

Contemporary Furniture  
at Crab Tree Farm

*By Franz Schulze*



A.

The workshop is in the south side of the main barn building  
photo: Craig Dugan, Hedrich Blessing Photography

B.

The barn complex, designed by Solon S. Beman, is comprised of a central barn flanked by four additional barn buildings and a pair of silos  
photo: Tom Gleason



B.

In the history of furniture the material that most distinguishes the modern age from earlier periods is metal. The industrial revolution enabled designers to work in wrought iron, steel, and aluminum, all of which proved more amenable than handicraft to methods of mass production. By the early twentieth century this development had produced such master artists as Harry Bertoia, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Charles and Ray Eames, Mies van der Rohe, and Eero Saarinen, each of them largely dependent on steel.

At the same time, while history has been reshaped by new forms taken from new materials, the uses of tradition remain vital as ever. Wood is the substance most commonly employed in today's furniture, and it has been the medium favored by some of the twentieth century's most skillful and innovative designers. Students of craft have long recognized the ground-breaking endeavors of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Charles R. Ashbee, William Morris, Gustav Stickley, C. F. A. Voysey, and Frank Lloyd Wright, but more recent practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic have made a remarkably inventive record on their own. John Makepeace, Mike Jarvi, and Critz Campbell are among the best representatives of the current generation.

It is significant that the source of the special exhibit is Crab Tree Farm of Lake Bluff, Illinois. Crab Tree is a working farm, with cattle, sheep,

horses, chickens, geese, and swans, as well as crops, including hay and soybeans. Yet the international reputation Crab Tree Farm has earned in the last years is derived not from nature except as nature has been transformed into the extraordinarily handsome furniture that fills the interiors of the main farm buildings. The stylistic affiliation of the furniture and accompanying decorative arts objects is Arts and Crafts with major works from both America and Britain represented. Pride of place is given to the work of Gustav Stickley (1858-1942), the leader of the Arts and Crafts movement in America, who spread the philosophy of the movement through his magazine *The Craftsman*.

At the turn of the twentieth century the property we know as Crab Tree Farm was a dairy farm of 360 acres, owned by the eminent Illinois Federal district judge, Henry W. Blodgett, a pioneer Waukegan lawyer and railroad president who created the system that became the Chicago & Northwestern Railway in 1863. When Blodgett died in 1905, the farm was taken over by Mrs. Grace Durand, who had learned dairy farming at the University of Wisconsin School of Agriculture. In 1910, following a fire that destroyed most of the farm buildings, Mrs. Durand commissioned the Chicago architect Solon S. Beman to design a group of replacement structures that we now recognize as the most visible components of Crab Tree Farm. The ensemble facing Sheridan Road consists

of a central court flanked by two pairs of side-by-side gabled buildings painted white and addressed by a barn containing workshops and a three-story apartment in the central tract.

The barn, where Mike Jarvi works, is the breeding ground of the designs bearing his name in the SOFA CHICAGO special exhibit. It is also, in a sense, the extension of Parnham House, a splendid sixteenth-century English manor house and garden that functioned earlier as the studio of John Makepeace, the designer with whom Jarvi studied.

Makepeace is one of the most celebrated contemporary British furniture designers. Born in 1939 in Warwickshire, he developed an interest in wood working pretty much on his own. As a teenager, following classes in carpentry at prep school, he established contacts with local craftsmen who favored the Arts and Crafts movement. By 1959 he had secured an apprenticeship with Keith Cooper, a Dorset-based furniture maker and designer possessed, as his student recalled, of exceptional taste and an appreciation of quality workmanship.

Training with Cooper prompted Makepeace to travel to Scandinavia, precisely at a time crucial to the fate of the European decorative arts. As the success of industrial design threatened to eliminate traditional workshops, a counteraction took form with the ascendancy of an uncommonly

talented group of Danish furniture designers like Steen Eiler Rasmussen and Finn Juhl, both of whom stood for individually crafted pieces. Makepeace was deeply impressed by what he encountered on his travels, and the professional direction of his life was set.

In the early 1960s Makepeace set up his own workshop and began making pieces to order. The fabricating and design of furniture had become for him a steady and profitable routine. Nonetheless, several years were spent in his early twenties as a teacher at an inner-city school in Birmingham, and while the experience was marginal to his primary interests, it would, as we will see, eventually prove vital to his career. In the remainder of the decade his expressive ends matured along with his technical mastery, and the design world responded accordingly.

By the mid-1970s Makepeace had become the most famous furniture maker of his generation in the United Kingdom, whereupon several factors led to a major career shift. He was now working on an increasingly larger scale, which necessitated more shop space. Moreover, his experience had brought him into contact with aspiring younger designers, who needed not only further training in the craft, but keener knowledge of business practices. And he had been a teacher.

In 1976 Makepeace elected to purchase Parnham House, with a view of turning it into a school, indeed a community, where master craftsmen would live and meet with students, while the curriculum would lay emphasis on instruction in entrepreneurial ends and means.

The house was built in 1540 on the foundations of a still older structure. Over the years additions and alterations reflected changing styles and tastes. The influence of the Italian Renaissance appeared in a late 16th century remodeling, and a return to the Gothic marked an 1810 enlargement of the house by the architect John Nash. In 1896 the antiquarian Vincent Robinson bought the property and filled the interior of the house with décor reminiscent of a wide variety of periods. The owner following Robinson was the Belgian-born entrepreneur Hans Sauer, who restored the Tudor style to the Great Hall of the house. During World War II Parnham was used for military purposes, and in the mid-1950s it was turned into a nursing home, remaining that way until its closure in 1973. Three years later Makepeace made his purchase.

He found Parnham in grave need of restoration, which he carried out over the next several years with characteristic thoroughness. In 1977, even before the renovation was complete, the School for Craftsmen in Wood—an institution that had grown into his personal mission—was formally launched.

A term of two years was required prior to graduation, the first given over to the study of technique, the second to the pursuit of design. The curriculum is a subject unto itself, but one aspect of it merits mention, in view of the locale of Crab Tree Farm, some 35 miles north of Chicago, a city renowned internationally for the quality of its architecture. Makepeace's school entered into a three-week exchange program with the Art Institute of Chicago that enabled Parnham students to make direct connections with buildings by such figures as Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright.

The school closed in 2000, the same year that concluded Mike Jarvi's two-year tour of duty at Parnham House.

There was next to nothing in Jarvi's early life that foretold the robust relationship he has meanwhile developed at Crab Tree Farm. He was born in 1954 in Humboldt, Michigan, in the state's upper peninsula. Following graduation from the local high school, he enrolled at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, where he majored in music and played trumpet and guitar. Family resources required him to work nights in construction in order to cover college costs. In his own words: "At the time there was a five-dollar bill in the Upper Peninsula, but I never got my hands on it." Thereupon means took over from ends, as he mastered the building trade—plumbing and electricity as well as carpentry. With his marriage at 26, Crab Tree Farm appeared on his horizon, since his wife's father occupied the position of farm manager for the then-owner, William McCormick Blair. By the time Jarvi's father-in-law retired, new owners, Mr. and Mrs. John H. Bryan, had taken over the farm and asked Mike to be the new farm manager. The offer was accepted on a non-contractual basis, as both parties tested the water. During a year-long hiatus in 1996 Jarvi and his family moved to Austin, Texas, where they entertained locally, he on the guitar, his daughter on the mandolin, and his son on the bass. They later decided to return to Crab Tree Farm, where Bryan noticed that

C.  
*The showroom features a view to the east across a pasture and a selection of furniture created at the farm.*

*At right in the foreground is Critz Campbell's Eudora, made from fiberglass, printed fabric, and polyester resin, illuminated with a florescent bulb  
36 x 31 x 31  
photo: Craig Dugan,  
Hedrich Blessing Photography*





c.

Jarvi had shown a flair for woodworking. The perception prompted Bryan, who knew of John Makepeace's school, to persuade Jarvi to enroll there while maintaining his employment at the farm.

Critz Campbell, also looks back to work as a resident student at Crab Tree Farm, where his focus in the late 1980s was in ceramics and sculpture. In 1990 he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). The SAIC then designated him a post-graduate exchange student at the Arco Centro de Comunicacao Visual in Lisbon. That assignment was followed by two years at the Penland School of Crafts in Penland, North Carolina, and another two years at Parnham House, and graduation in 1991.

Campbell is now the owner of b9 design llc., of West Point, Mississippi. He has served on the faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is currently assistant professor of sculpture at Mississippi State University. He has shown in *Inside Design Now* at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York; *Furniture Future Tense* at the De Cordoba Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts; International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF) in New York; and *Seven Days – Seven Nights* in the LIMN Gallery of San Francisco. Campbell has also won awards from the Mississippi Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts.

## The Exhibits

John Makepeace is represented by several entries, one of which is *Millennium*. Only two examples of this chair have been made, both in English holly rendered in consecutive laminations—nine in the slim elements and 40 for the legs and arms. The upholstery is in leather. This piece, on view at SOFA CHICAGO, was a gift to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1990 from Neville and John H. Bryan.

Devotees of geometric design may find the chair challenging, to say the least. There is not a straight line in it, although it is precisely bilaterally symmetrical. Or they may be as impressed as any other onlooker by the elegance of the profile, the exactitude of the carving and the follow-up surface finish. The chair provides a good example of Makepeace's technique of building each element up from a number of different layers glued together and bent and polished to the wishes of the designer.

Makepeace's biographer, Professor Jeremy Myerson, has observed that the chair is "a three-dimensional graph of the curvature of the human back...each component...individually shaped to pick up the lines and lumbar and body support."\* The millennium chair is as comfortable to sit in as it is attractive to the eye and serviceable to the human frame.

More conventional in form but utterly exceptional in the joining of its parts is *Eighteen*, an English cherry frame and drawers. The drawers are veneered in burr elm, the drawer linings in scented Lebanon cedar, the drawer guides in hornbeam, the handles in bronze, demonstrating Makepeace's interest in selecting and using materials for their best properties. Close inspection reveals an amazing mastery of the dovetailing, unerring in its detail and diminution of scale. The certainty of the overall form, the mathematical relationships, and the combination of patrician woods is comparably rewarding.

One noteworthy aspect of Mike Jarvi's work is the impressive balance reached between the debt he owes John Makepeace and the preservation and maturation of his own expressive personality. The most spectacular of his pieces is *Throne Chair*, developed from the root work of a red oak tree that he found on the grounds of Crab Tree Farm. It too presents a balance—between the obviousness of its natural form, its

transformation into a sculptural abstraction as well as a piece of usable furniture that seems to have a mind of its own, encouraging us to sit in it. Normally one does not think of furniture as monumental, but the word seems quite appropriate to the massiveness of the chair. The refinement of the curving surfaces points to Jarvi's inheritance of the legacy of John Makepeace. Jarvi has also developed an extraordinary skill in bending wood. Using heat for softening purposes, he has been able to coax natural wood into configurations of his own design. A table called *One-Piece Table*, illustrates that talent. The viewer requires a moment to deconstruct the form, so to speak, in order to perceive that the objects before him consist of single pieces of wood, walnut in one instance, oak in the other, each endowed with delectably sensual curves. And economy of form: Mies van der Rohe's famous axiom, "Less is more," could not find a more eloquent demonstration. One piece designed by Critz Campbell suggests that despite all he learned from Makepeace, he has developed an approach to design that is not only unique but leagues removed from that of any of his contemporaries. *Eudora* is a chair of fiberglass with printed fabric and polyester resin, illuminated from within by fluorescent bulbs. Named for the late, revered novelist Eudora Welty, whose Mississippi background corresponds with Campbell's faculty position at Mississippi State University, the chair, in its own singular way, is as witty as some of Welty's comic literary exercises.

Three designers, bound together by the attention paid them at Crab Tree Farm, are testimony to the bond of agriculture and aesthetics that continues to flourish on a plot of Midwestern farmland unique in the United States.

\* Myerson, Jeremy. *Makepeace: A Spirit of Adventure in Craft & Design*. Conran Octopus, London, 1995, p. 119.

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D.



E.



F.



G.

D.  
*John Makepeace*  
 Eighteen, 1996  
 English cherry frame and  
 drawers, the latter veneered  
 in burr elm, scented Lebanon  
 cedar drawer linings,  
 hornbeam drawer guides,  
 bronze handles  
 51 x 33.5 x 21  
 photo: Mike Murless

E.  
*John Makepeace*  
 Millennium, 1988  
 consecutive laminations of  
 English holly, nine in the slim  
 elements and 40 for the legs  
 and arms, leather upholstery  
 42 x 32 x 21  
 Collection of the Art Institute  
 of Chicago, 1990.578  
 Gift of Neville and  
 John H. Bryan  
 photo: Mike Murless

F.  
*Mike Jarvi*  
 One-Piece Table, 2007  
 oak  
 34 x 84 x 14  
 photo: Michael Tropea

G.  
*Mike Jarvi*  
 Throne Chair, 2007  
 red oak  
 53 x 75 x 54  
 photo: Michael Tropea