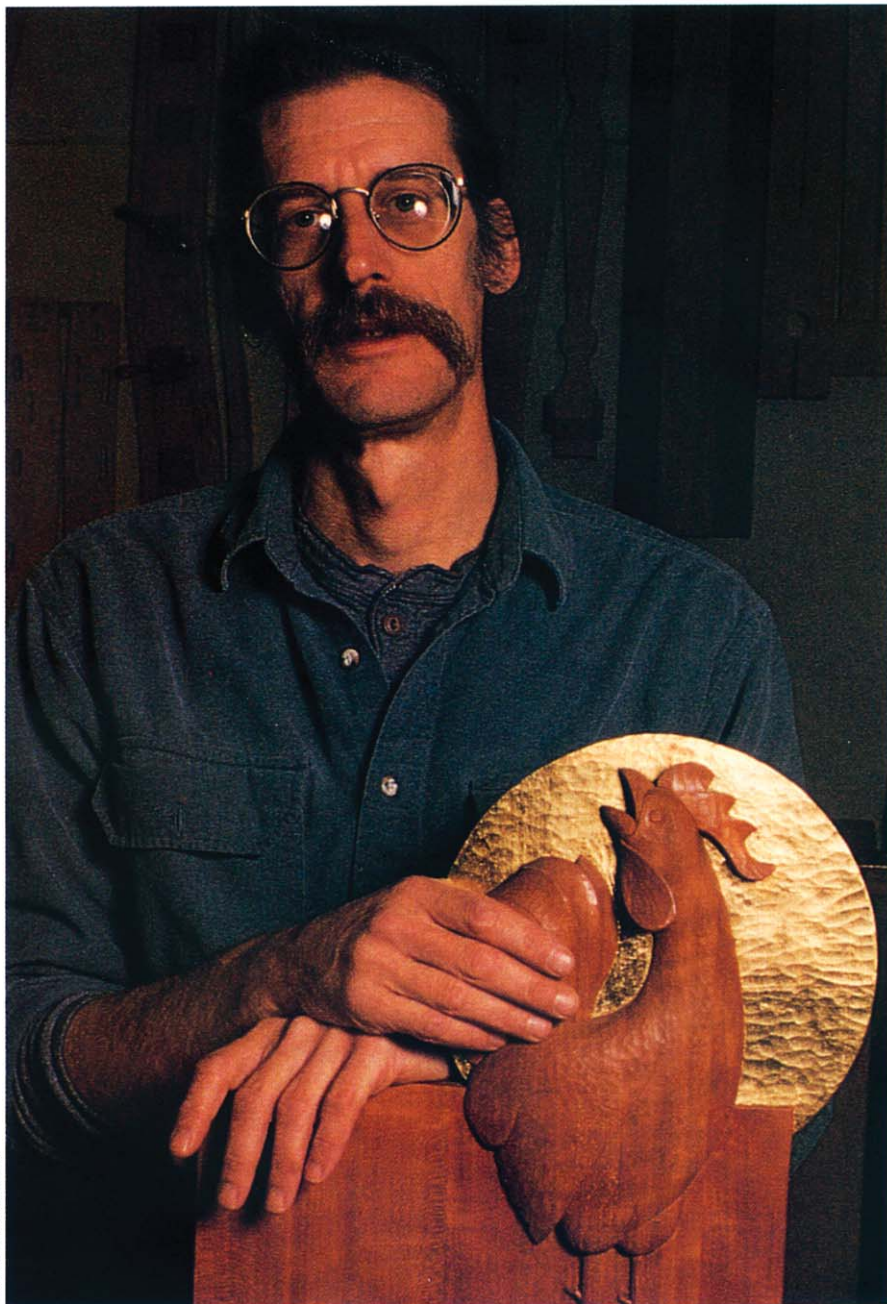


Paul Reiber: The Art & Spirit of a Chairmaker

BY TOM MCFADDEN



“The interest that I have in woodworking is image-oriented rather than process-oriented. What interests me is creating objects that have an emotional and spiritual content while working within the traditional craft concerns of function and beauty. People don’t buy my chairs because they need a chair; they buy my chairs because they need something else.”

These are the words of Paul Reiber, an artist living near Mendocino California, who draws on a background in mythology and comparative religion for inspiration for the designs he carves into his work. He is a tall man with bushy brown hair who speaks passionately about his work and his reasons for doing it. His words reveal a person rooted in spirituality and concerned about humans and the human condition, and courageous enough to follow his own vision and allow his work to evolve accordingly.

Although Paul has no formal art training beyond an art class in high school, he traces this interest clear back to his childhood. “I was always art-oriented. I have drawn all my life.” Extensive travels in Europe as a teenager allowed him to experience the art museums and galleries from another part of the world. He studied Greek in college, and in 1970 obtained his BA in Classical Studies from Boston University. He then prepared for the ministry, attending a Unitarian school, The Star King School for Religious Leadership. That was where he began woodcarving seriously. “I took a class on totems. It was taught by a Jesuit—a

PHOTO BY DEIDRE LAMB

■ Paul Reiber, northern California woodworker, fuses a deeply-felt spirituality and a wide-ranging iconography in the creation of his sculptural chairs.

European-trained wood carver—who did sculpture in the round.” The totems that they carved there were “essentially religious objects.” It was this experience more than any other which turned his life in the direction of sculpture in wood.

His path toward becoming an independent artist was fairly direct. He worked for a while as a casual carpenter, then applied to the College of the Redwoods for the first class of James Krenov's woodworking school. Paul finished at College of the Redwoods in 1981 and worked for a year in the shop of furniture designer David Stary-Sheets before moving to Fort Bragg and opening his own place there in 1983. “I was driven to get my own shop up and running as soon as I could. It was financially difficult because I was also raising young children at the time.” But he just went ahead and did it because “I knew inside that as an artist I would never be happy doing anything else.”

Chairs as Canvas

Paul's work at this time reflected what he calls a “naturalistic” style, with floral designs done in high relief. “The floral work grows out of an appreciation of flowers as the traditional subject of furniture carvers,” he explains. “It is the sensual quality of carving flowers that appeals to me; I like to have an excuse to carve roses, callas, and irises.” He made 10 or 15 mirrors in this way and then “decided that the canvas I wanted to work on was chairs. I am drawn to the design potential inherent



PHOTOS BY JESS SHIRLEY UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

■ (Above) “Series ‘C’ Chair with Roses” (1989); cherry with upholstered seat; (Below) Detail of “Series ‘C’ Chair with Grapes” (1989); walnut with upholstery.

in the curves, angles and negative space of chairs. The visual and spatial complexity of chairs provides a canvas with a lot of room to play. They also have to be utilitarian: they must be strong

enough to sit on.” He says that all of his chairs are traditional in their construction methods. “I am satisfied with the solutions that have evolved over the years for the technique of chair construction. There is no need for me to reinvent the chair.”

The first chairs were traditional in form and were carved with flowers, kelp or trees. The pieces done in this style formed a distinct body of work, but as his work evolved over the years some of these “naturalistic” pieces began to include sensual human forms, rather than flowers, and this human aspect formed a connection with a rather different body of work that Paul refers to as “sculptural.” “As I have worked designing chairs, I have been drawn to emphasize their human aspect. Chairs



are talked about in human terms—they have arms, legs and backs. Chairs are seen from all sides and are experienced as human in scale. They offer a tactile relationship because you sit in them and are held by them.” These “sculptural” pieces also began to incorporate Paul’s interest in mythology, religion, and tribal art.

Transitions

Having made the transition from mirrors to chairs, Paul’s next challenge was how to integrate the designs he wanted to use into the objects. The comfort of the person sitting in the chair was the first issue that he faced: “I could put only about 3/8” of relief on the back of a chair without a comfort problem, even if I was careful about points, knobs, and so on. I felt my way into it. I knew how to make a chair and how to carve, but to combine the two was difficult.”

It is a difficulty that he has dealt with very well. I have sat in many of Paul’s chairs and have not found one that was not comfortable. The traditional thing is to design the carving to fit the chair part: crest rail, leg, or foot. Paul found that this is somewhat limiting, both in the amount of space available for the carving and in its form. He wanted to design the carving first and then let it fit itself over the form of the chair, and in order to do this he began to simply ignore the “negative space” (where there is no wood) and let the carving flow from one wood part to the next. The “Heron Chair”, built in 1989, was Paul’s first experiment with this approach. “It was my first break from tradition. To skip the negative space and then pick up the design was a departure from the historical development of western furniture.”

The black aniline dye used on the “Heron Chair” was his first use of color too. “I just got into it,” he said. “I like black with Cherry. It was difficult to learn, especially on a carving, because the aniline dye flows easily both with the grain and throughout the carving. The use of color is certainly not a new

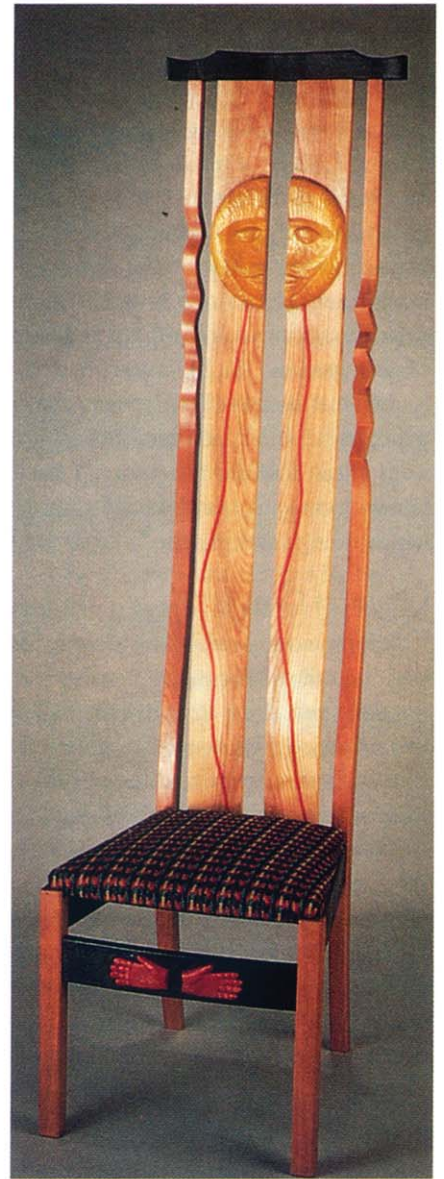
idea. I think what it does is give me boundaries.”

Explorations and Visions

The second and larger transition in Paul’s work occurred in the late 1980’s after he saw a show in San Francisco featuring the work of Alphonse Mattia. “One of Mattia’s pieces, called ‘Valet Chair’, opened up a whole new line of what was possible,” said Paul. “It was high-backed and sculptural, not very functional. After seeing that, I started giving myself permission to be much more exploratory.” He realized that one way to resolve the comfort problem posed by high-relief work—and get a larger surface to carve on—was to add height to the top of the chair and put the carved image there, above the back and head of a seated person. “Mask Chairs 1 & 2” are the first examples of the new direction that his work would take. These tall chairs have faces looking back at the viewer.

He describes “Mask Chair #3” as “one of my favorite pieces and also the piece that sold the fastest. I finished it and took it off to the gallery and it was gone.” I asked him how that made him feel and he replied, “Really full. It was very well received, people *liked* it. I liked having it sell so fast. It was a jump forward in being experimental and the fact that it sold so quickly made me feel that it was right for me to really pursue my particular vision.”

The chair has a face on the back, split in two by the negative space between the slats. The shape of both of the legs is distorted by waves, but those on the left have softly undulating lines while the right ones are hard and angular. The ebonized rail below the seat has two red hands carved on it. The use of faces and hands on these chairs represents a benchmark in how his work relates to mythology because their use adds a sense of personality. “Myth is about narrative qualities, about the telling of stories by humans. My central interest here has to do with mythology and tribal art; it is a result of making totems while I was studying for the



■ “Mask Chair #3” (1989); ash, cherry, ebonized cherry, reed, upholstered seat.

ministry, and that interest has stayed with me ever since.” He has looked at many examples of mythical and tribal art and has tried to find ways to relate one to another and to incorporate them into his work. The masks, for instance, were inspired by Mexican art and the red hands by Australian.

The Goddess Series

In 1991 he made a trip to a San Francisco museum where he saw a show of Cycladic marble statuettes made on the Greek islands in the third millennium BC. He came home from that visit inspired and made the “White Goddess” chair, which led to a series of six chairs based on goddesses from folk cultures around the world. “The imagery of these chairs is powerful,” he said. “They touch me in very fundamental ways. My resonance with these goddess images is very deep and old—they are *goddesses* after all!” These chairs are reminiscent of thrones. “They are not casual seating; they are celebratory. It is difficult to sit in one without being conscious of the figure that is holding you.” One of these chairs is based on the image of Mary. It has a seat and back upholstered in blue material. The seat is square in the front and the back curves around two sides. Two back legs follow the curves in the upholstery. The chair has a French walnut head and hands, and a person sitting in it would feel that he was sitting in Mary’s lap and holding her hands.

The Goddess Series also evokes the mystical regenerative power and beauty of women for Reiber. “What they call forth for me is rich with the contradictions in my love-hate relationships with the female half of the Universe. The ‘Snake Goddess,’ for example, is about a very different type of powerful person.” This pearwood chair has the life-size head and torso of a woman as its back. Her foreshortened arms and hands hold two snakes which arise from the rear legs of the chair. The walnut slats form the rest of her body and she seems to be standing on the seat. The inspiration for this piece was a figurine about one

foot high that Paul often saw at the Boston Museum when he lived on the East Coast.

Comparing “Mary” to the “Snake Goddess”, Paul said: “‘Mary’ is soft, the head and eyes are turned down, she is clearly inviting you to curl up and be comfortable. The ‘Snake Goddess’ is a seat of power, not a place of refuge. She is much more in your face; she is about the dispensing of life or death.”

Human Forms

During the period when he was doing the Mask Chairs and the Goddess Series, Paul also produced a number of “naturalistic” pieces. It was in 1992 that the first of the naturalistic pieces with a human form on it appeared. “Erica’s Rocker” is a very traditional rocking chair in walnut with floral upholstery that has a dancing female figure carved on the crest rail. The drawing for the crest was done by his friend and client, Erica Fielder. This move toward the incorporation of human forms into the naturalistic pieces serves to relate these pieces more closely to the “spiritual” work because it adds the elements of humanity and personality and narrative quality to them. As Paul says: “Human form is what gives my work content. I like doing flowers and I like doing birds, but I think the possibility of emotional content is much greater when you are using the human form.”

About that same time, Paul started using hands on his chair backs because “I see people by their faces and their hands. What makes for a human form is hands and heads. ‘The Sun’s Hands’ rates as one of my favorite chairs. It is the most asymmetrical piece I have ever done; it is very high and has a dancing figure sense to it. The face and hands are human size, at human standing height.”

Another opportunity came with the “Bojorek Dining Chairs” (1993), which were commissioned by collectors who had seen the Goddess series. Two of these chairs have heads and hands above the crest rail, with the remainder of the set traditional in style.



■ “The Sun’s Hands” (1992); cherry, walnut, gold leaf, upholstered seat.



■ “Father and Son” (1992); ebonized oak, upholstered seats.

When a Mendocino gallery invited him to take part in a show with Time as its theme, Paul used the opportunity to do an opposing pair called “Day and Night.” Done in cherry and claro walnut, they are opposites in many ways. “The rooster is male and the owl is Athena. Owls have that female designation. If I am doing pairs of chairs like ‘Day and Night’ I am also contrasting the light and the dark qualities.” The metal incorporated into these chairs is gold and silver leaf, which he first used on some of the early mirrors.

Male Images

Since the Goddess series, Paul’s central focus has been male figures. He has made a series of “Dancers,” and there

are two chairs called “Father and Son,” which concern his relationship with his father and son, and were inspired by carvings from New Guinea that he had seen in various books and museums. The male images are proving to be somewhat difficult for him. “That is a tough one for me. It is important to me to get clear about male images. I have worked as a volunteer for the last 25 years with men around issues of identity and anger and who we are in this changing world.” Paul says he would like to create positive male images “because I think that the icons that contemporary men have to choose from are not really very good. I think that the part of me that is an image-maker or an iconographer really struggles with that.”

More recently, Paul was commissioned to do a tiger statue about three feet tall, and that moved him back into the realm of full-round sculpture. He has experimented with small figures—all males—and has many of these sitting in his shop in various stages of completion. Now he wants to work out a way to incorporate these small sculptures into chair forms, because he feels that full-round carving does not touch him in the way that furniture does. “In the longest view,” he said, “I think I started being interested in furniture as a vehicle for my carving. I got more and more sculptural with chairs until I found myself just going back to sculpture. What remains appealing to me about making chairs is that chairs *do* have a place in people’s lives and sculpture on the scale that I want to work in *doesn’t*— and I’d like to have a place in people’s lives.”

Future Plans

Paul is planning to make a number of small chairs. It will be possible to sit on them, but they will be diminutive. “I have made chairs big; now I am going to make them little,” he says. The central theme of his work will remain unchanged, “trying to incorporate and use images that have emotional and spiritual content.” He had mock-ups of three of these small chairs set up in his shop when I last met with him. They will be less than three feet tall, with small seats and a single carved back leg. The carvings on the first three will be a large hand, a male head with no body, and a female torso. While working on them he plans to be working out designs for two other series of related chairs. “I guess what I would like to do is to play with the kind of Jungian images of maleness that are centered around the king, the magician, the lover, the father and the warrior,” he said. He also plans a series based on Greek Gods: Hephaestus, Apollo, Hermes, Dionysus and Zeus. “I’d love to have someone commission me to do a set of male chairs. That would be great.”

Tom McFadden is a woodworker and writer in Philo, California.

METHOD

Inspiration and Process

Paul Reiber's shop is a huge space, with high ceilings. The building was at one time a pea-packing plant. There is now a wood stove in its center, but he says there is nothing he can do that seems to affect the temperature of the place. One side of the shop is given over to a machine area, and the wall on that side is covered with templates of chair parts and with long hardwood planks leaning up vertically. There is another room that was once a walk-in cooler, and he uses that room for finishing work. The main work area is dominated by two hardwood benches, a wall covered with chisels and other hand tools, and a sharpening stand. Partly finished sculptures adorn the ends of planks or sit on makeshift stands. Parts of mock-ups and small carvings are fastened to the walls here, along with sketches and full-size drawings of past and current projects. There is another area, in one corner of the building, that is divided into a large office, a bathroom, and a storage area.

I was especially interested in a technique that Paul uses for making his carvings. When I first visited him, he was working on a commission for a carved mantle. The workpiece was not lying flat on the bench as I would have expected, but was mounted to a rack which sat on the bench and held the carving, slightly tilted, at about chest-height. A movable light was suspended over the work. Paul says that he does most carving in this way. "I try to hold my work so that I am looking at it as close to the way that the viewer will see it as I can. Obviously I can't do that all the time but that is the objective,

rather than carving in flat on the bench. I guess it is kind of normal for relief carvers to work flat on the table, but you are looking at something predominately from a view different than your viewer. I became aware of that doing chair backs, because with chair backs you are clearly looking at them from a point of view that is a couple of feet higher than they are, and if you put them down flat on a bench your point of view is off to one side and not higher or lower. I guess this is something I thought up; it seems obvious to me."

I asked Paul if he builds the piece first and then does the carving. He said that he cuts it out and does the joinery first, but I was surprised to learn that he not only does the carving but that he also puts the finish on the piece before glue-up. Here is his description of the process.

"Generally speaking I want to have the final bit of finish on stuff before I glue it up. That's generally how I make



■ Paul Reiber with "Day and Night" (1994); cherry, Claro walnut.

things. Keeping the finish off the areas where the glue will be is much easier than avoiding getting glue on the areas where the finish will go. If something is finished first then the glue won't stick to it and you just wipe it off and it's no big deal. That's the way I learned to make furniture from Jim Krenov—you have everything finished before you glue up. Or as much as possible; obviously there are times when you can't do that completely.

"What kind of finish do I use? Waterlox (a tung oil and additive finish) is the brand name. It is a wipe-on oil finish. I think it's great. Very compatible with carving. Where I have carving that's going across a joint I can usually do that by assembling and dry-clamping. I cut out the pieces, do my joinery, cut out the profile, trace the carving pattern onto the back and then dry-clamp it. Then I take it apart and rough-carve it and then put it back into dry clamps and carve across the joints. Actually what I do is make a jig that holds the whole back vertical just below my eye level. I mostly carve it assembled but dry-clamped—that's the simplest way to explain it. I don't like the idea of getting it glued up and then having to do anything to it.

"I don't have much trouble keeping the finish off of the glue surfaces; as long as I don't let oil run down into the mortise and keep it off the tenon, it is all right. And I leave the shoulders bare."

Inspiration

Paul Reiber has used the word "inspiration" often in talking about his work, and I asked him to talk a bit about that. "'To inspire' means to breathe or to take in," he said. "That is how I function visually. I mean, I look at things and I look at things and I look at things and they get combined by whatever that process is that I am. Inspiration seems to be a reaction to what I can take in, what I can see, what I can experience. It has to do with

being able to be quiet enough so that I can let my own processes put that stuff together and take something back out.”

He has been inspired and he wants to inspire others as well. “Part of my interest in making things out of wood is to add to the beauty and drama of life. I want to draw from as broad a base of visual stimulation as I can, and I like to look at what other people have done. I am drawn to the place where art reflects the spirituality of tribal people, craftsmen living in tune with their spirituality, and to the spirituality embodied in Romanesque European stone carving. A lot of my inspiration comes from the stories that we tell to explain the world.”

Evolution of a Design

Paul had moved his shop into the huge new space in Fort Bragg by the time I was doing the last of our interviews. He was just finishing up a commission for a stunning pair of chairs that have a raven and a heron on them. I noticed that there were some full-size cardboard cut-outs of the chair backs on the wall of the shop, and that there were sketches pinned up near them too. I asked him to go over with me the whole process of this project, from its initial conception to the finished pieces.

“I start with the image that I want to use for the back and then let the whole chair grow out of that. The client wanted a pair of chairs with a heron and a raven and she wanted the birds big. I began by sketching one of these birds. I got into this contrast of the heron standing and the raven flying. I wanted the bird to have some portion that would break through the profile of the chair. I didn’t know what the shape of the chair would be so I was just interested in getting an image of the bird that seemed strong in profile. I started with various images of the heron and this is what I came up with. First I had the wing out but that

seemed too complicated so I dropped the wing. It was too visually complex.

“With the raven I started thinking of the way the rooster and the owl are in “Day and Night,” imagining that the raven was sitting on the back of the chair. But I wanted a contrast with the sitting heron. My image of herons is that they are standing in the water doing their patient thing, whereas my image of ravens is that they are flying around being raucous. So I let go of the image of the raven sitting and started playing around with images of it flying. I knew that I wanted the bird image to break through what would be the normal profile of the top of the chair. At first I had them both facing the same direction, but the client came back and wanted one of the birds flipped.

“I knew roughly how big these images were going to be on the back of the chair, so I cut them out from a piece of paper. I made a mock-up, tacked it up on the wall, and started drawing chairs around it. Then the

client wanted to see a drawing so I had to come up with one, but what I was really doing was working back and forth between full-size cut-outs and drawings. So the bird image came first, and then the shape of the back and then the shape of the front of the chair. Then I made the drawing for the client and the client had some ideas and some input at that point. A pretty standard thing for me is to do a black-and-white line drawing and then make many copies—that lets me do color renderings and experiment with different color patterns. I use that a lot. I might do the drawing of the bird and then Xerox that and sketch in various chairs around it. It’s a good way for me to explore variations.

“I think that in general I usually start out with the back of the chair. If it is a “spec” piece I’ll frequently make the back or at least dry-clip it before I even start on the front. The fronts happen in my mind after I see the back dry-clamped.” —Tom McFadden



■ Paul Reiber with “Day and Night” (1994); cherry, Claro walnut, metallic foil, upholstered seats.