



In wood shop, a son polishes father's legacy

by Jacoba Charles



Woodworking and water are the themes of Tripp Carpenter's life. Sleek wooden furniture inspired by waves and other natural forms crowds the small showroom he inherited from his father, Arthur Espenet Carpenter, who was a world-renowned furniture maker.

"Like dad said, what we're doing here is the jazz of woodwork: everything is untraditional and innovative," said Tripp, a lanky 52 year-old whose broad hands reveal a lifetime of surfing and working with wood.

He runs the shop as a working museum and a tribute to his father, who went by the professional name of Espenet – in part to avoid the nickname "Arty Carpenter."

In the 1950s, Espenet was one of the pioneers of California Design furniture, which is characterized by organic forms and a cavalier flouting of convention. He helped shape the field with his sensuous, simple designs and unconventional construction techniques. His work is now displayed in the Smithsonian and other collections worldwide.

"Espenet's wishbone chairs were an incredible solution to making furniture because they are essentially lag bolted together," said Yale art professor Edward Cooke about the sleek, popular chairs. "He celebrated the gnarliness that is part of the wood."

Today, Tripp is carrying on his father's legacy in the long, narrow building full of wood shavings and windows. He fills orders for his father's designs, creates his own pieces, and also does refinishing and repair work.

"I don't really think of myself as an artist or a craftsman," Tripp said. "I'm just trying to make a living. But it helps that I have an aesthetic; I know what good form looks like, and it's fun to make beautiful things that are going to outlast me."

He added that exposing the beauty of wood is one of his inspirations, as are the sensuous forms waves – which is fitting for a man who describes himself as a surfer above all else.

When Tripp's family moved to Bolinas he was two, and the town was on the cusp of changing from a sleepy farming community to a bastion of liberal artists. At the age of six he started working in his father's shop, making wooden candlesticks that Espenet sold for him.

By the time he was eight, he was body-surfing. He was also the first boy on the baseball team to have long hair.

"I was rebellious, and very antiestablishment," he said. "I got called a girl a lot but didn't cut my hair until I was 40."

While attending college, Tripp worked in the woodshop along with Espenet's many apprentices. But he kept his schedule flexible so he could split when the waves were good. At 17, he went to Peru for a year to surf, later following the sport across much of the globe. He spends several weeks of each year in Rio Nexpa, where an old woman keeps his surfboard for him.

Eventually Tripp left Espenet's shop, moving to Sausalito when he was 28, and later buying a tiny cabin on the eastern flank of Mount Tam. He worked as a carpenter and a grade-school art teacher off and on for 15 years, and rarely saw his father other than on holidays.

"I basically let go of the shop," Tripp said. "Dad was just out there doing his own thing, and he kept to himself a lot. He was kind of a curmudgeon."

When Espenet was in his 80s, things changed. One day he called Tripp, frustrated because he couldn't see well enough to finish a table.

"I came out and finished it for him," Tripp said. "And ever since, I've been here."

Espenet's death in 2006 ended his lifelong lease on the property, and Tripp was relieved when the owners continued to rent it to him. "I hope there's a way to keep the shop going like it was in the old days, whether I'm here or not," he said. "This should be a working museum and a library, with artists-in-residence and apprentices. I'd hate to see it die."

He added that the legacy of his father's shop is a sanctuary and an inspiration for artists: a supportive place where people can live cheaply and have the freedom to experiment with form and style. "Bolininas is a great community to be an artist in, and the shop is a part of that," Tripp said.

Espenet trained over 130 apprentices, many of whom are still nearby. People come in and use the equipment to make things and fix things, or just to say hello, Tripp said. This week one apprentice's son came in to make a breadboard for a Christmas present.

"People have made masks, a huge 40-foot sailboat mast, a coffin for one apprentice's daughter," Tripp said. "This place really has some history."

Tripp Carpenter refinishes a table built by his father, Arthur Espenet Carpenter. Tripp now runs the wood shop on the Bolinas Lagoon that has nurtured over a hundred apprentices since the 1950s. "I made things that worked; I wasn't making any art," said Espenet, an award-winning craftsman whose work is on display in the Smithsonian. "Chairs are to sit in. So whatever beauty derived from that, it derived from a straightforward desire for utility. When you see a chair, you should say sit; when you see a table, put things on it. If you make something that says sleep, by God, you've made a bed." Photos by Jacoba Charles.

