

EVERGREEN STUDIOS:

A lifelong Apprenticeship

BY JOHN LUKE

***O**n the second or third day of our vacation, [my parents' oldest friend] would come to call in his Gar Wood speedboat.... My brother and I were there to say hello and admire the speedboat, whose lines were lovely and economical and curvy as bull's horns, and as lethal. The brightwork was polished and the mahogany varnished to a luminous shine so that you could see your face in it through the tiny weblike cracks. The leather seats were soft, like the well-worn seats of an English sports car. The leather smell mixed with gasoline fumes was intoxicating. In a machine like that you could go anywhere, north to Mackinac or south to St. Louis, always attracting attention. It had been built years earlier in Sheboygan, and built to last."*

The words are those of the protagonist of Ward Just's distinguished 1989 novel, *Jack Gance*, recalling a day in 1944. But the respect for craftsmanship and quality they reflect echoes down the years in the way Olympia, Wash.-based Michael Ashford talks about becoming a sailor, learning to appreciate and then build fine wooden boats, and about crafting lamps in the Dirk van Erp-style that have made his Evergreen Studios one of the

most sought-after lighting shops on the contemporary Arts and Crafts scene.

An Improbable Journey

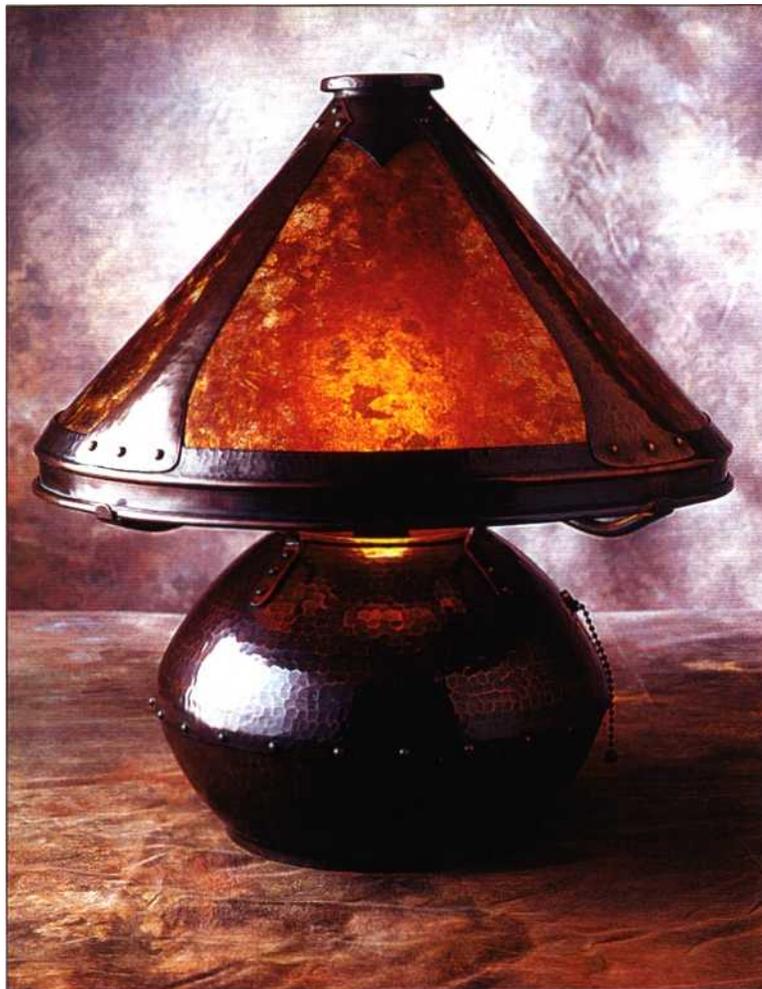
When Michael graduated from college with a business degree in the mid-1970s and took what he calls an "unengaging" suit-and-tie job, there was nothing in his personal history to suggest that he would one day—last year, in fact—be the first modern-day craftsman to be invited to lecture at Bruce Johnson's Grove Park Inn Arts and Crafts Conference.

Then, again, there was nothing to presage his falling in love with sailing and the summer spent rebuilding an 18-foot sloop originally built by the Northwest naval architect Ted Geary. He became an apprentice shipwright and then the quality-control inspector for Bellingham-based Uniflite, the original builder of the luxurious Valiant line of sailing yachts, only to see his job and his career as a boat builder evaporate in 1980, when the company's factory burned down.

"Rebuilding the Geary sloop was what started it all," Michael says. "As a kid, I had never done anything with

my hands. No wood shop, no metal shop, nothing. But when I finished with that boat that summer, I thought, 'Wow, that's pretty cool. Maybe I could do that for a living.' "

During the years he was learning to build boats at Uniflite, he found that "the beautiful details of a wood boat are structural in nature, the same as Arts and Crafts furnishings. Pinned joints, exposed tenons and corbels, hand hammering and rivet joinery all contribute to both the beauty and structure of the objects we all love."



But the factory fire disrupted all that, and the nearly simultaneous offer of a teaching job for Michael's wife Cathy took the couple to Olympia. There, after unsuccessfully trying to get a boat repair business going, he donned a suit and tie again-as a salesman for Pitney Bowes-all the while continuing to develop his knowledge and skills in building things on the side. After seven years, the couple had amassed a nest egg sizable enough to fund the purchase of six acres in the nearby Capitol Forest foothills, where they planned to build a house.

"I wanted to build it myself, so I started looking at books of house plans. That's when I discovered Stickley's *Craftsman Homes*. And that's when my life changed again."

The Beauty of Craft

Michael didn't build the entire house himself, but he built all the cabinets, patterning them on Craftsman models, and designed a small nautical bath off the office. And he built a Gustav Stickley-inspired spindle coffee table that caught the interest of his friend Jeff Hill, of Craftsman Antiques in Seattle.

Jeff said, "Hey, we could sell some of these." So Michael kept on building. He also began doing some Stickley case pieces, and when one needed hammered-copper door and drawer pulls, he decided to try to make them himself. His work with boats had taught him to be resourceful: "You develop an attitude that, with a little research, you can build just about anything," Michael says.

He got some books on coppersmithing, made the pulls, and in the process discovered a new passion, one that eventually led him in 1988 to quit Pitney Bowes - "Thank God Cathy had her teaching job, or I would have stayed"-set up Evergreen Studios and eventually re-apprentice himself, in a way, this time to the copper-smithing techniques of the Dirk van Erp Studio.



Michael also immersed himself in the entire Arts and Crafts scene, and for five years in the mid-1990s joined with Jodi Harris in producing the Pacific Coast Arts and Crafts Exhibition, at the time the largest Arts and Crafts show on the West Coast.

Passing On the Tradition

In the excruciating process of transforming a flat sheet of copper into the varied shapes of van Erp-style lamps, Michael has become

one of a handful of self-taught savants. (It was his 1999 article, "Demystifying van Erp," published in *Style: 1900*, that prompted Bruce Johnson to invite him to speak at Grove Park.) Today, he and his three employees-Jimmi Davies, Scott Swayze and Mike Esparza-have a continuous five-month backlog of orders for lamps, sconces and chandeliers.

In their shop-a "brutal 20-yard commute from my home office," Michael says-they spend 30 to 35 hours building a normal-size table lamp and up to 80 hours on a large one. And the pattern of apprenticeship that Michael followed from shipwright to coppersmith continues in the shop today.

"I taught Jimmi, and he and I taught Scott, and we're all teaching Mike," Michael says. "My crew is invaluable to me. There is so much to learn, and so many ways to screw it up. I'm blessed that they are with me." ID



MICHAEL RAISING A LAMP BASE.



FROM LEFT MIKE, SCOTT, JIMMI AND MICHAEL.