

Visitors to ASL, or those who try to find the indoor route to the development and alumni office, discover a haven of industry, order and concentration as they enter the woodworking area. Usually about 12 students – and often more boys than girls – group around the teaching area – a large workbench – as Tim Watson outlines the goals for that class. After explaining a new project or demonstrating a new joint or skill, he releases the students to their workstations, an immovable wooden bench which has acquired a seriousness with the patina of age. They work two to a station, learning how they can help each other. From the wooden model of a Sopwith Camel – the first project attempted by the Grade 7 students – to the elaborate chairs carved and joined by the advanced veterans of five or six years of woodworking, all the projects are completed to the same exacting standards. “We aim to have a finished product that looks good, is nicely finished and is made to the best of the student’s ability,” explains Mr. Watson. And then at the end of every class, the familiar litany marks the transition, “Will you please start tidying up. Put all your tools away. Brush down your benches and machines.”

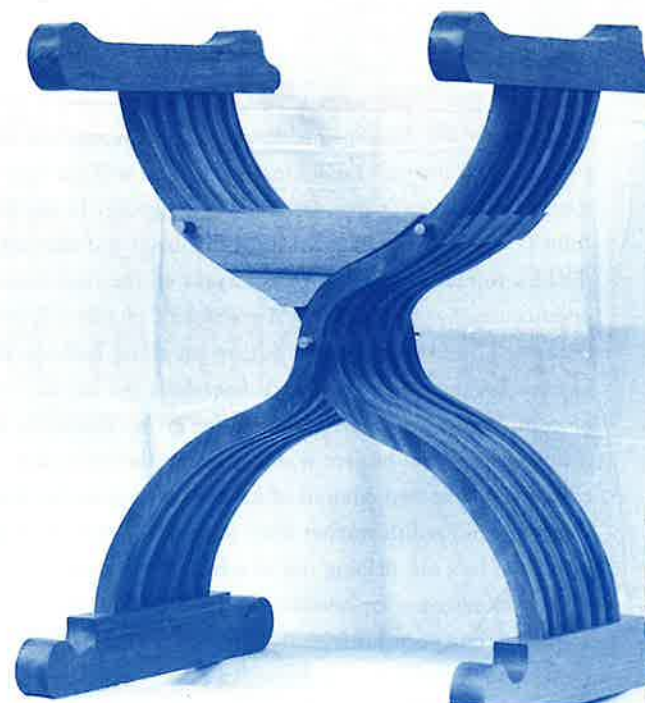
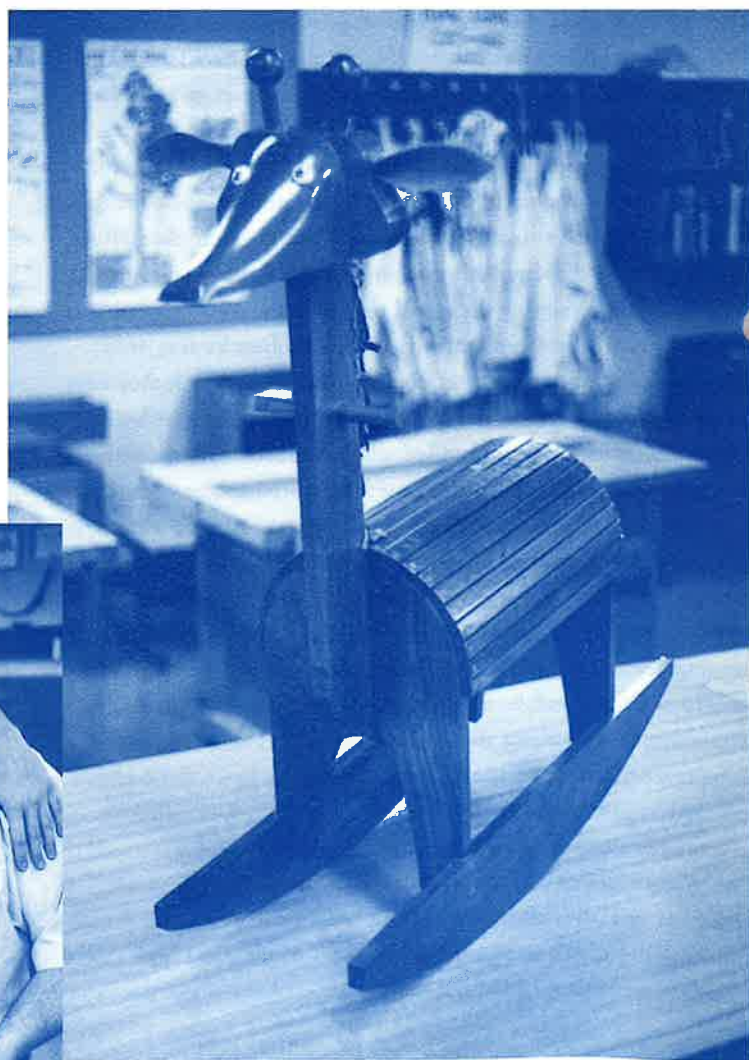
One glance at the large airy space, echoing with the sound of lathes turning or planes cutting, and you know that precision and care is crucial to the work being done. Racks of metal clamps line the approach, wooden mallets, lined up like soldiers wait for eager craftsmen, planks of wood arranged with the precision of a filing drawer stand in anticipation of the next project. Only after the day’s classes are over is there any sign of disorder as the shavings cut and carved off blocks of wood carpet the floor.

Creating an heirloom

Tim Watson and Mahmoud Baban '99 display Mahmoud's completed checkerboard. A child's rocking giraffe made by a student in the advanced woodworking class awaits its rider.



Over the years Mr. Watson has devised an imaginative sequence of projects, from the model Sopwith Camel to the boomerang to the pencil box to the dovetailed cassette/CD box to the Monopoly board to the coffee table and then a chair. “The younger students see an older student’s project and think ‘I want to make that.’ Over the years, we modify patterns to suit students’ interests and to make the projects more appropriate for their skill level,” says Mr. Watson. A look through his photographic archives shows the development and evolution of the captain’s chair, the dowel rocking chair and the coffee table. “Each student has some impact on a project’s design, an impact determined by the student’s skill level and own design sense.” Jack Rowland '78 was the first student to choose to make the dowel rocking chair. In the next year it was modified and Mr. Watson says it has been built about ten times. “Each time it is made it changes, and the balance, production ease and appearance is improved.” The most advanced projects are those involving the greatest number of skills – carving, turning, steaming, joining, drilling, polishing. “Some projects have to wait until the student has an understanding of practical mathematics and can use trigonometry to figure out the lengths and angles.”



A camp chair designed and built by Andy Beckemeir '81 as his final project. Art teacher Spencer Namyst rests on a beach chair made by Ted Harris '83.



Tim Watson's passion for excellence

Made from indigenous material

Unlike the constantly evolving projects, Mr. Watson has remained an ASL institution for the last 23 years. Actually, he hasn't moved very far from home as he grew up in the St. John's Wood area and attended Kynaston School before it was merged with Quintin to become Quintin-Kynaston. He knows the area around ASL inside and out, having had work experience (internships) in many of the local small industries which have now disappeared. His local knowledge would make him a contender on Mastermind. Q: What was the name of the company who made taxi meters on Lisson Grove? A: Geesons.

After completing his further education in which he specialized in beaten metalwork and machine shop, Mr. Watson spent a year teaching in the Black Country, a part of Staffordshire and then returned to QK for four years, teaching both woodwork and metalwork. The program at QK, with ten workshops, was well-developed and the facilities well-equipped. In 1972, as ASL was moving into the new facility on Loudoun Road, Tony Marlow, then Principal of the Middle School, crossed the road to ask the advice of the QK industrial arts teachers on setting up a woodwork and technical studies department. Mr. Watson's boss at QK volunteered him for the duty, and then recommended that he apply for the new position of woodworking teacher, a job he has held since 1973.

He is very proud of the woodworking area, and works hard to instill pride and illustrate the value of order to his students. The design of the shop as well as that of many of the machines are his own; he builds machines out of parts of discarded ones, creating a tool for a specific use, often having crucial parts machined at a local engineer's – one of the few artisans still working in the area.

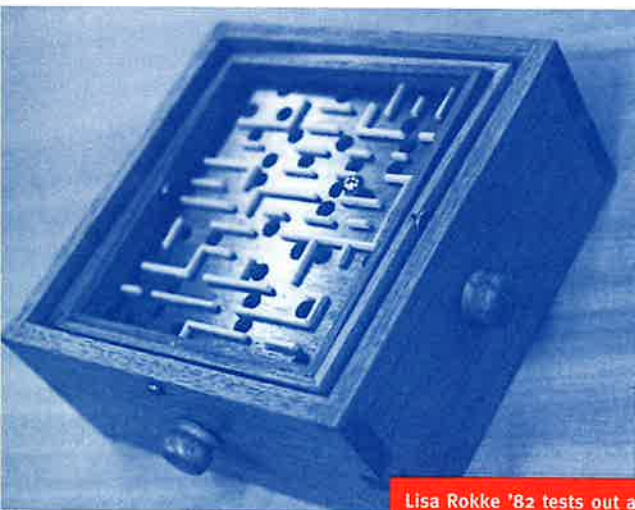
“I like doing difficult things for the first time,” confesses Mr. Watson recalling his sense of accomplishment when he made a box with a secret miter dovetail joint for a 21st birthday present. He's eager for his students to have the same sense of accomplishment and so works with them to design a project of which they will be proud. “An important part of my job is to figure out how to accommodate mistakes so the kids finish with a good piece,” he says. “We don't want to waste time or materials, as we are so fortunate to have the resources here. In British state schools, students spend the majority of their time designing projects, because there aren't the resources to let them build them. You lose a lot of practical experience that way.”

Inspiring a new generation of craftspeople

He takes great pleasure in the alums who return to school, and most of his former students stop by and take him out to the pub. Several alums still live in London and a few, like Phil Blunsen '77, come in on the weekend to work on their projects. For some students, woodworking becomes almost a cult, and they take it year after year, long after their fine arts requirement has been satisfied. Initially, woodworking began in Grade 8, but in 1987 it was added to the Grade 7 electives, and Mr. Watson has a special feeling for those who complete at least five years of the class. These students receive a belt buckle – machined by Mr. Watson – in recognition of their longevity and achievement.

One of this year's crop of six-year students, Nick Grandy '96, mused on the qualities that make Mr. Watson such an important teacher. "He knows what he's doing and he is clear about expectations. He's also funny and interacts well with the class." In fact, it was Nick who revealed Mr. Watson's pet name for his most frustrating students – "Brainless, gormless, bozo," a phrase always delivered with studied exasperation.

Mr. Watson's standards are legendary, so it comes as no surprise to learn that all he has made the furniture in the house he shares with Grade 5 teacher Linda Bensen. "It's a small house, and we don't have many things," he adds wryly, not completely willing to acknowledge his intense perfectionism. And his favorite wood? English oak, he replies, because he likes the figure in the grain, but students work with a variety of other soft and hard woods. "English oak is too hard for students to work with," he explains.



Lisa Rokke '82 tests out a hanging chair built by Ray Leonard '83. This marble maze game was made by one of Mr. Watson's early students.

Taking on new challenges

And what of the half-finished kayak resting across one of the large tool cupboards? Look closely and you will see four more resting on the shop's iron rafters. Their history? In the late 1970's, John Lockwood took a PE class to the canal and they dreamt up the idea to make eight fiberglass kayaks so the class could practice nearby. Helped by ASLers Steve Coloney '77, Phil Blunsen '77 and John Lund '78, they set about building the kayaks. Because of the nature of fiberglass, the kayaks had to be completed in one day. However the group found the fumes disturbing and the project was abandoned before it was completed. The two completed kayaks were given by former High School English teacher Don Jesse to a club in Camden.

When he's not helping out at school – customizing a desk for a tall administrator or building a particular cabinet – Mr. Watson is often helping out his friends. The other weekend he was in Bournemouth setting up a fireworks display for a Scout troop. He's also a member of the National Rifle Association and volunteers on weekends at their competitions – a recent event required the erection of a quarter-mile tent and over 100 targets.

The enduring image, however, is of Mr. Watson with a class growling gruff words of encouragement at ASLers as they learn that their finished piece is directly related to the amount of care and attention they have devoted to it.

