

TOYS *to* TREASURE

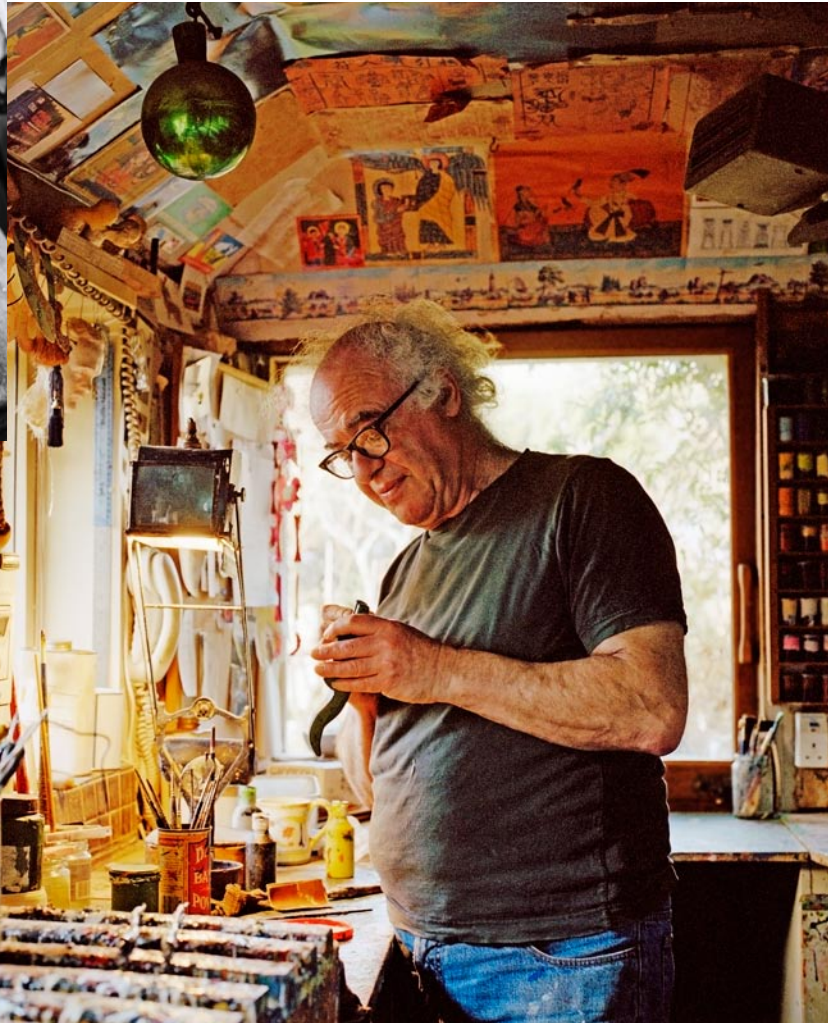
In the run-up to Christmas, David Plagerson's Devon studio feels like the Santa's workshop of every child's imagination as his hand-bewn nativity scenes assume their magical form, each piece crafted with passion and pride

WORDS BY KATHERINE SORRELL | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TARA FISHER



crafts





In a wooden shed at the bottom of a rambling garden in Totnes, Devon, a snowy-haired man is whittling away at a wooden block that he is slowly carving into a small donkey. It is mid-winter, but inside it's warm and cosy, and all that is needed is the sound of jingling bells and the whinny of a reindeer for it to feel just like the Santa's workshop of a child's imagination. A fine layer of sawdust covers every surface and fresh, sweet-smelling stacks of timber are labelled with animal names. A shelf holds a parade of chickens in varying degrees of finish; and along a sturdy bench is a row of Heath Robinsonesque machines, each one performing a vital function in the creation of the wooden nativity scenes and Noah's arks, farmyards and circus sets that form the heart of this toymaker's collection.

The run-up to Christmas is so busy for David Plageron that he once ended up in hospital. He has since learnt to pace himself, working steadily and producing half a dozen of each animal at a time. "Most people buy a set outright, but I do have some customers who will start off with an ark, and then add a pair of animals once a month or for birthdays," he explains, as he blows the sawdust from his newly whittled donkey, which he puts to one side and then turns to begin another. From an old tin box, he selects a simple template and draws around it onto a block of wood. With a band saw, he quickly and expertly cuts out a chunky profile and then starts to refine the shape. As he moves his hands back and forwards around the blade, the block of wood is rapidly

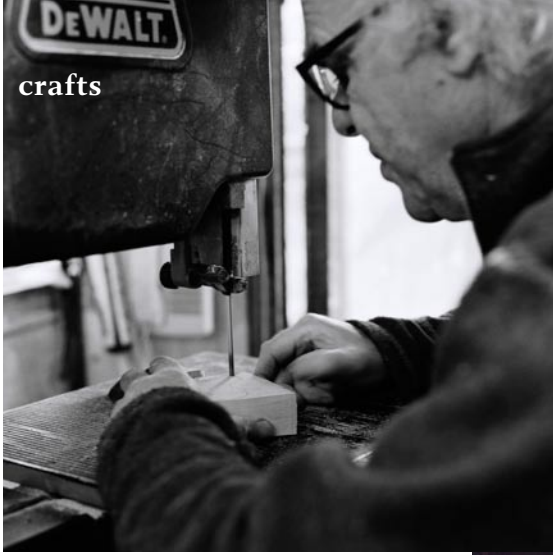
transformed: a V-shape nipped out here, a downward cut there, a smooth glide that in one stroke turns the side of the nose, and then a flank. In just a few minutes a second, solid and characterful figure emerges. "My party piece," he says.

It is clearly a donkey, although it has been created using as few cuts as possible, giving the minimum number of clues in order for it to be instantly recognisable. "It's all about economy of design," he says. But at this stage it is still roughly hewn, and there is much more work to be done, from careful whittling and endless sanding to painstaking painting, varnishing, waxing or staining, before it can take its place in the nativity stable.

"People are far harder to create than animals," David explains. "Their faces must be appealing, not witchy or asymmetrical, and every now and then I'll have a saga with one!" Mrs Noah's face can be particularly tricky, as can glamorous circus girls. Ronnie, David's wife, who acts as quality control, will reject any figures that aren't up to scratch. "It is solitary work, and the economics are permanently anxiety-provoking, but I am a compulsive maker, and I am only happy when I am doing this," David says.

He has always been fascinated by toys and the idea of how our children are socialised by them. He originally trained as a painter and then worked as an art teacher in East London, where he was inspired by the Bangladeshi refugee children he encountered there. "They taught me about simplicity of design, strength of colour and fluidity of brush strokes," says David, >

David uses local sustainable lime wood for its lightness and smooth finish, transforming the blocks of wood into simple but instantly recognisable forms, using as few cuts as possible before refining the shape. "It's all about economy of design," he says.



Weeks, even months, of work go into every toy to produce beautiful pieces that will light up a child's face on Christmas morning

who is now settling himself in the organised chaos of his own dedicated paint workshop, crammed with colour samples, brushes, drying racks and a rainbow of assorted paraphernalia. "My interest in toys and children's play was really kindled by the birth of my daughter, Anna, in 1971. I would regularly visit the Museum of Childhood in Bethnal Green and study the toys there, particularly the European wooden toys including some really beautiful German Noah's Arks. There was nothing like them in Britain at the time, so I decided to make one for Anna."

Just as the animals multiplied, so did the arks, as David went on to make them for friends and family. Soon a newspaper wrote a small piece about his work, and all of a sudden David's toy-making had turned into a business, of which the Noah's Arks were its mainstay. "Children love recognising the elements that make up an animal or figure, and naming them," he says. "I think that is one of the basic pleasures of playing with an ark – the universal appeal of putting animals into pairs, and the idea of a safe home that is also a boat."

David's nativity scenes, farmyards, flamboyant circuses and splendid chess sets possess a similar charm and beauty, and are equally destined to light up a young child's face on Christmas morning. Each is carved from local sustainable lime wood, known as the 'carver's wood' for its lightness and smooth finish. But for an ark that is truly special, he will use 17 different woods, selected to reflect the character of each animal and finished in

subtle beeswax. David also works to commission, and is regularly asked to make copies of pets from photographs. He even created a witty figure of his friend, playwright and film-maker Mike Leigh, as an organ grinder's monkey. Children's author JK Rowling is also a customer. Most rewardingly, perhaps, they can also now be found back where it all began in the Museum of Childhood.

But David's work is rarely collected and put on a shelf just to be looked at. The cost of the toys reflect the weeks, or even months of work that goes into each beautiful piece – these are toys that are saved up for and, once bought, become heirlooms that will beg to be picked up and played with for generations to come. "People who buy my toys care about aesthetics and children's play, and usually love the idea of the toys being passed down through families," says David, as he begins to dot the eyes on a bashful-looking donkey. "I sometimes do have to encourage people not to be precious about them because there's no need. They're totally child-proof. They might get teeth marks on, but I have a repair service and can give them a sand and re-paint; I'm getting 30-year-old ones back for repair now. Most rewarding of all, I get letters from parents telling me that their children have played with their toys every day." 🐾

A painted nativity scene with ten figures costs £510; an Ark with 12 pairs of mixed-wood, beeswax-finished animals, costs £575; painted ark with ten pairs of painted animals costs £995.

Contact David on 01803 866786 or via www.noahsarktoys.eu.

Once he has created the shape, David spends hours whittling, sanding, painting, varnishing, waxing and staining to give the toys a strong sense of character. As well as the nativity scenes, his collection includes Noah's arks, farmyards and circus sets.