



THE LIGHT OF HIS LIFE: William Morris Studio

BY TERRY TSUJOKA

ON THE WALL OF William Morris's Benicia, California, studio is a Tao quote: "Because he doesn't display himself, people can see his light." For William — father of five, Little League umpire and artisan of handcrafted art lamps — these are words to live by.

"Everyone has a unique expression," says the former Bay Area machinist who developed his woodworking craft and established William Morris Studio 18 years ago. With Renee, his wife of 25 years, making the shades from mica, parchment and leaves from trees on their property, he creates beautiful but functional works of art. "When I send a lamp off to the customer, my work is done. My job is to keep the channel open, so that the work just comes through me. I don't become part of it. I just enjoy the experience of having made it and appreciate being asked to do it."

He spent much of his youth in the garage. "By fixing and building with my hands, I got a tangible result and discovered the delight in creating things," he says. Later, as a young Navy Vietnam veteran returning home to San Francisco in the early '70s, he worked as a job-shop machinist repairing ships. "The work was fascinating," he says, "because as



with art, you really never do the same thing twice. Ten years later, when I took a job machining prototypes for the aerospace industry, I again found satisfaction in making one-of-a-kind things. It was exacting and achievement oriented, which has always compelled me."

His transition from working with metal to wood was natural. "I love the smell of wood, the feel of it," he says. He became a licensed cabinetmaker when he moved to Benicia 25 years ago, building kitchens, mantels, staircases and even an altar for a historic Episcopal church in town. One of his customers was a lampshade maker who asked him to make bases for her. That led to a new focus both for his woodwork and for Renee's artistry as she apprenticed in creating the natural shades.

"Carpentry is rewarding, but it's hard and heavy work to do alone," he says. With lamps, I had a niche, I didn't need a lot of space and I liked the more frequent sense of achievement."



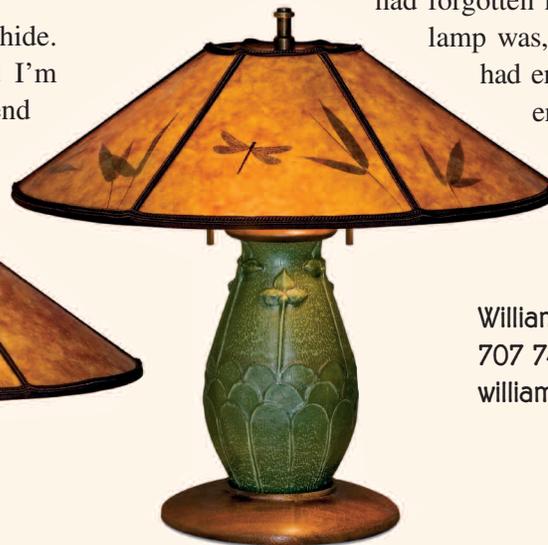
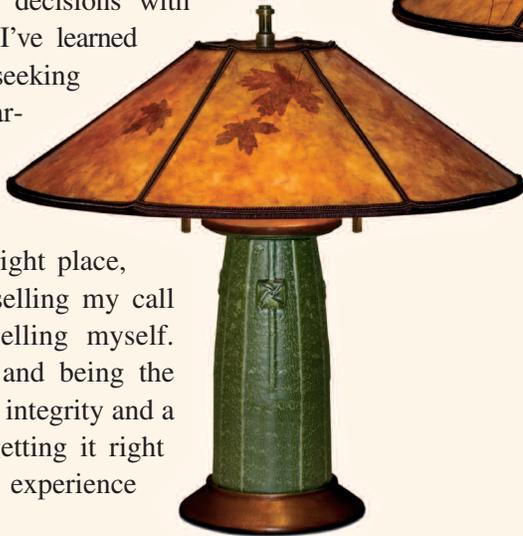
It also brought out his creativity and the opportunity to collaborate. “I’m totally ‘right brain.’ I have an intuitive sense about my work, about when it’s complete and if people will enjoy it. Because everything is made to order, customers have the freedom to choose whatever they want—the design, the type of wood and leaves, the colors of the mica. They’ve inspired new ideas and designs, as have other artisans I’ve worked with to create glass and pottery lamps. The challenge of that relationship — being fearless, asking for what I want and adding value to their beautiful objects—is very satisfying.”



Getting It Right

An umpire for his community’s Little League baseball games the past 20 seasons, the former Little Leaguer and all-around athlete believes that umpiring has been his greatest personal development tool.

“When I’m out on the field, there’s no place to hide. My strengths and weaknesses are exposed, and I’m forced to get better at what I’m not good at or spend a lot of time defending my position. I have to make decisions with conviction. And I’ve learned that approval-seeking doesn’t build character or confidence. I earn my own approval by being in the right place, timing my call, selling my call and ultimately selling myself. Going out there and being the best I can be with integrity and a commitment to getting it right creates a positive experience for the kids.”



After baseball season ends and fall arrives, William Morris Studio gets busy. “There’s always a high note in our business when we go back to Pacific Standard Time. People go inside and need to turn the lights on. Customers tell me they’ve been looking at my ads for years, and when they turn their clocks back and it’s dark when they get home, they think, ‘Now, where did I see that lamp I liked?’”

Something similar occurred when a caller wanted to order a lamp he’d seen that William had discontinued to make way for new designs. “He told me, ‘You don’t understand, I have to have it. Take all the time you need, even a year.’ We talked for 40 minutes, and I was so moved by what he said that I wanted to go ahead and make it with the feeling he had given me. By then, I wanted to do my best.

“When I was done, I had to step back, because I had forgotten how beautiful the lamp was, and how much I had enjoyed the experience. I had to thank him for bringing that back into my life.”

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