

feature **artist profile**

On the Wild Side

with Jeffrey Cooper



Whimsical chairs are the focal point in a waiting room at the Texas Children's Hospital. Jeffrey feels that by enriching their hospital environment, he is helping children with their healing process.



PISCATAQUA PALS:
The humpback whale bench was given by a patron to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

Quality craftsmanship and wildlife carvings combine for delightfully whimsical furniture

By Kathleen Ryan
Photography by Bill Truslow

“If I can do something that gives people pleasure in life and makes them smile, then that’s what I want to do,” says acclaimed carver Jeffrey Cooper.

Looking at his handiwork, it’s not hard to imagine that his unusual furniture designs do just that. Both children and adults delight in his wild and crazy animal creations found in libraries, hospitals, museums, and cancer centers scattered around the country. His array of lamps, benches, tables, chairs, and more are all constructed as functional furniture and accessories designed to put a smile on our faces.

Jeffrey Cooper was born with art in his blood, even though his artistic abilities took shape later in life. His mother was a professional artist who very much encouraged the arts. As a child, Jeffrey’s favorite medium was Play-Doh, but he did take a stab at carving once.

“I was making a little puppy dog when I cut my thumb with the knife,” Jeffrey said with a laugh. “I had this little red geyser going, so my mom took me to the hospital. That was my first woodcarving experience. I still have the scar on my thumb—that’s how I tell left from right.”

Tabling art, Jeffrey pursued chemical engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduation, he worked in that field for about a year before the lure of the early ‘70s led him to a commune in Oregon, where he ended up assisting a cabinetmaker in the woodworking shop.

“While I was there, I saw an ad in a magazine for Constantine’s Marquetry Kit and decided to send away for it, not knowing a thing about what to do,” he said. “I did some veneer work, which was not very good, but it got me interested in doing it on furniture.”





OLDE FLORIDA PORTICO, left, and CHEST OF GIRAFFES, below, illustrate the variety of Jeffrey's carvings.

In fact, he enjoyed this type of work so much that after he moved back to his home in Portsmouth, NH, Jeffrey enrolled in some woodworking classes. There he found his forte.

“There’s a lot of engineering and design to woodworking,” he said. “But eventually I found myself wanting to decorate the furniture with carvings.”

After his daughter was born in 1988, his wife suggested he try making some kid’s furniture for her. That’s when he came up with the design for children’s animal chairs, which turned out to be wildly popular.

“The early ones were fairly naive, and it was a struggle for me to get them right at first,” Jeffrey said. “No matter what I did, they all looked like a dog! But I kept working and working and eventually developed a style.”

“I actually build the armature first, with furniture joinery, and then I start to carve,” Jeffrey explained. “The process is a lot different from taking a block of wood and carving it. I have to design it as furniture with oversized members. I use 3”-thick wood so that I can carve away and make some sort of a figure on it.”

Amidst the basic woodworking machinery and carving tools, Jeffrey’s shop hosts an array of benches built to different heights. Jeffrey explained that when you’re carving you want to work at elbow height. With the different benches, he is able to work at just the right height no matter what the project is.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the self-taught woodcarver was learning to carve in furniture hardwoods—considered by many to be a woodcarver’s nightmare. “When I tell other carvers that I’m using cherry and curly maple, they look at me like I’m crazy,” Jeffrey explained. “I do have to use my mallet a lot, but the hardwoods offer a nice rich color, and the ridges and cuts stay crisp and clean.”

Maple is one of Jeffrey’s favorite woods because the light color is easy to dye. He uses dyes so the grain of the wood shows through.

Development is a big part of what Jeffrey Cooper offers as an artist. For the Tampa Olde Florida Portico project, Jeffrey met with library officials and the architects to discuss and draw up a plan. “The architect showed me the

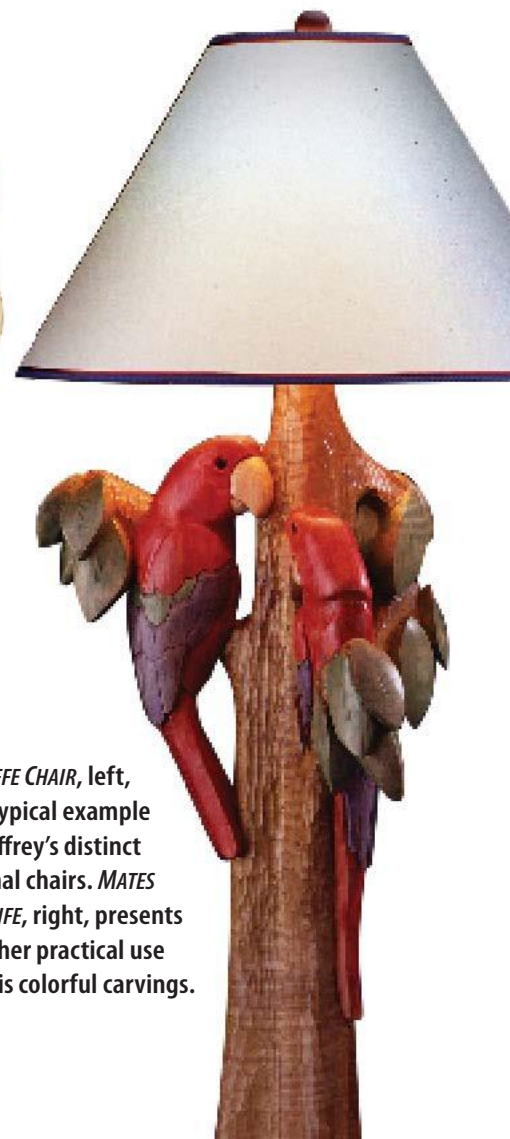
floor plans marked with an X where they wanted an arch—and that was it! Nobody had any idea about what it should look like. So I sat with a sketchbook in my lap and just talked to them to draw out their interests. By picking their brains I was able to pull together a lot of elements and come up with a perfect design for them.”

Jeffrey has his own system for marketing his work. “You just go to the right parties,” he said, tongue in cheek. “What I mean by that is that it’s largely word of mouth. I just introduce myself to the right people and whip out my card. The real answer to the marketing question is networking.”

In a world where so many artists carry around huge egos that clients have to tiptoe around, Jeffrey Cooper’s “let’s talk about it” approach to his woodcarving comes as a refreshing surprise.

When asked about his plans for the future, the 56-year old said, “I don’t have a concept in my head of retirement, and I have no plans to give up furniture making. I want to be creative, making things my whole life.”

Jeffrey noted that as he gets older, he’ll most likely look into becoming a carving specialist, subcontracting his services instead of making heavy furniture. But for as long as possible, Jeffrey plans to continue designing and producing the enchanting wildlife furniture and accessories that carved out his future two decades ago.



GIRAFFE CHAIR, left, is a typical example of Jeffrey’s distinct animal chairs. **MATES FOR LIFE**, right, presents another practical use for his colorful carvings.



About the Artist

Jeffrey Cooper is a professional woodworker and member of the NH Furniture Masters Association. His distinct sculptural furniture has won various awards and is on display in public buildings throughout the U.S. Visit his website at www.cooperwoodsculptor.com.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

In our next issue (Summer 2008, issue 43), Jeffrey walks you step-by-step through the construction of this striking polar bear bench. His unique process of building the furniture framework from oversized lumber makes a sturdy, functional project to showcase your carving skills.