

Once upon a time there was a magical toymaker...

Tucked away in his garden workshop, David Plageron turns humble pieces of wood into toys that will be treasured forever



All you'd need is for some snow to fall and the scene through toymaker David Plageron's workshop window would make the perfect Christmas tableau. Sitting at his workbench at the bottom of his Devonshire garden, the air fluttering with sawdust as he turns a piece of lime wood into a lion, he is every inch a maker of wonderful things. In the great tradition of wooden toymaking, David's nativity sets and arks, shining with colour and character, are simple translations of real life.

To find David's tiny workshop, it is a walk through the artistic scenery of his townhouse in Totnes, past string puppets and immaculate groupings of primitive toys from Europe and Asia, and out to the far corner of his garden. Here, beyond the miniature pond with its lone duck, is the sawdusty space where through even the coldest months of the year, David works on his 'tableau toys'. His nativity set echoes the German tradition of simple figures grouped together under a simple wooden roofed stable, making a picture and telling a story.

He is, as a quick glimpse around his house bears out, obsessed with arrangements of objects and primitive animal toys from around the world.

'I am very romantic about animals,' says David, who studied as an artist at Camberwell before going on to teach Bangladeshi children newly arrived in East London. 'I'm also interested in education and childhood. The children I was teaching couldn't speak much English but they expressed themselves beautifully in art.'

David has been taming wild animals for his arks, nativities and circus scenes for over 40 years. His hippos are happy, his lions, laid-back, his penguins pick-up-able. They are both lovely on the eye and robust; aesthetically thrilling to adults and whole worlds of play for children.

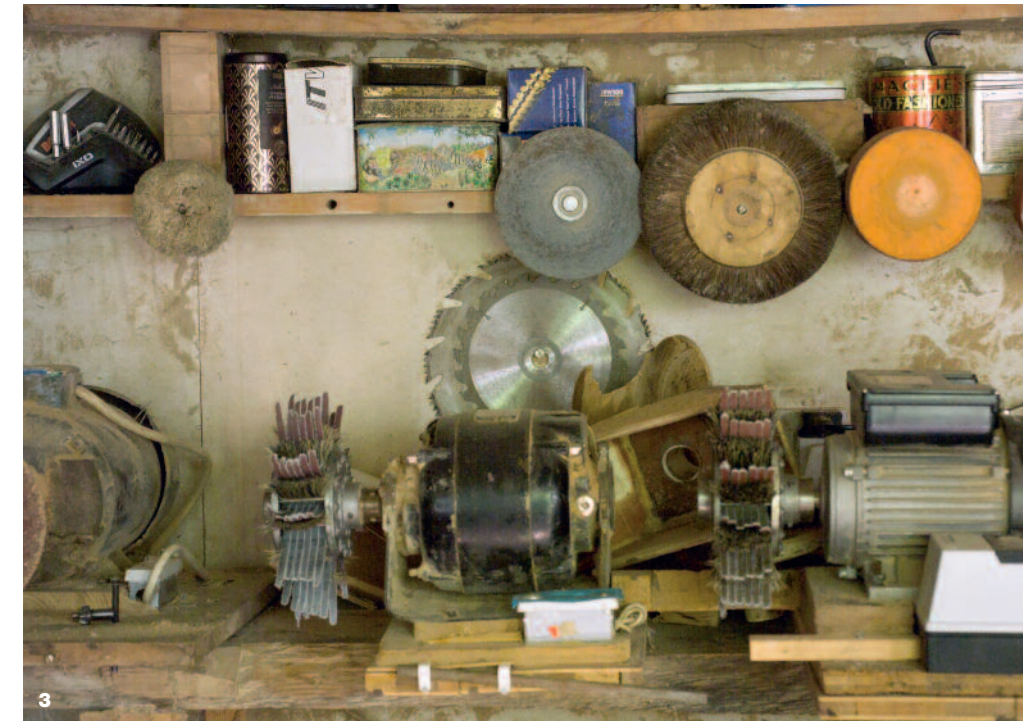
It was on a school field trip with his pupils to the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green, London – 'I was never that keen on teaching in the class' – when the business of making arks first grabbed his imagination.

'They had some wonderful German arks in the European tradition of toymaking, pre-industrial, 19th-century,' says David. 'It tied in with what I liked: one of my heroes was Sam Smith, a graphic designer who took toys and transferred them into art objects. He had also absorbed the European tradition.'

Pick up one of David's finished cheetahs and you will see how the strands of his artistic talent and fascination with learning and play come together. It is a toy, a cheery yellow chap with a kind face, but it is also tactile and exciting, like a piece of living artwork.

His first animal project, after he discovered the flexibility and efficiency of the bandsaw, was to make 31 little horses for his pupils. It confirmed he'd inherited the family gene.

'My mother's side were all compulsive makers – seamstresses, hat makers – and my granddad was a cobbler and had a shed at the bottom of the garden just like I do. It might have been for economic reasons, because they couldn't afford to buy things, but it was also that they weren't very good at sitting still.'



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Around this time, David's daughter, Anna, was born, and his first floating home for animals, 'crude and simple in design' was made for her.

'If you think about the story that's represented in Noah's Ark it is man saving the world,' David says. 'It is also about pairings, which children like, and centred around a safe house – it has archetypal elements to it. My grandson has a later version of the one I made for my daughter and I can see how crude my original arks were. Worse than that someone from the Bethnal Green Museum bought one of my early ones and it is still there – I find it a bit embarrassing!'

But his talent for making was spotted not just by the Museum of Childhood but by the national press, and soon orders started coming in. With the simple style of German Erzgebirge toys (they were often made by miners to make a living during the winter months) in his head, David began to develop his own style of working and manufacture. ▶

- 1 A carefully carved camel and crocodile waiting to be sanded and painted
- 2 David proudly holding one of his arks in the doorway of his workshop
- 3 An array of linishers and sanders on David's work bench
- 4 Handcarving as David does takes years of skill and experience
- 5 Blocks of lime wood waiting to be carved



'Most of the animals are made from lime, the Grinling Gibbons wood, which gives a lovely finish,' he explains. 'They are made from a solid block of wood so it is pretty childproof and the paint you can use is strictly regulated. Everything has to go with the grain and the legs are all worked downwards because the animals have to withstand being banged around. All of that affects interpretation. But I think that limitation produces something interesting.'

The transformative magic of turning a piece of wood into a recognisable figure is

now an efficient process: 'I've taught myself to do things I'm sure you're not supposed to do on the bandsaw – I've evolved a series of cuts that I can introduce between the legs or from the head down to give them definition.' Then it is on to grinding them with coarse flat-wheel sanders and smoothing them off with a series of machines, including the odd-ball finisher wheel fixed with tiny flicking tongues of sandpaper.

Since the early days, David has refined his figures to become more realistic. His wife Ronnie, who as David says, 'is a New Yorker

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1 A simple Noah's ark and its inhabitants made from mixed woods

2 Lovingly carved and beautifully painted this ark is sure to become a much-loved family heirloom

3 Noah and his wife with two feline companions

4 David's nativity scenes make popular Christmas gifts that families cherish for generations

and knows about what the customer wants, whereas I am more cheap and cheerful', acts as quality control. One of the biggest challenges is getting the right level of emotion on the faces of the nativity figures and making sure Mr and Mrs Noah don't look too pointy or unfriendly.

'I am obsessed with miniatures,' David says. 'I think most people are. With the miniature you can hold it in your hand: it is controllable, it is mimicking the world out there and reducing it to a manageable size, you can act out the danger and reduce it. All the children love the crocodile figure because it is fierce.'

Each ark set takes around three weeks to a month to make – 'the ark itself is non-traditional, more barge-shaped than hydro-dynamic' – and start around £650 for a mixed wood set. Although David has made arks for Hamley's and JK Rowling has bought at least a couple, much of his business comes from grandparents wanting a special toy that will last and be played with for years. He has also introduced a more affordable range of unpainted animals and recently added a brilliant designed laser-cut bird that can be jiggled around into a squawking array of shapes and colours.

Plus, he explains, there is the option of buying an ark on its own or with a small number of creatures and adding a new pair every month, or once a year for a birthday, so



that they really are coming into the child's life two by two. When the call comes for a pair of dolphins or flamingos, they come out of the workshop and into his magical little paintshed – a raised galley off the kitchen covered in art postcards and pictures of ancient toys – to be finished.

'I sit by the window where it is illuminated to work on them. All of them get dipped in paint and in varnish and I stick them on the dripping stand. And then I work on them again. If you were sat up a mountain in Germany having to make 200 toys a day to make your living, you didn't half get good at it. So my phrase is that the paint has "to fall off the end of a brush." You need to find a series of marks that are relatively easy to make and instantly recognisable as a mouth and so on,' David explains with enthusiasm.

In this his fourth decade of toymaking, the knowledge that children fall in love with the animals and talk to them is still one of the biggest rewards.

'Customers are lovely, they will send photos of their grandchild playing with the ark or write us letters telling us how much fun they've had with them,' David smiles.

'We've been doing it so long that people who had them as children are now buying them for their children. And I am onto restoration: people get in touch and say, "the dog's been at the penguin, can you fix it?"'

FIND OUT MORE

For more information about David's arks, nativity sets and toys, visit his website at www.noahsarktoys.eu or call 01803 866786

