

ARTISANS



Tinkering With Time

David Smith is fascinated by clocks, and he knows what makes them tick

BY ANNE PAPROCKI | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIK ANDERSON

A PEEK INTO the windows of Smith Clock Co. — tucked away at the corner of Bush and Baker Streets — reveals dozens of grandfather clocks, ticking away, a reminder of an earlier time. They look as if they belong in a museum. All are lovingly tended by David Smith, the shop's owner, who has been restoring and repairing clocks since 1975.

"There's so much to be fascinated by in clocks," says Smith, who's had his own shop in the neighborhood for the past 16 years, first on Fillmore Street and now at 2799 Bush. "From the well-built grandfather clocks of the 1600s to the tubular chimes of the 1800s, they're all so different," he says while painstakingly inserting a musical unit into a broken German cuckoo clock.

Smith sells grandfather clocks in the store's front room, repairs antique clocks for dealers in the back and carefully tends to the heirlooms brought in by neighborhood residents.

The store contains wooden clocks of all shapes and sizes. It also houses Smith's workshop, where tools and clock parts rest on every available surface.

He was fascinated by clocks from an early age. As a boy, Smith often helped his father, a San Francisco real estate agent, clean properties before they went on the market.

"People left all kinds of stuff behind," he says. "When I was 10, I found my first clock. I opened it up and tried to figure out how it worked."

His parents encouraged his curiosity about clocks, especially because it kept him away from more dangerous things.

As he grew older, Smith's love of tinkering with clocks stayed with him. He was an amateur expert and collector by 1975, when he got a job at a furniture store in Daly City setting up and servicing customers' clocks. By 1980, he was ready to learn more. He enrolled in a two-year clock and watch repair program in San Francisco, and later apprenticed with two area clock repairers.

He's especially interested in the insides of the timepieces: the gears and wheels that control the lunar calendars, chimes and melodies found in clocks sometimes centuries old.

Clocks currently in the shop include an English grandfather clock from the 1800s with a lunar dial and a seven foot tall grandfather clock with an ornate Asian image above the face. But Smith says he cannot single out one clock as a favorite.

"My favorite is usually whichever clock I'm working on," he says.

Today his customers — many of them decorators and antique dealers — come from the neighborhood and from many miles around. "I'm about the only shop like this left in San Francisco," he says.

Smith says the clock business has changed — not just because of the economy, which has affected the antique market, but also because many dealers have moved online.

"Before there were more local people,"



"I'm about the only shop like this left in San Francisco."

— DAVID SMITH, owner of Smith Clock Co.

he says. "We would meet and you could see everything. Now it's all from websites."

Smith, too, is adapting, and has recently launched his website at smithclock.com. He plans to add an online database with photos and clock descriptions. Even as he moves online, he worries about shipping such valuable material — and misses the camaraderie of meeting face to face with collectors and dealers.

In addition to repairing clocks, Smith also dispenses clock advice and has more than 40 clocks for sale in his shop. He's also careful to make sure a clock will fit with a house's style and size.

"Victorians in San Francisco have smaller rooms," he says. "So you want a clock with less depth than something you might get away with down the Peninsula."

Even though the clocks Smith repairs include models from the 1700s worth tens of thousands of dollars, he says he's just as excited to help people repair the clock they grew up hearing chime on the hour.

"It's not just about *Antiques Roadshow*," he says. "There's a sentimental reason many people repair clocks."

And that seems to be one thing that's only getting stronger over time. Smith says several customers have asked him to repair clocks for their aging parents, who find the familiar sound of the family grandfather clock or cuckoo clock a great comfort.

"People can get attached to clocks," he says. "They take care of their families, their pets — and then their clocks."