, the company was owned by Philip Warner, who recognized the beauty of the South American hardwoods imported for the knife handles and who started producing “treen” or small wood-ware items. The firm turned out bowls, candleholders, and pepper mills from rosewood and cocobolo—some examples of which are still in Mr. Bowen’s shop—and

called itself the “Salisbury Artisans.”

The Museum of Modern Art, in a show of the best 100 gifts of 1948, recognized Salisbury Artisans for its delicately-turned “muddlers” [small sticks for stirring mixed drinks]. Salisbury Artisans created a gavel used to call the Connecticut legislature to order.

In 1951, Salisbury Artisans partnered with renowned designer and potter Eva Zeisel on several items for the home, resulting in a turned table centerpiece, fruit stands and a tea service tray.

Lewis and Fannie McClure, along with wood turner Richard Parsons, took over the operation in the 1960s and continued making bowls and fine treen. Mr. Bowen and his wife, Priscilla, purchased the complex in 1997. ■



Top, a silver chest by David Bowen of Salisbury Artisans in a photograph he provided. Above, Mr. Bowen’s studio/workshop, photographed by Walter Kidd.