

Southern Surreal —The Masterpiece Furniture of Tilden Stone

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Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. —John Stuart Mill

Tilden James Stone was born in 1874 near Thomasville, North Carolina. After both his parents died in 1895, Stone headed to New York City to apprentice to a master cabinetmaker.

Several years later he moved back to Lenoir, NC, determined to make his fortune in the state's burgeoning wood industries. While he had remarkable early success, a series of economic panics and long recessions, coupled with instability caused by the First World War, soon soured him on a career as a furniture manufacturer.

Instead, he joined the U.S. Merchant Marine and spent most of the 1920s as a senior officer on a combination cargo and luxury passenger liner that plied the Pacific mail routes. By the time he retired from the sea in the early 1930s, he had gone around the world more than ten times and made some thirty-seven voyages to China.

Back home in Lenoir on furloughs between voyages, Stone did what pleased him most: building unusual pieces of fine furniture that reflected a wide variety of woodworking styles encountered on his extensive travels. Many of them feature highly unusual decorative elements such as dragons, fish, or wood-eating worms. Others conceal secret panels, hidden compartments, or disguised drawers protected by intricate puzzle mechanisms that may have been inspired by ancient Chinese furniture construction.

After ten years at sea, Stone settled back in Lenoir for good, working as a master pattern-maker for Bernhardt Furniture Company. In his spare time, he continued making highly unconventional

pieces for a few wealthy collectors. Late in life, apparently still feeling more at home on water than dry land, he built a house in Lincolnton shaped like a tramp steamer, setting up his workshop down in its cargo hold.

“Uncle T.J.” remained a delightfully eccentric character beloved by family and friends until his death in 1952. This is the first public exhibition of his rare and peculiar personal work in his home state. —Roger Manley, Curator and Director

PHOTOGRAPHS:

Tilden Stone, Apprentice

ca. 1895-1900

When both his parents died in 1895, Stone left his childhood home in Thomasville, North Carolina, and went to New York City to apprentice to a master carver and cabinetmaker for five years. At the end of his training he returned to live in Lenoir, NC, where he co-founded a series of small furniture companies. After changing hands a few times, one of them later became Broyhill Furniture Industries, which remains a major furniture manufacturer.

Aboard Ship

ca. 1925

Several Wall Street financial panics and recessions between 1910 and 1914, together with supply line uncertainties caused by the First World War, quelled Stone’s eagerness to found or operate furniture companies, although he would continue to enjoy making furniture in his spare time. Instead, he joined the U.S. Merchant Marine and spent most of the 1920s and early 1930s at sea. The majority of those years were as a senior officer on the S.S. President Wilson, a combination cargo ship and luxury passenger liner that followed the Pacific mail routes. During this phase of his life, Stone made thirty-seven voyages to China and at least ten trips around the world.

Ship-Shaped House

1946

In his early seventies Stone began building a new house and workshop on the outskirts of Lincolnton, NC, which was shaped like a tramp steamer. No one knows whether he was attempting to exploit a national craze for creating roadside attractions (since buildings shaped like ducks, giant fish, hotdogs, elephants, and teapots were being erected alongside major highways like Route 66 and US 1 during the same time period) or was only keenly missing his years at sea.

Exploring Old Manila, Philippines

ca. 1925-30

Unlike today's cruise ships, which typically remain in foreign ports only long enough for their passengers disembark for a brief excursion, the ships that Stone worked for needed a week or more to unload and take on new cargo in each port they visited. He used these times to explore each city thoroughly, often hiring local transportation that ranged from horse drawn chaises like this to human-powered rickshaws and sedan chairs.

Chinese Temple

ca. 1920s

Among the many regular ports-of-call that Stone often visited were Singapore, Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, each of which had dozens of Daoist temples. The large octagonal structures flanking the corners of this temple are fire places where worshippers could burn temple money, incense, and other symbolic gifts to send to their deceased relatives in the spirit world.

Dragon Fountain, Japan

ca. 1920s

In Japan, as in the rest of East Asia, dragons are considered powerful rain and water deities but generally benign toward humans. They are thought to impart strength, harmony, wealth and good luck. Stone was captivated by their associations with the sea as well as with prosperity, and incorporated them in a number of his most remarkable pieces. He took this photo in Kyoto at the *Kiyomizu-dera* temple complex.

Driving in the Surf, Cuba

ca. 1925

Stone enjoys a surfside ride in the back seat of a 1924 Willys-Overland roadster. Willys later became famous as the manufacturer of the Jeep vehicle for the military during World War II.

Cargo Pier, Hong Kong

ca. early 1920s

Over the course of a decade Stone visited Hong Kong at least thirty-seven times (approximately every three months). This particular little girl and her parents and siblings appear often enough among the hundreds of snapshots he took on his travels that it is possible to see how she grew up to become a young woman, suggesting that he'd made close friends with her entire family and looked forward to seeing them each time he was in port.

Portraits

ca. 1920s

Wherever he went, from Shanghai (upper left) to Waikiki (lower right), Stone liked to dress appropriately. Two shots of him taken in his shipboard cabin reveal behind-the-scenes moments in his skivvies and silk bathrobe.

Shoe House

1945-46

For the amusement of his young nieces and nephews, Stone created a shoe-shaped playhouse next to the James Pinckney Henderson House in Lincolnnton ("Woodside," built 1798), where his

sister Jessie Stone Ramseur lived after marrying Richard Ramseur. Built with the help of their grown son Jack, it still stands.

Bernhardt Furniture

ca. 1930s

During the 1930s and early 1940s Stone was a master pattern designer for Bernhardt Furniture Company in Lenoir, NC. The majority of furniture he created for Bernhardt were in the classic Victorian Revival style favored by Bernhardt's middle and upper middle class customers, who primarily wanted fine pieces that would announce their sophistication and attainment of financial success. He created his far more eccentric "personal" pieces on his own time, mostly as gifts for relatives or for a handful of collectors who appreciated his unusual talent. These two people are unidentified.

"Lost" Serpent Chair

ca. 1920s-1930s

This piece, whose current whereabouts are unknown, clearly demonstrates Stone's fascination with Chinese furniture as well as his mastery of the Victorian Revival style (which in turn had been influenced by fifteenth and sixteenth century European pieces). Whenever he was working on his own, Stone never hesitated to combine styles, techniques, or cultural traditions.

FURNITURE:

Journeyman Carpenter's Case

On loan from the Stone family, Caldwell County, North Carolina.

With its tools, straps, handle and case carved entirely of wood, this is a perfect example of *trompe l'oeil* (deceive the eye) illusion. It also includes an "in-joke" that a fellow woodworker would appreciate. The handled tool is a box hatchet, of the kind once used by warehouse workers to hack thin slats for building disposable wooden crates used in shipping fresh produce — hardly the kind of tool a master furniture craftsman would employ for fine work.

China Cabinet

Courtesy of Mary Crews

In China, Japan, Malaysia, and elsewhere in East Asia, Stone saw dragons regarded as positive symbols of vigilance and divine protection, able to ward off evil and bestow good fortune. Considered magical and auspicious rather than frightening like European dragons, the Asian dragon signified the emperor's search for the divine wisdom of heaven.

Floor Lamp

Courtesy of Mary Crews

In Asian sculptures, dragons are often depicted as chasing a brightly glowing orb symbolizing the Pearl of Wisdom. Stone adapted this theme by employing a dragon to suspend a light bulb.

Fainting Couch

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, fainting couches served as status symbols by signaling that the family was wealthy enough that the lady of the house did not need to work, and indeed was so delicate that she was given to fainting spells. The sinuous, asymmetrical lines dictated by this arrangement must have suggested a sea serpent or dragon to Stone's imagination. He may also have been amused by associations with the biblical story of Eve encountering the serpent in the Garden of Eden, or the fact that the sight of snakes actually causes some people to pass out.

Nautical Table

Courtesy of Linda Moretz

Many of Stone's furniture pieces feature ship's wheels, anchors, chains, ropes, and depictions of seagoing vessels. The chain attached here is carved from a single piece of wood.

Ship's Wheel Chair

Courtesy of Mary Crews

After years spent trying to succeed in the furniture manufacturing business, Stone joined the Merchant Marine and spent more than ten years at sea. Late in life he built a house that resembled a tramp steamer. Nautical décor held an especially deep resonance for him and often appears on his furniture.

Fish Table

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

A rippling rope suspended by floats mimics the behavior of the top line of a seine net resting on waves. Although this border is only a decorative element, here it serves to turn the table surface into the sea surface, with a big fish diving below. Carved fish, seahorses, or stylized dolphins were common motifs used to support tables or shelves in Italian Baroque furniture made between 1600 and 1740.

Tall Case Clock

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

The tall case or “grandfather” clock that Stone made for his sister and brother-in-law comprises three distinct sections delineated by differences in treatment, ornamentation, and materials. The lowest part gives the illusion of being crudely made of knotty, worm-eaten wood. The middle section, which would normally conceal the weights and pendulum that power the clock mechanism, is ornately crafted with fine attention to detail. The top resembles a clapboard-sided barn with farmyard animals leaning out of their stalls, doves under the eaves, and a cedar shake roof. The face of the clock depicts a classic country schoolhouse topped by a small bell cupola and an errant boy dashing toward the door, no doubt tardy. Stone may have intended the clock to offer a moral lesson, with the lower section symbolizing ignorance (or perhaps the plain living of his Quaker upbringing), the midsection indicating refinement, and the top conveying the idea that education is the only way to escape a life on the farm. Then again, he may only have been amusing himself by showing how many different styles he was capable of.

Corner Cabinet

Courtesy of Linda Moretz

Stone built at least four “scenic” corner cabinets with similar motifs and features. They all include animals and small buildings at knee level (presumably for the enjoyment of children), mirrored shelves for knickknacks just out of children’s reach, and faux pieces of luggage at the top. They differ in details of foliage and vegetation, types of fencing styles, size and arrangement of the livestock and miniature buildings, and style and size of the suitcases at the top (which are actually drawers). The angled mirrors not only make it possible to see and enjoy all sides of any objects placed on display, but also provide an illusion of expanded space by seeming to offer a peek into another room.

Chair with Equestrian Headgear

Courtesy of Lucille S. Johnson

Decorating an intentionally rusticated chair, a horse bridle with blinkers (or blinders) and a halter suggest a working horse used to pull a coach or carriage. Blinkers are intended prevent the horse from being distracted or spooked on busy streets. Stone enjoyed renting horse drawn vehicles in foreign ports like Manila and Lima and often had himself photographed driving them.

Horse Tack Hall Tree

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

Stirrups, bridles, and a giant horseshoe provide an equestrian theme to a type of furniture rarely encountered in modern homes. The hall tree offered a place to sit while removing boots or work shoes and a place to leave overcoats and hats. This one was made for Tilden Stone’s brother-in-law, Richard Alexis Ramseur of Lincolnton, as identified by the “R” on the faux harness medallion at the upper right. As another example of Stone’s penchant for combining disparate styles, the lower part is ornately carved while the upper section cleverly incorporates utilitarian gear. It is a subtle reference to the transformations that take place at the hall tree as a nexus between the outdoor world of work, travel, and animal husbandry and the indoor “household” realm of proper decorum.

Granny Cabinet

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

Disguised to look something like a stepback cupboard from an old farmhouse kitchen with bins for staples like cornmeal and flour, nearly everything about this cabinet is a deception. The curtained window obviously is not a window, but the cookbooks are also not books, and many of the drawers are not actual functioning drawers. It does, however, conceal a working piano. Many of Stone's pieces, including several in this exhibition, combine ornately carved sections with intentionally crude "folky" treatments in other parts. In this case, the "proper" Victorian-style upper section signifies the traditionally designated feminine sphere of books, windows (i.e., remaining indoors, looking out), and decoration, while the lower part reminds the viewer that being a woman also included hard work and providing food for the family. The hidden piano can be used equally well for high culture and plain old fun.

Majess Woodstove

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

One of at least two identical faux woodfired stoves that Stone made, this is actually a chest of drawers made only of wood, not cast iron. One of its secrets is a button disguised as a rivet that allows the "stovepipe" at the top to swing open, revealing a perfect hiding place for a bottle containing a favorite beverage. Made for Tilden Stone's sister, Jessie Stone Ramseur, "Majess" is a teasing reference to her name and a pun on Majestic Stoves, one of the premier American kitchen range manufacturers at the turn of the last century. Stone might have been especially drawn to this brand because the company logo featured a steamship, reminding him of his own years at sea.

Majestic Mfg. Co., St. Louis, MO. *Majestic Cook Book, Compiled by...the Best Housekeeper in This or Any Other Country*, 1899, page 27, Majestic Range No. 251. From Smithsonian Libraries Unbound, <https://blog.library.si.edu/blog/2014/11/17/cooking-the-majestic-way/>

Baseball End Table

Loaned by the Stephens family

One of Tilden Stone's greatest patrons was James Murphy, a retired baseball talent scout whose brother had owned the Chicago Cubs during their 1906-1913 championship years. Murphy commissioned a number of pieces with sports themes for a large mansion that he had built in Wilmington, Ohio. Although they seem naturally worn by game use, the bats that serve as legs on this end table are made of mahogany, not standard baseball bat ash, and never were used in any games. Stone carved them, like the gloves hanging from the sides of the table, to exactly replicate the real things.

Golf Bag Cabinet

Courtesy of Candy Mauney Gaudet

Stone made at least six small golf-bag-themed cabinets with secret catches that could be released by lifting one of the large driver clubs. Inside was space enough for hiding some snacks and a bottle of liquor. Stone gave each of his nieces and nephews one of these wooden golf bags.

Jake Chest

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

Although the rusticated look of this chest and its decorative elements immediately suggest “manly” outdoors activities like camping, fishing, rowing, and vagabond travel and are all obviously Western, the calculatedly primitive and even damaged appearance of many of these features suggests a familiarity with the Japanese Buddhist concept of *wabi-sabi* — the appreciation of transience and imperfection. In Japan, Stone may have encountered carvings made of wood that exactly mimicked damaged baskets, much like the sagging fishing creel seen here. Despite its traditionally masculine motifs, this piece was made for Tilden Stone's sister, Jessie Stone Ramseur, a dedicated outdoorswoman. “Jake” was his nickname for her.

Susan Cabinet

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

Stone made this for his great niece, Susan Ramseur, while she was still in kindergarten. Whether being around it propelled her toward a lifelong interest in music, or whether he could already tell by then that she had musical talent, no one knows, but she grew up to become a professional musician and performed with the New York Philharmonic. The top drawer is decorated with a bas-relief of a musical saw, an instrument that her brother, Richard Ramseur, still plays. Musical saws are always bent into a curve when played.

Bookshelf, Desk, and Secret Bar

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

One of the most ambitious pieces that Stone ever made was this highly eclectic piece. Fully closed, it looks as if it were the casually-maintained repository of books from a North Carolina home library of the early twentieth century. Among the carvings on the backboard are a bold pair of crouching lions, and below them, bas-reliefs of Christopher Columbus's Santa Maria, a lighthouse, and one of Stone's favorite scenes of an old hunter resting and scratching the chin of his bird dog, copied from a *Saturday Evening Post* magazine cover. Opening the glass front and lifting the shelf reveals a classic old style home office with pigeonholes for sorting letters and bills. A bas-relief carved on the underside of the shelf above them depicts a boy scratching the chin of his puppy — a flashback from the previously-seen image of the old man. A hidden catch enables these cubbies to swing open and reveal a secret bar, outfitted with bottles and glassware. This suggests that the piece may have been completed during the era of Prohibition (1920-1933) when it would have been important to keep a supply of alcohol well-hidden.

"Doris Duke" Fern Stand, Smoking Stand, or Telephone Table

On loan from the Stone family, Caldwell County, North Carolina

Fern stands were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but are now rarely seen. They were designed to revolve so that large potted plants could be placed near windows and regularly rotated to keep the foliage healthy and evenly distributed. After the introduction of air conditioning led to lower ceilings that were more efficient to cool, such large indoor plants fell

out of fashion. Fern stands were often repurposed as smoking stands or telephone tables, when phones were still rare enough to be status symbols worthy of display. This stand, decorated with carved tobacco leaves, was made for wealthy tobacco heiress Doris Duke. However, she never owned it. When Stone went to deliver it she somehow insulted him, so he hauled it back to his truck and drove away. It has remained among his relatives ever since.

Child's Chair

Courtesy of Mary Crews

Even toddlers deserved fine furniture in Stone's world. Making miniature pieces as gifts for families with young children may have been an encouragement for them to consider ordering full-sized dining sets later on. This is Stone's own unique take on the Rococo Revival look. Note the faces on the extended stiles at the top.

Baby Chest

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

The different sizes of shoes as the drawer pulls made sorting the diapers and clothing for siblings of different ages or genders easy. Note that each drawer has a different border pattern.

Hunting Sideboard

Courtesy of Rick and Myra Ramseur

Among Stone's finest creations were several sideboards made for both relatives and paying customers. This piece displays a hunting theme and features legs carved from mahogany to resemble various firearms, ranging from flintlock and percussion cap rifles to exact replicas of pump-action and double-barreled shotguns. None of the parts are metal, and the apparent "wear" on their stocks was meticulously, if artificially created. Bas-relief carvings ornamenting the panels and depicting different hunting pursuits (birds, large predators, foxes) were adapted from popular magazine illustrations from the 1920s. This sideboard has a hidden catch that enables it to open and reveal a secret, well-stocked supply of alcohol.

Josef Francis Kernan, "The Old Hunter," *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 3, 1928, front cover.

Golf Shelves

Loaned by the Stephens family

The "M" at the top of these shelves is for James Murphy, Stone's greatest patron. They were once part of a symmetrically matched pair of shelves. The other set was supported by baseball bats instead of golf clubs and featured extremely realistic carvings of a catcher's mask and baseball gloves made to look as if they were merely resting on the shelves.