SEEING THE WORLD WITH DAVID UPPFILL-BROWN

BY PATRICK DOWNES • PHOTOS BY DAVID UPPFILL-BROWN

It's impossible to fall asleep while David Uppfill-Brown talks. At the very first word, you'll cock your head like a terrier, trying for your life to figure out his accent. Born in South Africa and raised in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, David has lived across the English-speaking world, from Africa to England to Australia, and, currently, the coast of Maine. Just as the sun never set on the British Empire, it hardly sets on the path this man has taken. The sound of him speaking, by turns staccato and flowing, serious and playful, smooth and rough, contains all the places he's ever called home.

Once you've gotten a handle on David's accent while listening to him at a slide show, during a beacon or in friendly conversation over lunch, you're liable to learn something and laugh. A conversation with him will easily range from the history of furniture to poetry, from ecology to contemporary artists and makers. You'll leave the time you spent with him amazed at the distance you've covered, bemused and a little jellied, and finally sorry it had to end. A tall man, about 6'2", wiry, with a strong jaw and bright blue eyes set slightly deep in their sockets, David is 60, limber, and seems fit and ready for anything. He'll hike a local mountain, cross-country ski, toss a Frisbee, or take out his fishing rod whenever he gets the chance. Sometimes, you may have the sense he isn't quite where he wants to be, as if he is being kept from an appointment elsewhere. The variety of his thinking, his action and his conversation, which may seem almost impossibly charming and entertaining, really represent an internal restlessness, a constant desire to return to his work. He needs his shop, his tools, his craft. He needs to make and make and make. Everything else is a distraction.

Since 2004, David has been at the helm of the Nine-Month Intensive course at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine. He'll be leaving behind the full-time teaching schedule in 2009 and return home to Australia and the necessity of doing his own work. "I miss the making," he says.

David learned the basics of woodworking from his father. A soldier who lost his leg in WWII and "a Victorian," as David calls him, Tony Uppfill-Brown was a "confident amateur," who made built-in and stand-alone furniture, often in a Georgian style. From an early age, David acquired an appreciation of craft and of the history behind the craft. Even so, his father, hoping his son might cotton to a vocation more viable than art, sent David off to a two-year stint in England for better schooling. After serving the time without much success, David was hauled back to Africa, where his father imagined the discipline of army life might do him some good. He lasted a year in conscription before making his escape. He hadn't yet guessed that his discipline would come in exactly the way his father might have wished it wouldn't.

In the late 60s, as Rhodesia pursued independence from British rule, a movement began to promote indigenous crafts produced by Africans. Because Rhodesia had large deposits of soapstone, including a form called serpentine, local stonecarving took off. Early carvers made the most of familiar cultural symbols, particularly the Zimbabwe bird, a stylized eagle, which had been used in carvings centuries earlier. Indeed, the name Zimbabwe, which Rhodesia later became after independence, comes from the name for the ancient stone city of Great Zimbabwe, completed sometime between the thirteenth and sixteenth Centuries, and now in ruins.

After his release from the army and still in his early twenties, David started a business exporting traditional and contemporary crafts from Rhodesia to South Africa via Botswana to avoid duties. Not much time passed, though, before David
grew restless, as if to parallel the country’s growing pains. “I was selling indigenous work,” he says, “and I realized the stone carvers were having the most fun.” He took what he calls a “few weak lessons” from a carver named John Takawira and was hooked. He turned to doing carving himself.

Political and cultural pressures, however, would force him to look for a better place to live and work. The persistent racial and nationalist struggles, coupled with the expanding guerrilla warfare, drove him to emigrate to South Africa in 1973. Once there, David acquired a set of 12 Marples chisels and set to work. All but entirely self-taught, he carved wood and stone. Relying on the African vernacular, he carved bowls, heads, figures, anything he could sell to survive. “I had been around people working with their hands all day, every day,” David remembers. “And they’d used everything available to them, even flattened coffee cans.” What’s more, he lived for two years in a house without electricity, working the wood entirely with hand tools. This consciousness of material and means informs David’s sensibilities as a craftsman even now. “The best way to learn the material, stone or wood, is to carve,” he says. The three years David spent in South Africa were extremely productive and educational. David’s father, recognizing his son’s deep commitment, made him a wedding gift of six tons of Rhodesian soapstone and serpentine as a gesture of respect. “I almost used it all up,” David remarks.

David sold everything he made. He sold to local galleries and a community of South African craftspeople, gave interviews and showed up in articles, which increased his chances of selling more work. Out of all this carving and sculptural work came his first solo exhibition, in 1976, at the South African Association of Arts Gallery, in Cape Town. “When you put yourself out there,” says David, “be prepared to be hit down.” What a good lesson. I appreciated the praise, what there was of it, but the harsh criticism hurt.”

Inside this experience was a deeper lesson for him. As an artist, he resisted explaining his work. “I didn’t want to have to justify it or defend it. I wasn’t aware of trying to say anything in my sculpture. I was producing, getting better and trying to stay alive.”

When he turned to furniture, David freed himself of having to justify his work in the language of art critics. Furniture, by its inherent implication of functionality, seems to liberate the maker from having to explain it. A chair is a chair, regardless of whether or not it has symbols carved into it. And David would come to like this freedom. “The function of furniture,” he says, “gives sanction to make more.” He explored sculptural furniture as it was being carried out in the United States at that time, copying furniture he found in photographs that came from the pages of Fine Woodworking.

Six months after his solo exhibition in Cape Town, David emigrated to England to escape the regime of Apartheid in South Africa. “England was a sanctuary from white Africa and white supremacy,” From the artist’s point of view, “it was the Old World.” To survive, he took care of houses, worked with cattle, forested, did carpentry and house restoration, and used his carving skills for everything from making signs to restoring antiques. Much of his commission work for his furniture came from friends and family.

Around this time, like so many other young furniture makers, David stumbled on James Krenov’s A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook. “It was an epiphany,” he says. “It seemed all about lifestyle and cats. I could do without the cats; it was the lesson of the lifestyle that struck me.” Little did he know he would end up at one of the premier schools in the world for furniture craftsmanship, ready to pursue that lifestyle of freedom, production and creativity.

One day in 1979, the partner of David’s aunt, Colonel Berthe Tansley-Witt, asked him, “Have you heard of John Makepeace?” Then, “Did you know he runs a school down the road?”

The revelation of Makepeace’s Parnham House would change David Uplift-Brown’s life for good. “I realized I could get a relevant training,” he notes, and this meant he could get ahead faster. “I knocked on Makepeace’s door and asked him, ‘What do I have to do to come here?’” After the tests and interviews, acceptance came even. So, David says he flipped a coin to decide whether or not he should attend. Already working hard and making a go of it, he was a free spirit who had not enjoyed school, and he worried he might choke at the bit. Fortunately, the coin landed right side up for Parnham.

“Parnham was all about making. It was monastic. It was expensive; I sold the family silver to help pay for it.” Unlike his classmates, David had a wife and child at home. “I was a useless father. Parnham was two very full years, and I couldn’t get enough of it. I’d get home after midnight every night.” The curriculum was separated over two years in the simplest way. The first year, the students followed the principal, a master named Robert Ingham, building a series of projects alongside him, much like an intensive apprenticeship. The second year, all the students worked at their own projects with different instructors. David saw little of Makepeace himself. “He would come around every so often, look at the student’s work, and say, ‘Too thick, too heavy, too solid!’ Still, the students visited his shop weekly and could see for themselves the cutting edge of British fine furniture.

The primary reason to go to school, David suggests, is for shortcuts to know how and efficiency. “I was always aware of learning more,” he says of Parnham. He read books, steeping himself in the history of furniture even as he was surrounded by the contemporary designs coming out of Makepeace’s shop. He continued to learn from Fine Woodworking. One can’t learn everything. David stresses—the volume of knowledge is so enormous—but to learn in nine months or two years what might it take the self-taught a decade to figure out helps a developing maker hit the ground running.

At Parnham, David finally realized he had become a maker. Fulfilling the projects, and then the final exhibition of student work brought it all home. Once he left school, though, he had to get back to the business of making his way and supporting a family.

The desire to leave England for self-sufficiency and the search for a frontier for work—and his wife, Hermione, who refused to return to Africa—propelled David to emigrate with his family to Australia in 1982. He arrived with tools, $500, and a daughter and he and his wife could still bathe in a large bucket. After settling outside Canbera into a shop with a fellow Parnham graduate, he pursued and began to receive his first public commissions.

“If I could choose a perfect career, I wouldn’t include commissions,” he says, “but in the cut and thrust with a client, you push each other. Both of us learn new things.” In the end, these commissions, both public and private, set David on his way. “Government work is good.” He grins and adds, “Public commissions up the responsibility. Deadlines are deadlines.” He acquired a reputation for being fast, which, to some, is part of what defines a true master. David credits some of his opportunities with these commissions—such as the Speaker’s Chair he built for the Australian Parliament—which led to a string of parliametary commissions throughout the Pacific—his ability to carve, long since
honored. He had at least one more arrow in his quiver.

In addition to living and working so near the seat of government, where the public commissions could be sought, David belonged to the woodworking and crafts community of Canberra. The camaraderie and word of mouth brought a lot of work. By exhibiting with his colleagues and peers, which revealed a dedication to furthering the whole community, he could show his commissioned work, sometimes in progress, even though there was no guar- antee for sales. Over his career, he has had two solo exhibitions of his furniture, including one in Australia in 1988, and has been part of more than thirty-five group exhibitions all over the world.

From 1985 to 1993, together with Hermione, David managed the Canberra agency for an Australian lumber company, selling among eighty species of Australian and international furniture timbers. “I’ve always tried to get a grip on the character- istics of different wood species, particularly the local ones,” he says. “Imagine having roughly 30,000 board feet of stock. When I stacked the new stock, I picked out the best boards for myself. I’d try my customers that they were buying second-hand timber!”

One last, meaningful element to David’s public persona as a maker is his teaching. Since 1985, he has taught off and on and developed his style in venues ranging from the Canberra Institute of the Arts to more career-oriented schools, such as the Australian School of Fine Furniture, where he served as academic director and principal. He credits his continually evolving sense of design to his students over a quarter-century, and what of David’s own sensibilities in the shop? “Iabor the dreaded right angle. So my work involves a lot of curves. I shape by bandsaw and finish by hand, and I still carve when I can. Sometimes, I think I tam- ume too much.”

His work is deeply informed by what George Ingham, the brother of his old

ON TEACHING

By David Upfield-Brown

WHEN I ENROLLED AT PARHAM HOUSE
in Dorset, England, in 1979, I’d had bashed into me my experience with good schooling. Though the branchial of John Makepeace, Parham’s principal was Robert Ingham, a man who seemed to me a sort of tolerant and honest by his work. The intense first year of training at Parham hinged on Ingham’s project-based curriculum. Over that year, students built eight or so project sets, which Ingham designed annually to serve as progressive learning exercises. The students didn’t inter- pret his models; this wasn’t independent, ego-driven experience. Instead, the students built each project with Ingham exactly as he intended it to be built. I was in the third group of students at Parham, and Ingham’s method was finely honed by the time I began. It was a blissful kindergarten, where the logic and techniques were fully demonstrated, sometimes once and sometimes five times a day before Ingham was appreciated by every one of his nearly 200 stu- dents over 20 years.

The second year of independent projects, with visiting instructors, developed from the first year of close technical apprenticeship. Students could explore the limitless possibilities of using timber and a little invention to method. It was at Parham that I recognized, maybe for the first time, the give and take between students and instructors, and how much the group of students had to offer.

The flow of ideas through a classroom is one of the prime benefits of my teaching now.

Not long after leaving Parham House, I emi- grated to Australia, where I joined a workshop alongside another young maker at Curracurrumal-bong Craft Center a few miles south of Can- berra, on the Mummbidgee River. As intended, I took what I’d learned at school and got to work for myself. I had no immediate thought of passing on the wisdom in any other way than through my furniture, but fate intervened.

I worked for years, building anything and everything I could. Finally, in 1956, George Ingham, Robert’s brother and a former second-year teacher at Parham, called at the shop. George, by this time, had been two years at establishing the Wood Studio of the Canberra School of Art. He was not a large man. Even so, he hooked his finger under my collar and dragged me out. “David,” he said, “I would like you to come and teach at the school. You are becoming a hem- mit and you need to get out more.”

After a short time teaching twice-weekly night classes to motivated vocational students, I was asked to teach project-based classes in the school’s degree and diploma programs—in full weeks on chairs, lamination or veneering. I did this for nearly eight years, teaching one or two sessions a year. What I discovered from these class workshops is that learning is one of the prime deceit of my teaching now. There’s no getting around it, every class has mature and immature students.

Group dynamics are mysterious but controllable. Generosity and careful, almost trick-full, coping map reveal, encouraging the discouraged and taming the rogue. The realm of ideas in a brain- storming session advances design solutions for all. The inclusion of women in a group pushes the design potential of that class. Every student has a voice and ability, however confused or uncon- fident. Large egos can, unfortunately, handle damage the dynamic, usually by fracturing tempers.

And importantly, the group teaches itself—col- leagues inevitably learn from one another.

My greatest pleasure comes from watching the students work, seeing their confidence grow. Working with wood, possibly the most instructable medium, even reads some to discover something deep within themselves; perhaps a pri- mental connection to those who fashioned the first tools. For many students, the craft generates a powerful physical, practical and emotional intel- ligence. They become something like dancers or athletes, individuals whose minds speak through their bodies.

These were the lessons I picked up from my students; I also gained insight into teaching from fellow instructors across the art school. One such tool of wisdom revolves around criticism. It can’t be overestimated how well-crafted, construc- tive criticism can encourage a student, and how needless and damaging negative criticism may become obstacles to a student’s learning. Criticism requires honesty, yes, and also tact and grace.

I have taught for nearly 25 years, from man- tained Australia to Tasmania to the past five years—coastal Maine, at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. Now I must get back to my own shop, leaving the classroom hoping I have given more than I have taken. I thank George Ingham every day for pulling me from the shop into teaching. Without the cross-pollination and regeneration, I would not only be a lesser maker, but a lesser man.
Parham principal, a sometime teacher himself, and one who pushed and encouraged David to teach, called "species-specific design," which means using the right wood for the task, seeking what mid-century sculptors meant by "truth to material." His sensitivity to the nature and behavior of various woods comes from his long history as a carver, working the material with hand tools.

"Very few of my pieces are satisfactory to me," says David. "Some might be pretentious. Or they might be mundane, done just for payment." He feels as if his true ambition, to find a purity of form in his work, has not been fulfilled. Still, he adheres to that ambition. Relying on the history of furniture, the lineage, which many makers choose to uphold in some way, and his own sense of tribal, ethnic and local vernacular, his work often crosses boundaries. It seems very nearly sculptural, without the baggage of being defined as such, since it is functional.

As he gets nearer to the time when he will be working again for himself and leaving his teaching to just part of the year, David looks forward to making pieces for himself. After a life of selling nearly everything he has made over thirty-five years, he says he doesn't care if what he makes in the future sells. "I love the making, and I want to come up with pleasing objects." Then, with a smile, he adds, "I'm beginning to think of myself as a bloody artist."

10. "Anatomy Chairs"
Cherry, leather upholstery
30" x 28" x 19"
2006

11. "A Dry White Season"
Queensland silver ash
34" x 65" x 18"
1996

12. "Ceremonial Chairs"
Queensland silver ash, leather upholstery
57" x 24" x 32"
1987

13. "Music Stand"
Queensland walnut
64" x 20" x 18"
1984

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