

Jeff Soan

Jeff studied Art and Design at Goldsmith's College in the late 60's, taught for a few years, travelled for a while, married, started a family and a building business during the 70's. He gave up building in the mid 80's when his knees, back and some clients started troubling him.

A chance encounter with a wobbly rat from Chile changed his life. He was so inspired by this articulating folk toy that he joined a course in toy making at the London College of Furniture, successfully completing the City and Guilds course. He set up his garden workshop in 1987, making toys which were sold at the local craft market in Greenwich. After a year of selling many new designs he eventually returned to the articulating creatures that had so fascinated him. A batch of wobbly fish being snapped up by eager customers caught the eye of a passing TV producer and he was invited to take part in a BBC programme called 'Handmade'. Sales really took off and he started developing many different creatures incorporating the technique.

Jeff joined the British Toymakers Guild in 1989. His distinctive talent was quickly recognised and he was awarded the Polka Prize in 1989, the coveted title "Toymaker of the Year" in 1995 and 2000 and the Guild cup in 1990, 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1999. He was also winner of the Longleat Cup in 2000.

The turning point in his career, however, came with his successful application in 1991, into *The Chelsea Craft Fair*, organised by the Crafts Council. This prestigious show attracts the cream of the craft world, national and international buyers and a large appreciative public. Since the outset there has been so much work that Jeff has required help in the workshop. He has been fortunate to have found many willing, able and talented assistants but none more exceptional than **Julia Darke** who joined him in 1991 and remains to this day.



Artist Statement



My work reflects equally a love of creatures, great and small, and a love of wood.

My earlier training as an artist and more lately as a toymaker has led to objects which can be seen as playful sculpture or perhaps sculptural toys but I generally refer to it as Wobbly Wood.

I try to express the essential nature of the animals, birds, and fish I create, sometimes by simplification, sometimes by attention to detail and very often by the sinuous movement achieved with the technique of articulation. A large part of my work in recent years has been investigating the possibilities of this wobbly wood which is created by cutting the wood into narrow sections and securing it to canvas.

I utilise the woods natural forms and features; its grain, colour and bark to suggest the creatures shape, markings, feathers and texture. I reduce waste as far as possible, for example the off-cut portion of a big fishes tail will form the breast of a bird. This awareness means that while cutting fish I can be thinking bird; one will reshape the other.

Reclaimed wood is used extensively, from discarded furniture, driftwood, industrial pallets and friends and neighbour's prunings and it is this found wood that often informs and shapes the work. This constantly varying source of timber helps keep the work fresh and alive

Quotes

We are pleased to inform you that your fishes have reached here in good condition and obtained a high reputation among our customers because they are so beautiful.....*Niki Tiki ,Tokyo*

Congratulations on making such a perfectly beautiful salmon with such elegance and character. I could not be more thrilled with it...*Mary Tuely, Woodstock.*

"I am thrilled to bits with the seal ! He is wonderful - such a cheeky, inquisitive look. I feel any minute he's going to follow me across the room - so full of life. He will be a treasured possession.....*Diana Seacy, Edinburgh*

It is difficult not to talk in superlatives about your fish. Long may they continue....*Fish addict, Heidi Lichterman*

More,more, more urgently required.....*Ronald Pile, Primavera*

Snake is utterly beautiful.... maybe I shall wear him round my neck when I go to Oxford.....he will be the pride of the collection.....*Iona Opie.*

you our so nace for mikin the toy fish. Thankeyuo for the toy fish. you our clever for mikin the toy fish and it must have tock a hoer to micke.....*Stephanie, Wolviston.*

Thank you very much for my beautiful seal, which arrived safely today and has caused much jealousy around the office.. *Gillian Ambers*

I decided to give the fish to my son as a Christmas present. I would like you to know that this has made me the most popular mother in the United Kingdom, if not the Western World..*Roma Schapiro*

"The sea otter is the best thing I've ever seen".....*Katie, 8½*

I would normally hesitate to describe anyone as a genius but I think that in the field of wooden toys Jeff Soan is such a being, He has looked anew at an established simple toymaking technique, available to any one who cared to think about it and done wonderful, beautiful things with it, stretching it to new limits with great sensitivity. He seems borne along like a surfer in full flow, skillfully extracting every bit of creative energy from his wave of 'wobbly wood'...*John Gould*

I was actually in search of a new sofa and ended up buying the octopus and the full sized crocodile. It's not very comfortable but very much more interesting..... *Laura Sykes, Putney*

The Mermaid I ordered as a wedding present arrived safely. When we opened the box and saw the wonderful flow of her douglas fir hair, the beautiful shape of her body complete with rubber nipples and elegantly curving tail we knew we couldn't part with her! So here she stays and our friends get champagne instead..... *Linda Irving-Bell, Oxford*