



# IT ALWAYS STARTS WITH A DOODLE...

But David Tragen's art, created in a tiny workshop in Ashley,  
now has Hollywood producer Jon Landau among its collectors

WORDS: Kate Houghton

**D**avid Tragen may have had no intention, as a young man, of following any form of creative path, but here he is. A degree in international business with languages took him to Rome; training as a TEFL teacher took him to Barcelona; and watching a friend design and build shelves and storage for his empty flat took him to a realisation that 'I could do that'.

'It gave me some insight into what can be achieved with just some basic knowledge. Later, I saw a light in Habitat I liked, and thought, "I could do that myself," so I set about it, and did.

'I began by collecting bits and pieces of unwanted furniture and set up a workshop in my spare room. I signed up for a woodworking course and a marquetry course and started to upcycle furniture, adding marquetry, cutting a hole in a tabletop and inserting stained glass, etc. I got commissions from friends, and it began to grow.

'In 2000, I moved back to the UK and joined the fine furniture maker David Savage on a 12-month designer-maker course. Following this I joined Silver Lining Workshops, in Chester, working on pieces for high-end homes in London, both onsite with fitted furniture and creating freestanding furniture. My plan was always to go solo, and in 2005 I did.'

David found his way into a distinctive style of cabinetry, from tables and cabinets to mirrors and wall art, and his timeless, breathtakingly beautiful pieces have a ready audience, with commissions providing a steady flow of work. It is his unique style and the sinuous, flowing curves he paints with wood, all handcrafted in his Ashley workshop, that led to an invitation to join the curated website 1stDibs, which showcases only the most beautiful and unique of jewellery, furniture and fashion, and on to a second invitation to attend one of the biggest film premieres of the year.

At the end of 2022, the Oscar-winning producer of *Titanic* and *Avatar*, Jon Landau, spotted his coffee table, *Sidewinder*. Filming for *Avatar: The Way of Water*, as well as further releases in the franchise, took place in New Zealand and Jon and his wife, Julie, had bought themselves a seafront apartment in Wellington. The couple took a hands-on approach, seeking out furniture they felt a connection to and which stood out of the ordinary.

'You don't know who you're liaising with on 1stDibs, you just get a first name, so I had no idea who he was at first,' David explains. Jon placed an order for three pieces – the coffee

table *Sidewinder*, the side table *Aguaviva* and the floating shelf *Genie*, all to be shipped to New Zealand, and then said he was coming to London soon. I went and selected the wood I would need and brought it to Ashley, then made a little video to show him the wood and talk through the steps I'd be taking. Within hours he got back to me and said he loved the video, and by the way, the reason he'd be in London was for the premiere of *Avatar* and would we like to attend?'

The occasion required the purchase of a dinner suit, the first since university days, and convincing his partner, Shireen, (and himself) it wasn't an elaborate hoax.

'It was amazing. After collecting our tickets, we saw Kate Winslet (who plays Ronal) and James Cameron (writer and director) being interviewed; then we saw Sigourney Weaver (who plays Kiri). I felt

like a kid in a sweetshop – there was fabulous food and chocolates on our seats, and Bill Bailey, also a guest, was sitting behind us. We were trying to stay cool – but Bill Bailey was sitting behind us.

'After the showing, a fleet of taxis took all the guests to the after party, held at the Natural History Museum. I thought Jon would be too busy to talk with me, so I found his wife and said hello and she insisted on me going over to meet him. When I checked my phone later, I saw he'd actually texted >

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**above:** David Tragen is being drawn into a more purely decorative form of sculpture

**left:** David's floating shelf, *Genie*, is his most commissioned piece to date



**above:** *Sidewinder* and *Aguaviva* in the living room of Jon Landau's New Zealand waterfront apartment

'I am learning to push things further, question myself harder: is it really that good? Is it good enough to go in my portfolio? Is it good enough for people to say wow?'

**below:** David's first design in his new sculpture series, *Transmission*, has a centre light that casts a delicate glow. Photo: Matthew Secc

me to meet him at the bar. We chatted about the project, and he introduced me to his friends – he made me feel very special. It's been a hard slog and having my work recognised by someone like that feels like a landmark moment.'

David, while still accepting commissions for his furniture, is currently being drawn in a new direction, away from the 'functional art', as he calls it, of his furniture designs, and into a purer form of sculpture. His first piece, *Transmission*, has received much acclaim and a place in a luxury home, and led to a commission for an adaptation of *Transmission*, created in a cold cast bronze resin, from a homebuilder for a sculpture to sit in a communal garden at Watermill Gardens in Prestwich. He has since developed a new design, *Convergence*, made with cold-cast

marble, which has stretched his digital and physical design skills even further.

'I'm working on a new piece now,' he says. 'A really complicated design with 20 segments of two different designs. Developing a new portfolio piece takes time and there have been lots of experiments en route and in different parts of the process. It always starts with a doodle, playing around with an idea, a form, then it seems to coalesce and fuse into something and I think: "Yes, that's it".

'I am learning also to push things further, question myself harder: is it really that good? Is it good enough to go in my portfolio? Is it good enough for people to say wow? With this new piece, that happened just a few days ago.' ●

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