

Masterpiece School of Furniture and Masterpiece Gallery

Story by

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Behind its yellow and blue exterior, the Masterpiece Gallery seems much like any other art gallery; paintings, pottery, photographs, furniture, carvings and textiles. Yet, it's like the tip of an iceberg. What's behind the doors, through the sitting room, by the office, and past the long, narrow wood storage area is the heart of another masterpiece, the Masterpiece School of Furniture.

In Glasgow, Scotland, James Bowie was a master furniture maker and after visiting the United States on holiday with his father in 1967, Bowie's desire was to come back. Finally, in 1990 Bowie and his first wife flew into sunny Florida. He loved it, she didn't.

"After I got back to Glasgow I kept thinking, "I want to see some sunshine again before I die." Bowie explains that in gray Glasgow it rains nine months of the year. It's pointed out that it rains a lot on the Mendocino Coast, but Bowie laughs and says, "Yeah, but not 180 inches a year!" (That's fifteen feet of rain.)

Bowie did return, only this time to southern California, living in Newport and Laguna Beach. His first wife and son remained in Scotland.

After meeting his present wife Laura, an artist, they moved to Fort Bragg in 1998. Bowie leased and then bought property at 541 South Franklin Street in Fort Bragg.

"In America, there's great room for improving yourself—and maybe improving America—that's what it's all about," says Bowie.

He worked on commissioned pieces of fine furniture, primarily in the Queen Anne and Chippendale style, for the first year. "People have an idea of what they want," says Bowie. "But I also make what I want because if I don't enjoy making it, it doesn't do the client any good."

About the time he wanted to expand, he began to get inquiries about apprenticeships. Bowie, himself, had apprenticed with furniture makers, cabinet makers and antique restorers. In Scotland, four years of practical experience and three years of college is required to become a Master Furniture Maker. Bowie attended the Barmulloch college in Glasgow, where he received the prestigious City and Guilds for Woodworking.

Since Bowie had already operated an apprenticeship program in Scotland, "I looked at other schools around the country and realized that I could do this [open a school]," he says.

He named the school "Masterpiece School of Furniture" because, as he explains, when an apprentice is ready to become a "master" they are required to build a "master piece," a piece that reveals all that the apprentice has mastered.

Bowie is committed "to the philosophy and classic form of seventeenth and eighteenth century [English and American] furniture making." With intensive personal training and an attention to detail, it isn't surprising to read that part one of a three-part first year begins with "discussions on the selection and uses of fine hand tools, sharpening and turning techniques for hand planes, chisels and other edge tools."

Students are responsible for providing their own hand tools in accordance with a list that is provided upon enrollment. Their cost is estimated at fifteen hundred to eighteen hundred dollars.

Starting with one student, Bowie now mentors two to eight students at a time. There are short courses in the summer but generally the training takes one to three years.

Melvin Simpson, a student from "southern California by way of Virginia" has already served his first year, with two more to go. He loves the hand work, the joinery and carving, he says. He's here to "emulate James Bowie." Afterward, his plan is to open a gallery and furniture-making shop on the central coast of California.

Simpson adjusts the closure on his wall-mounted "toolbox" as we talk. Beautiful in itself, the toolbox is, of course, practical as well. Already, a set of chisels hang from inside one door.

Throughout the shop, tools are displayed with panache; pragmatic but artful placement. Hand planes are

placed in an old window frame.

Another student's toolbox of red elm hangs from a nearby wall. Bowie runs his hands over the wood, looks inside, fingertips exploring, closes the doors. One is slightly ajar. "He'll have to work on that door," remarks Bowie.

Admission Requirements

Students from Ghana, West Africa and Canada have joined others from within the United States to attend Masterpiece School of Furniture. Word-of-mouth got things rolling but now most contacts are made through Bowie's Web site, /www.masterpieceschool.com/.

Students must be at least eighteen years of age and have a high school diploma or GED, and if possible, be able to demonstrate some ability in woodworking tasks, or show a desire to do so.

The three-step application process includes:

1. Interview Every applicant must visit the school before enrollment, or have an extensive phone interview.

2. Application The applicant should fill out the form and return it only when all of the questions have been answered. If possible include any photos or slides of their work.

3. Transcripts High school or GED certificate and the most recent Post Secondary School transcripts are to be submitted, if possible. The applicant is responsible for requesting these transcripts and to have them mailed to the school. When a completed application has been received, it will be processed.

Applications are reviewed quarterly and positions filled as they become available, from the pool of applicants. Applications remain active for a period of two years, at which time the applicant must reapply if they wish to remain in the application pool. Acceptance is judged heavily on the interview, ability, and desire.

Upon signing the enrollment agreement and paying the registration fee (a non-refundable hundred dollars), the tuition is set at the rate existing at the time of enrollment; a down payment is required and a monthly payment plan is available for the duration of the course. The cost of instruction is sixteen thousand dollars per year.

Instructors are available from 8:00 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, taking a one-hour daily lunch break. These hours are in accordance with the school calendar which is open for enrollment at any time of the year. The one-year course is forty weeks or one thousand hours of instruction; the two-year course is eighty weeks or two thousand hours and the three-year course is 120 weeks or three thousand hours.

An extensive ten-week course is also offered for six thousand dollars.

Work Spaces

In a smaller room are the power tools. "They're here to do the donkey work," says Bowie. "Work big bits of lumber into more manageable pieces."

Indeed, everywhere you look, there is wood. Stacked against walls. Chairs waiting to be finished, hanging on walls. A beautiful sofa being repaired. Bowie was surprised and pleased to get some English oak from inland. A small stash of ebony is piled up. "Here, feel this," says Bowie, handing over a piece. "Heavy, isn't it?"

The cost of wood, hardware, finishing materials and any special materials associated with students' chosen projects are their responsibility. The estimated cost is twelve hundred to fourteen hundred dollars per year. Continuing the tour of the workshop, Bowie notes that the concrete floor has been over laid with rough tan oak planks of various widths that he bought at the [Georgia-Pacific] auction. The footing is a non-slip surface, much easier on the body than concrete and attractive, too.

The shop is available to the students under the supervision of a shop instructor after regular school hours from 2:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. This extra shop time is included in the tuition.

The shop consists of 4,000 sq. ft. and is fully equipped with all the necessary machines. Each student is provided with their own workbench and storage space. There is also a small reference library. Students also have access to the adjoining gallery to display their work.

Back in the gallery are examples of Bowie's and his students' work. Just looking at a prototype chair, it's easy to envision the twelve more that were made with a matching table.

James has sold and displayed his masterpieces throughout the United States and Europe. His work has been on display in the San Francisco Design Center and the Laguna Festival of Arts. James is also included in the book titled Custom Furniture Makers. He has also won prizes at the San Diego Finewoodworking Show in Del Mar, California.

But not all is wood, the paintings in the portfolio by his wife Laura have an appealing ambiguity that creates thought. Photo-graphs of the coast are well represented as are the other arts of ceramics, glass and textiles displayed in the Masterpiece Gallery.

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