

DAVID HAIG: INSTRUCTING IN THE FINE ART OF WOODWORKING AND DESIGN

Further to our recent profile of the Centre for Fine Woodworking at Wakapuaka, furniture designer/maker and tutor David Haig talks about imparting fine woodworking skills and ‘teaching’ design.

David Haig is an experienced full-time woodworker who has undertaken a wide range of commissioned work for clients worldwide. He has a particular interest in chair design and is widely regarded as an expert in steam-bending techniques – best represented by his Monogram rocking chair and its coherent, interconnected curves.



David Haig: “Design can be taught – but, like every skill, it’s easier for some than it is for others.” Photo: © Daniel Allen

His association with the Centre for Fine Woodworking began via his brother-in-law and school founder John Shaw (a fine furniture maker in his own right). Haig helped out with the early courses and with the curriculum ... and became increasingly involved in teaching as Shaw pulled back to concentrate on his own work.

He has also taught at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, Maine, on a number of occasions since 2002, and will be returning later this year. “It’s one of the largest and most established independent woodworking schools in the US. I’ve also taught at the Perth Wood School and in Sydney, and will be giving a masterclass in Melbourne later this year.”

Credible skills

Haig says that his 35 years as a practising woodworker have given him the confidence and credibility to impart his knowledge. “I have a strong interest in historical aspects of our craft [he has a history degree from Oxford University], which gives my explanations some depth and perspective. I’m a good communicator and very much enjoy seeing creative potential come alive in students and their projects.”

At various times, he has taught all four terms of the school’s prestigious Furniture Makers’ Programme ... but this year will be taking just the Curvature term.

“It’s an aspect of woodworking that I especially enjoy. Steam bending is a wonderful technique that is often bypassed in favour of laminating. But when appropriately used it is, in my opinion, a superior technique because of its relative ease [once a steam source and box are sorted], incredible economy of wood and lack of any glue lines – which can potentially be both visible and the source of problems later on. With steam bending, it’s as if the piece of wood just grew that way, and you are free to shape it as you wish, with full grain readability.”

He adds that temperate hardwoods – like oak, walnut, sycamore and European beech – are best suited to the process compared with coniferous or tropical timbers. Walnut, one of his favourite woods given its rich colours and flashes of depth and lustre, just so happens to be ideally suited to steam bending.

Student backgrounds

Haig says most students at the school come with little or no experience of fine woodworking. Some might be familiar with an aspect of carpentry, engineering or boatbuilding, and a few will have absolutely no background in any practical discipline. “We have had quite a few former art school graduates who want to see their creative side nurtured in a more practical and concrete way than such schools typically provide.”

The Furniture Makers’ Programme initially concentrates on developing hand skills and accuracy, and gaining confidence in the use of essential woodworking machinery. Students then progress to making their own design and construction decisions as they create a piece of work that reflects their progress.

Haig says it is usually a seamless transition. “We believe students can take some degree of ownership for their designs surprisingly early, which definitely gives them a deeper investment in the entire process. It’s not like students are left to come up with the whole design solution. They are in constant dialogue with the instructors and the results are nearly always a collaboration.

“However, it is incredibly important that the instructor leaves certain stages up to the students, and doesn’t lead them by the hand every step of the way. Making some mistakes is an essential part of everyone’s learning ... things that will make you remember not to miss a process or an order of development the next time around.”



Left: Haig’s Folium chair (English sycamore and matai) – the ‘leaf stem’ extends to form the back leg. No two chairs are the same, given the abstract nature of the leaf design. Centre and right: Monogram rocking chair – an enduring item sold worldwide (in walnut and right, sycamore). Photos: © Daniel Allen

Student backgrounds

He adds that design can be taught – but, like every skill, it’s easier for some than it is for others. “It’s a two-stage process really. Initially you generate a range of imaginative possibilities, keeping it broad and unfettered. Then it shifts to a sifting and winnowing process – the reality check if you like, where good judgement comes to the fore.

“It is inherently complex because two very different forces are in play. It’s possible to stay far too long in one stage or the other, so an ability to see what is inherently a good idea is absolutely essential. Oddly, a lot of people can tell what is a good idea or product, but only after it is in existence. To arrive at a good idea that is also in some way new and unique is a lot harder.

“In furniture design, a thorough technical background is, of course, a huge help in reaching fundamentally sound construction decisions. Many nice ideas are spoiled by poor execution ... which tends to be an art student’s problem. Conversely, many creative ideas are not rigorously edited, and end up as beautifully crafted pieces of little design merit ... which tends to be the woodworker’s problem!”



Left: Blanket chest and seat (figured English walnut). Photo: © Digby Shaw. Right: Walnut writing desk and 'V' chair. Photo: © Daniel Allen

Intense opportunity

Haig says many of the students that finish the course stay in touch. Some move into furniture making or design-related fields, while others treat the course as an intense opportunity for personal growth and development in a very challenging but rewarding field.

“It is certainly a life-altering time for everyone, which results in a deeper understanding of craft and design work. For a few, it’s the beginning of a new career, and we always enjoy watching how they progress.”

For more on David Haig and his work, go to <http://davidhaig.co.nz>

– Michael Smith