

Made in England

Noah's Ark Toys

Traditional toymaker David Plageron is dedicated to his craft. Isobel King finds out more.

ARTISTS are often pictured in their studios surrounded by half-worked canvas, paint-splattered furniture and a whole assortment of materials – and David Plageron's studio is no different.

The air is thick with the aroma of varnish and paint; the whole space is crammed with paint pots, rough hog-hair brushes and a mishmash of containers. The ceiling is covered with images and old cassettes line the wall, and David's workbench has developed a rich patina of different coloured paint splodges after years of working here.

It would be fair to say that the home in Totnes, Devon, of David and wife Ronnie is a true creative space and sanctuary for the traditional craft of wooden toy-making. Inside the house, cabinets of old wooden toys and models line the walls. The kitchen leads to the small but magnificent painting studio, while a brief walk through the garden ("my commute," David jokes), leads to a little workshop where the woodwork goes on.

It's so quiet, except for the odd quack from one of the couple's three pet ducks that waddle outside the back door.

Lancashire-born David, Chairman of the British Guild of Toymakers, has been making wooden toys for over forty years now – beginning to do so on a regular basis in the autumn of 1977. He specialises in Noah's Arks, complete with pairs of charming wooden animals – their friendly faces making them impossibly endearing – as well as Mr and Mrs Noah, of course.

"Many customers build up their sets over a period of time," David says. "Usually they start with an ark and I post them a pair of animals each month, or they order a pair of animals for special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas."

Christmas is, of course, a busy time of year for David and Ronnie, with David



David in his studio.

even falling ill one year from overwork.

"I'm a compulsive maker, that's how I'd describe myself, from a family of compulsive makers" he says. "I'm much better at spacing out the work now, but as everything is made to order it's very hard to know exactly how long anything is going to take me."

"Those hippos there may look lovely," he continues, pointing to a pair of hippos on the drying rack, "but I've just noticed one's got a fault and will have to be made again. There's a lot of that. Ronnie sends things back, too, and sets a benchmark."

Being handmade, of course, the toys naturally take time to make – something one soon realises when David demonstrates how he makes one small wooden toy horse from start to finish.

It begins with David drawing around

one of his hand-drawn templates (in this case, a horse) on to a block of wood. He then, with extraordinary skill, releases the animal shape from the block by cutting into the wood with a bandsaw.

The wood is then shaped and all the rough planes are smoothed. For this David uses a self-improvised method that includes much sanding, plus whittling where he needs to.

It's the little details in the woodwork that give the figures and animals their personality: a tiny nick there for the mouth; gentle indentations around the muzzle; small sloped ears that, mispositioned, would perhaps make a little horse look forlorn rather than animated.

Painting also takes time. For the base coat, David either dips each animal in paint and lets them drip-dry, or paints them with a brush. However, the nature of wood means the paint inevitably raises the grain, making them rough, so each animal then has to be sanded by hand and painted again to ensure a smooth surface.

Details such as a mane and hooves are then added, with free brush work to give the toys a folk-art style and yet more character.

The eyes are carefully dotted, and the horse is dipped in varnish before drip-drying again.

"It's pretty nerve-racking painting the faces," David admits, naturally by this stage not wanting to make a mistake, "though I do find people much harder than animals. It's so easy to get their expressions wrong. Funnily enough, I also struggle with orangutans!"

Clearly David's repertoire goes far beyond the elephant and the kangaroo. He can make any animal one can think of, from sloths hanging from a tree – "It was Ronnie's idea to make them detachable so children can take them on and off" – to rare breeds, and even to representations of his customers' family pets.



Crammed with paint pots!

He has made bespoke arks that resemble the homes of his customers, too, whether that's a thatched roof on one or a portico on another.

It's not only arks, either: nativity sets, circus sets, farmyards with barns, pigsties, stables and even a traditional fox hunt have all been commissioned over the years.

But it is the ark that he always returns to. Why?

"There's something very deep-seated about the story of Noah's Ark. In many ways it's about man's contact with animals and nature", which in a world of disconnection with wildlife and the wider environment is so relevant today.

Its enduring popularity as a toy, though, must lie in the enjoyment children, and even adults, take from it.

"Very young children who are just acquiring language love to name the different animals; older ones enjoy pairing, classifying, making arrangements, creating farms, zoos, boats, and all sorts of homes from their arks. I think they also love the idea of the ark as a safe refuge."

It's easy to see why, once given, they are so loved. Picking up, holding and looking at the toys is a soothing experience: the weight and warmth of the wood; the beautiful smoothness of the worked surface; their jolly coloured coats and the contrasting tones of the wood.

Sixteen different types are used for the



All David's toys are handmade.

unpainted sets, from cherry for the hippos to yew for the crocodiles.

I wonder whether these bright and beautiful creatures are really for playing with.

"Of course – they're child-proof!" David bashes a horse from his sample set on the wall to illustrate his point.

"Hand-crafted toys are slow to make, but their life expectancy is long. They'll endure as an heirloom gift for subsequent generations, sitting somewhere in the house waiting for a child to come and play."

They even have an aesthetic value as a decorative object in their own right, once, say, a nursery is transformed into a room for another purpose.

This durability is all in the animals' design and David's knowledge of his materials. The finishing varnish protects the paint from chipping, while unpainted animals are dipped in beeswax to nourish the wood.

Many of the animals are made from a single piece of wood, with the grain running down through the animals' legs to strengthen them. An exception is the leopards, where a separate tail piece, made from ash for its strength, is attached to the body. Each piece of ash is chosen for grain running horizontally to again protect against breakage.

Toymaking is certainly a specialist area to get into.

"For me," David recalls, "it was a collision of teaching art near the

Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, London, my daughter Anna being born, and taking a course that introduced me to the bandsaw.

"At the museum, seeing the German Noah's Arks really inspired me, as well as the story of how they were made. It goes back to around 1600 in an area in Germany called Erzgebirge, which means 'iron mountain'. There was a community of people who were miners in summer and toymakers in the winter – perhaps because it was too cold to mine at that time of year.

"Different villages specialised in



Paintbrushes for many colours.



A few of David's creations drip-drying on a rack.

> different animals for the arks – you got one village which was very good at horses, for example. So licenced traders would visit each village in the area to collect whole sets to sell on.”

Later on, wooden toymaking in Germany moved down to Nuremburg, which remains in many ways the centre for world toys, with the largest international fair for toys and games held there every year.

Not that this means that there wasn't a strong tradition of toymaking in England. Indeed, one of the reasons the British Guild of Toymakers was founded in the 1950s was to preserve the tradition of toymaking in this country. It was also to kick back against the large-scale manufacturers and mass media marketing that dominates the toy industry to this day, which has put many smaller toymakers out of business.

One London paper reported in 1973, “Anyone with a natural antipathy towards trashy plastic toys, flashy gimmicks and guns will probably have it heightened by the Christmas glut. For them, and almost everybody else, the British Toymaker's Guild exhibition will be an oasis in a sea of distaste!”

It must be a comfort, in our throw-away society, to give a gift that lasts and continues to give so much pleasure.

Is there to be a revival in the 21st century? David is positive.

“Yes, I think there is. There's generally more of an interest in crafts, and there is still a reaction against mass-production. Some parents are kicking back against technology.”

In terms of popularity, though, “the

problem with Noah's Arks is that, so far, no-one's become addicted to them, unlike a video game,” David jokes.

It's the importance of creative play itself which David holds in the highest regard though, even above the types of toys children play with to achieve this.

“Plastic toys such as Lego and Playmobil are fantastic,” he says. “I don't want to say plastic toys are bad and wooden toys are good.”

What matters most, David argues, is that children, and adults, play in a creative way. He tells me how he went to a lecture on “Homo Ludens”, a book written by Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga in the 1930s.

Huizinga argues that play is a

A Triumph of Muddling Through!

The British Toymaker's Guild is in their own words, “a very British Guild: a triumph of muddling through against all reasonable expectation. Considering the tiny scale of production of most BTG members, the eccentric nature of many of their toys and the very much more eccentric nature of many of the members themselves, it is remarkable that this type of craft-based toymaking and the Guild have survived so long.”

Twenty-four toymakers strong, it is the perfect place for Christmas inspiration. Visit www.toymakersguild.co.uk.

More of David Plageron's work can be found at <http://noahsarktoys.eu>. For more information and commissions, telephone 01803 866786.

fundamental aspect of being human, and what sets us apart from animals.

“It was a friend who told me, ‘We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.’”

After a day reconnecting with the idea of play, it's quite possible that truer words have never been spoken.



The animals went in two by two . . .