



SAPFM Chronicles

BOOKS, VIDEOS, MEASUREMENTS, AND PROTOTYPES

JOHN BORLEY, *Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

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“I said, “Boy, if I could make furniture like this, I’d be a real woodworker.”

That’s SAPFM member David Boeff, talking about the moment his fascination with period furniture began. He was at an antique show about ten years ago when he discovered a Fine Woodworking book filled with old magazine articles on the subject. “I think it was a dollar to buy,” he says. It turned out to be one of the best dollars he ever spent.

Boeff lives in Lakewood, Ohio, in the greater Cleveland area. He retired from his career as a computer services consultant two years ago. He now works out of a converted garage shop on his property, with about 1,200 square feet of space. He jokingly calls himself “The Chief Furniture Craftsman at Bonny View Furniture Workshop.” But he’s very serious about the quality of work that comes out of that shop.

His most recent accomplishment is a pair of Chippendale arm chairs. A great deal of research and planning went into this project before any tools came near the wood. Boeff says when he decided to make an armchair, he started with a book called *American Chairs: Queen Anne and Chippendale* by John T. Kirk. In it was a picture of an Eliphalet Chapin side chair. “I spotted that one and it was...wow!” This would be the basis for the armchairs he wanted to build.

Now, what are the odds? Turns out the Cleveland Museum of Art has one of those side chairs. However, they wouldn’t allow him to examine and photograph it.

So Boeff kept trying to find more pictures and details, but without much luck. Eventually “I made a drawing, and I started making a (prototype) chair out of soft maple. I got about half done with it and realized I really didn’t have enough dimensions.”

So his next step was to call the Yale University Art Gallery, which has a pair of the side chairs. They couldn’t provide any more details, but said he was welcome to come and examine one. “I pho-

tographed it and measured it and boy, my measurements were quite a bit off,” he says.

Once back home, Boeff finished building his prototype. “Having built the prototype, I kind of knew where the tough parts were and what was going to go well.”

Then he made full-scale drawings and went to work. He spent about 200 hours building the armchairs. His are made of walnut; the originals are cherry.

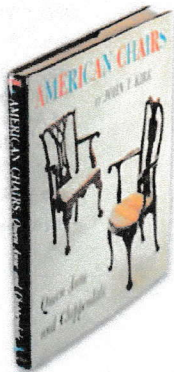
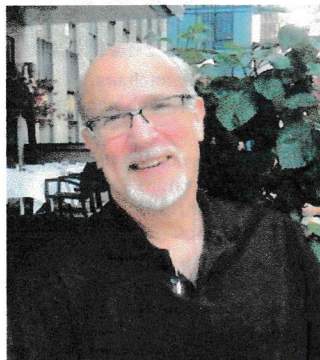
You might think those chairs would have a prominent place in his home, but that’s not the case. He was showing them at the “Woodworking in America” conference this year when someone bought one of them. He plans on selling the other. “The house is full of all that furniture now,” and his wife says, “You

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make one, you have to sell one.”

Boeff's favorite piece is a desk-on-frame, done in curly maple. It's a reproduction of another Eliphalet Chapin piece, also in the Yale University Art Gallery collection.

“I saw it in a book and it really knocked my socks off,” he says. He estimated the dimensions from the picture, along with researching the general size of these pieces. “I made a simple prototype out of plywood so I could see how the dimensions looked. Turned a cabriole leg out of poplar. Looked at it, modified it. Then I made a drawing so I would have something to work from.”

The chair is from Norman Vandal's book, *Queen Anne Furniture*.

His most complicated piece is a bombé chest. He worked from plans available through SAPFM member Craig Bentzley. It took about 400 hours to complete.

It's always interesting to see how people develop the skills for making period furniture. For Boeff, it started in his teens when he learned from his grandfather, who was a carpenter. Later, he did a lot of carpentry himself while working on his 110-year-old house. Then he started building “square” furniture. “You go to the store, you look at the quality. It's all made out of hardboard and particle board. You say, ‘I think I can make that.’”(Sound familiar?)

From there, his learning curve involved reading magazines, buying instructional videos, and studying videos

on YouTube. (He upholstered the Chippendale chairs after studying an online video by Roy Underhill.)

Boeff says he's also gained a lot of knowledge through SAPFM. He belongs to both the Great Lakes and Ohio River Valley chapters.

“I've learned a lot from just going to the meetings over the years, as well as making new friends, and then working together with them.

We go to each other's shops, and we learn techniques, look at their furniture, ask them how they did this, send emails and photos back and forth. It's a great resource.” He also says back issues of the annual SAPFM Journal are “a wealth of information.”

In more recent years, he has taken courses from people such as Jeff Jewitt (finishing) and Mary May (carving). He says “schools are very helpful if you can afford them.”

But Boeff says, “For me, it's doing. I always like to build a prototype first, of inexpensive wood, and if doesn't work out, I didn't lose a whole lot of money. But then if I get confidence from having built the prototype, to try it, then I go and buy better wood and do it. That's my approach to each piece I make.”

And through that approach he has become, without a doubt, a real woodworker. —JB



YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY



The Yale University Art Gallery played an important role in David Boeff's research into his Chippendale armchairs. It's a great resource that all SAPFM members should be aware of.

The Gallery has a study center called the American Decorative Arts Furniture Study. It's located in downtown New Haven, Connecticut, about half a block from the main gallery.

The Furniture Study is, as the website notes, “a working library of more than one thousand examples of furniture and wood objects...ranging from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century.”

Best of all, if you're thinking of reproducing one of these rare pieces, you can make an appointment to examine the original. Museum Assistant Eric Litke says “It's our mission to be an accessible study centre for the public, for scholars and amateurs alike.” With many museums and galleries now restricting this sort of hands-on access, that's no longer typical.

There are a few rules for visitors. Litke says “We allow people, within reason, to measure pieces.” You will be expected to wear cotton gloves and use items such as cloth tape measures that won't scratch. And he says “People are free to photograph things for their own purposes, but we prefer that they don't openly post them online.” Your visit will be supervised, of course.

So, what are you waiting for? If you'd like to study one of the outstanding examples of American decorative arts furniture in this collection, make an appointment with Eric Litke. His contact information is on the website. <http://artgallery.yale.edu/furniture-study>