

Sitting pretty

Woodworker carves niche with 18th-century lambing chair

By **ROGER McBAIN** Courier & Press staff writer 464-7520 or rmcbain@evansville.net
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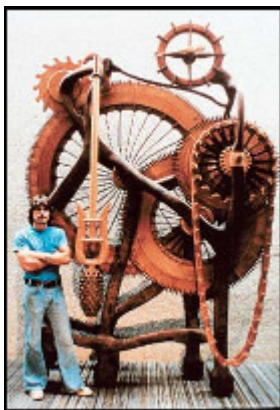
VINCENT PUGLIESE / Courier & Press

Sculptor and woodworker Kenneth Fisher works on a lambing chair based on an 18th-century design from England. Fisher, who has a studio in Stewartsville, Ind., has been crafting furniture for 30 years. He works from a shop in Indiana, a studio in France and an apartment in New York.



VINCENT PUGLIESE / Courier & Press

Fisher's lambing chairs come in several sizes and woods.



Tony Velotta

Fisher was a life science major at the University of Southern Indiana, taking art classes on the side, when he built "Time Stops for the Artist," a 12-foot-tall, 8-foot-wide wooden clock made from black cherry, black walnut, hard maple and birch, red and white oak and sugar pine

For big, boxy pieces of solid wooden furniture, Kenneth "Kenny" Fisher's lambing chairs get around - from Posey County, Ind., to New York to France and back. Fisher cuts, trims and fits sassafras, catalpa, cherry and walnut pieces for the chairs in a pole barn in Posey County, Ind. He assembles and finishes them at a studio in France, where he shares a home with his wife and two children.

And he markets the chairs everywhere - in New York, where he keeps an apartment; at furniture shows and in galleries in Europe and the United States; in the New Harmony Inn in New Harmony, Ind.; in Evansville Regional Airport; and in the international cyberspace of the World Wide Web.

He's sold the chairs, listed on his Web site for up to \$2,225, in England, France and the United States. Buyers have included playwright and actor Sam Shepard and actors Stephanie Zimbalist and Richard Shoberg. It's been a remarkable adventure from the start, says Fisher. It all began in 1977 in New Harmony, Ind., when he met Jane Owen. Owen, New Harmony's best-known benefactor and patron of the arts, asked to meet Fisher after seeing a picture of the 12-foot-tall, 8-foot-wide sculpted wooden clock he'd made over four semesters of studio art shop classes at the University of Southern Indiana.

Fisher, she learned, wasn't even an art major. He was a Posey County farmboy who'd gone into the Marine Corps right after high school. Using the GI Bill, Fisher, a North Posey High School graduate, had gone to USI as a premed student, taking art classes on the side. Fisher finished a degree in biology, but he also haunted the wood shop, putting in an estimated 3,000 hours on his enormous clock, a 350-pound arrangement of gears, wheels, cogs, chains and pulleys carved, shaped and assembled from black walnut, black cherry, birch, sugar pine, hard maple, red and white oak. He worked in construction for a year before taking a job as a chemical plant operator at GE Plastics in Mount Vernon, Ind.

Owen encouraged him to go to art school and to apply at the Rhode Island School of Design. A picture of his clock got him accepted there, he says, and Owen paid for his first year at the prestigious school. Fisher stayed for two more years, earning a master of fine arts degree, refining his mastery of art furniture design and execution. He worked out of studios in Layton, N.J., and Woodstock, N.Y., before moving to Brooklyn, where he shared a shop and studio, making his living building, repairing and restoring furniture, mainly for wealthy New Yorkers.

It was in New York that Fisher encountered his first lambing chair. It was an early 19th-century English chair that Owen's mother, Sarah Campbell Blaffer, had purchased from a Paris antiques dealer in about 1920, took to her family's estate in Canada and later brought into the United States. Owen's daughter Anne Owen, who lived in New York, inherited the chair in the 1970s. She asked Fisher to repair and restore it.

The lambing chair - a boxlike wingback chair with a simple drawer under the seat - was a common piece of furniture in specific sheep-raising districts in northern England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. "This was a poor man's chair," says Fisher, and was typically built from planks by ordinary carpenters using cleats, screws and nails to hold it all together. With their low seats and boxlike backs and arms, the lambing chairs effectively blocked drafts and helped hold the heat from a fire when pulled near the hearth of a shepherd's hut. Even without a cushion, the boxy chairs were comfortable, remaining in use from the early 18th century into the mid-19th century.

In 1986, Jane and Anne Owen commissioned Fisher to build 45 poplar lambing chairs for an addition to the New Harmony Inn, using the family heirloom as his model. Fisher continued to build the chairs, refining his own designs in several sizes. He used different woods, incorporated more sophisticated joints and eliminated the screws and cleats traditionally used to bind the chairs' planks together. Instead, Fisher designed contoured jigs to hold and clamp pieces in place for gluing. The jigs allowed him to cut and fit the parts, then assemble them later.

That was particularly important after 1996, when he married Pascale Vinson, a French secretary of Jane Owen's sister, the Princess Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenburg. The couple met in New Harmony at Jane Owen's 80th birthday celebration. After their wedding, Fisher divided his time between the Brooklyn studio and the home he and his wife shared in Paris. After the birth of their son, Lucas, they moved to a home in the Champaign region, where Pascale works as a teacher's aide. A daughter, Johanna, came two years after Lucas, now 7. Fisher kept his New York apartment, but moved his shop to a pole barn not far from his parents' Posey County farm in summer of 2001. Since then he's flown from home to home, spending time with his family in France, keeping his contacts in New York and working at his studio in Stewartsville.

He continues working on other projects, including restoring furniture, building new art furniture on commission and helping a local company with a new product design, but he wants to develop a bigger market for the lambing chairs.

Fisher got a boost in February when Edward S. Cooke Jr., Yale University's Charles F. Montgomery professor of decorative arts, published "Refined Vernacular, the Work of Kenneth Fisher," a seven-page, illustrated article in *Woodwork* magazine.

Cooke tracked Fisher down after discovering one of his chairs in the Milwaukee Art Museum's "please be seated" Chair Park. From the chair's boxy look, he expected it to be "stiff and extremely uncomfortable," Cooke wrote, but even without a seat cushion, it proved "as comfortable a chair as I had ever sat in." The article delved into the history of the chair and told Fisher's story, from his clock to other art furniture to the lambing chairs.

Since then, Fisher has received inquiries about the chairs from England, Australia, Canada and Germany. Unfortunately, most aren't from buyers, says Fisher; they're from other artisans wanting plans to build the chairs themselves.

He has considered selling plans and perhaps even an instructional video, but Cooke has advised against it. "He suggested that I offer to lead workshops around the country and internationally." In the meantime, he's posted a copy of Cooke's article on his Web site, www.lambingchair.com. The site has photographs of the chairs, tells about their history and includes a pricing list.

He counts on more people seeing and sitting in his chairs in museums, at the New Harmony Inn, at galleries and in places such as the Evansville Regional Airport, where two sit across from the ticket counters.

And he hopes everyone who's bought one will invite their friends to try it out, says Fisher.

"I could use some referrals."