

Piedmont teen - from traffic signs to furniture

Noelle Robbins, Special to The Chronicle

Wednesday, May 27, 2009



David Joseph-Goteiner has a passion for traffic signs, which is probably not so unusual for a teenage boy. But, in David's case, it has nothing to do with driving. The 17-year-old crafts old metal signs into practical and whimsical tables, stools and chairs.

David, who lives in Piedmont, attends San Francisco's Lick-Wilmerding High School, which turned out to be the perfect place to explore the possibilities of traffic signs. Lick-Wilmerding is known as a top-notch college prep high school, but it is also a pioneer in the technical arts and has been for more than a century. Shop classes are a key element in its curriculum.

As is often the case with blossoming artisans, David fell into his art by accident; his sister, Maya, offered him some traffic signs she had picked up at a flea market 10 years earlier, as raw material. The feel of the metal and the vibrant colors got his creative juices flowing.

For his very first piece, a table, three signs - one bright yellow topped with a jet-black arrow, and two blue street-name signs - provided the basic materials.

"I was amazed at how the traffic sign pieces fit together so well," David says. "Five simple pieces that just came together. I'd always had this notion that complicated was the measure of how good a piece was, but I finally understood how a simple and durable design has beauty."

Most of David's pieces, which he makes at his high school workshop, are tables of various sizes and one Super Bowl chair, which morphed into a chip and dip table. He also made a heart out of traffic sign metal for a friend's prom date. He has completed 12 pieces and is working on No. 13, a recliner. His projects fill the living room, line the hallway and inhabit the outdoor decks at home.

Sometimes a sign shape or color will inspire him; sometimes a design idea sends him to the traffic sign store looking for metal signs that will fit the project. His primary source is Hawkins Traffic Safety Supply in Berkeley, where salesman Sean Tracy sets aside signs in vibrant shades of red, yellow, blue and orange that he knows will particularly appeal to the young artist.

David says the analytical approach to construction offers him a quiet focus. He was introduced to a wide variety of metalworking options two years ago in a design and technology class taught by David Clifford, instructor in the technical arts department.

Working his way through blacksmithing, machinery, welding and riveting classes, he picked up technical skills and a desire to create things that fill an artistic and practical need. "It is an opportunity to experiment, to create pieces that people can interact with and that are relevant in a room," David says. "It is about art that is universal and multipurpose. It is not so much about math as it is about spatial relations and ergonomics."

Ergonomic metal

Ergonomics? And metal?

David's tables are sturdy, lightweight and weatherproof. They will not rust because traffic signs, which spend years in the elements, are manufactured of heavy-gauge aluminum or steel to withstand the forces of nature (although David does treat other metal components in his pieces with anti-rust spray), and have rounded corners and smooth metal surfaces.

Pieces meant for seating, David says, are proportioned to body dimensions and curves. And the recliner in progress will have a cushion for the head.

David says there is a therapeutic value to his art. "I am learning to take my sweet time, to slow down," says the junior, who is also an amateur photographer, debater, varsity tennis player and a Coro Youth Fellow busy addressing the problems of minority and poor communities in the Bay Area.

The grinding room, where finishing touches are put on each piece, is David's ultimate refuge from stress. Behind his goggles, intently focused on his metal, he has been known to completely lose track of time.

Clifford said he was impressed with David's vision and commitment from the start. "David got the relationship between object and user," he says.

There was extra credit for using sustainable and recycled materials, so David's choice of color-saturated stop signs, construction zone warnings and highway signs stood out.

Not just a grade

When Clifford left on sabbatical, at the conclusion of the semester in December, instructor Gary Goddard took charge of the class and quickly recognized David's talent and zeal. "David is undertaking projects that would be challenging for anyone, not just for a high school student. He comes in at all times of the day to work; it is obviously not about a grade, it is a passion."

It is under Goddard's watch that David embarked on the recliner, one of his most daunting and intricate traffic sign pieces. It is modeled after Chaise Lounge Model No. B306 designed in 1928 by French architect Le Corbusier. But while the original chaise used pony skin and leather, David's interpretation relies on the metal signs, and other recycled materials, shaped in flat and tubular arrangements.

He designed the piece, constructed the metal frame and then found signs he could cut to fit the frame. For another piece, the long-held desire to make an octagonal table from a stop sign served as the inspiration, and the design and base construction went from there. Some of his pieces use recycled wood components for legs and drawers.

David sees another side to his metalworking efforts: the chance to nurture an idea from concept to completion. He gets so attached to his recycled metal creations that he has trouble parting with them. But now with a good cause in mind, David is aiming to put his work on the market and donate the proceeds to music and other programs at Oakland public schools. He has four pieces for sale priced from \$200 to \$400 and will consider special orders.

As much as he loves making furniture, the signs in his future are pointing in a different direction. The high school junior plans to pursue international relations and business in college, with classes in history as an additional focus.

For David, his furniture is as much about learning from mistakes as it is about artistic expression, and the signs he uses often are mistakes themselves - seconds with misspelled words, off-center printing. He says that adds to the excitement of the process.

"I have great opportunities in my metal shop class. I gain a lot from experimenting, designing and building my own furniture," he says. "I hope the money I raise by selling my furniture can give students in Oakland public schools the same opportunity to learn in an exciting environment."

To find out about David Joseph-Goteiner's furniture, e-mail the artist at deejay510@gmail.com.

E-mail comments to home@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/27/DD8Q17F8MN.DTL>

This article appeared on page **E - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle