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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: George Nakashima, Correspondence, General, 1983

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DAVID POWELL AND THE LEEDS DESIGN WORKSHOPS

The master craftsman David Powell established Leeds Design Workshops in partnership with John Tierney in 1975. Born in England in 1926 to a family of artists, craftsmen and educators, Mr. Powell went on to study with and later to assist one of England's best furniture makers, Edward Barnsley. Following four years in the Barnsley workshops he went on for three years' study of furniture design at the Royal College of Art in London. Subsequently, as an independent artisan and as the head of a studio-workshop, he produced work on commission for Windsor Castle, Oxford University, the British Government and Shell International headquarters, to name but a few. In 1969 Mr. Powell moved to the United States, becoming an American citizen in 1977. His work in this country has been primarily for private collectors.

John Tierney, a native of Boston, joined David Powell with a background in physics (MIT and the University of Massachusetts) and administration of Hampshire College and of Boston University's Program in Artisanry. Together they launched an internship program which now has a capacity of twenty-one interns, the number to which the program will be limited for the foreseeable future.

LEEDS DESIGN INTERNSHIPS

Modelled after the rigorous apprenticeships which produced Europe's master craftsmen, the Leeds Internship program stresses the importance of mastery of basic techniques as the best foundation for the design of functional and harmonious furniture. The skills essential to the professional designer and maker of furniture include drafting, elementary freehand drawing and execution techniques in various materials using hand-tools and machinery. Within the environment of a working shop, each individual intern commits at least a working week of Monday to Friday 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. from mid-September to the end of May to the constant, repeated practice needed to establish almost instinctive facility with these skills. The intern's determined devotion to practice reinforces the teaching methods of discussion, demonstration and individual guidance. Instructors are on hand six days a week until 5:00 p.m. The workshops are open to interns during evenings as well.

Despite wide variation in experience that interns bring to Leeds, everyone starts at the most fundamental level to work towards progressive stages of technical perfection. This approach begins with extensive training in the use of hand tools and leads to the execution of a large complex piece that may be designed by the intern using then full range of machinery and appropriate hand skills.

Drafting instruction takes place one day per week from September through December. Assignments begin with the simplest working drawing and proceed on to complete and explicit drafts of proposed furniture as well as perspective views of these proposed pieces.

During the second half of the first year program a special instructor of freehand drawing teaches interns once a week for three hours. The ultimate purpose of the instruction is to provide interns with an invaluable tool to help conceive a design and to communicate it to a client.

Approximately once a month a guest lecturer visits Leeds Design Workshops for lecture and discussion, usually a slide show of his/her work, and/or a demonstration of techniques for which that work is known. Field trips also supplement the usual teaching methods, including annual visits to "Designers' Saturday" in New York City and to the furniture collections in museums and galleries. Announcements of additional shows and exhibitions throughout the Northeast are posted for the information of interns.

THE FIRST YEAR INTERNSHIP

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THE FIRST YEAR INTERNSHIP

The following schedule lists the techniques and materials involved in each project to be completed during the first year program of Leeds Design Workshops. Some interns may move ahead of schedule, perhaps taking on an extra project; those who fall behind will nevertheless start the next assignment on its scheduled day, completing any unfinished work after hours, to the way the interns should have the time necessary to master each new level of skill without becoming overwhelmed in any one project.

- | | |
|---|---------|
| [1] Tool Care: Sharpening. | 2 weeks |
| All hand tools require work before they can be used properly. For example, scales of planes must be flat and true, saw teeth set and filed, and all straight cutting edge tools must be flat and sharpened. | |
| [2] Planing and Joining. | 1 week |
| While tool care instruction proceeds, interns will observe and practice planing and cutting stock to dimension using hand tools only; specifically: rip-plan, cross-cut saw, jack plane, jointing plane, smoothing plane, marking gauge and square. | |
| [3] Octagons. | 1 week |
| Interns use the test pieces listed above in a planing and sawing exercise to accurately make an eight-sided bevelled board using only hand tools. | |

The following schedule lists the techniques and timetable involved in each project to be completed during the first year program at Leeds Design Workshops. Some interns may move ahead of schedule, perhaps taking on an extra project; those who fall behind will nevertheless start the next assignment on its scheduled day, completing any unfinished work after hours. In this way the intern should have the time necessary to master each new level of skill without becoming mired in any one project.

(1) Tool Care: Sharpening 2 weeks

All hand tools require work before they can be used properly. For example, soles of planes must be flat and true, saw teeth set and filed, and all straight cutting edge tools honed flat and sharpened.

(2) Planing and Sawing 1 week

While tool care instruction proceeds, interns will observe and practice planing and cutting stock to dimension using hand tools only: specifically rip saw, cross-cut saws, jack plane, jointing plane, smooth plane, marking gauge and square.

(3) Octagon 1 week

Interns use the techniques listed above in a planing and sawing exercise to accurately make an eight-sided bevelled board using only hand tools.

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