Albert Älfvåg

- ÖVER ETT DECENNIUM AV PIPMAKERI

Nedskrivet av
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Albert Älfvåg's pipe workshop is situated on a small farm. It is a beautiful and wild surrounding and in the driveway there are some old cars. Albert meets me outside the house and his pipe, a Ropp, is already lit. I have often seen Albert smoking Ropp pipes and ask him if he thinks they are the best smokers, but he says it is mostly an aesthetic choice. Perhaps it could also be called a historically interesting choice, as the pipe is shaped from old briar, found in a closed down French factory. The shape is of course classical. Albert has learned a lot about pipes and the history of pipes over the years, and each question results in a pleasant history lesson.

It turns out that the house here is his childhood home, where he still lives part-time. When not here, he lives in Uppsala, where he is studying to become an agronomist. He shows me around the farm and into the workshop, which he of course built himself. It is not just a pipe workshop, he is careful to point out, because all sorts of things are made and repaired there. But pipes are, however, undoubtedly the common thread; there are pipes, finished and half-finished, in the windows and on the tables. Albert shows me old books about pipes and pipe models from the manufacturer BBB, and inside the tobacco cans are crowded with tools into one homely mess. I get a nice old wooden chair to sit down on, next to a box filled to the brim with old sawn pieces of cow horns. "They will probably last until I retire," Albert says, explaining that they are used as decorations. He picks up and begins to describe, in detail, a semi-curved billiard that he was working on, but I instead ask him to tell me his story from the beginning, while I stop and light my own pipe.

Albert got into pipe-making by studying his father's old pipes, and fascinatingly enough, he started making pipes before smoking

them himself. He says he inherited the do-it-yourself spirit from his father, who never threw anything away. He is the only one in the family who makes and smokes pipes, but they all seem to be artistic, and that is all of them, because he is the third eldest of no less than seven brothers and sisters. He started making pipes shortly after graduating and found a lot of information online, where there were already good resources in those days. The first pipe he made was from pine and was perhaps not much to smoke from, but just a year later he was in full swing making pipes for sale and had then also joined the Pipe Club of Sweden.

Albert is also a frequent visitor to the meetings of Stockholms Pipklubb, which take place every month in the fantastic lounge of the shop Cigarrummet. He thinks he probably is the member who has attended these meetings most often, almost ten years. We both remember, with warmth, the old premises of that shop when it was situated at Stureplan, and I, as a young student, once bought my first pipe there. For a short time now, Albert also sells a few pipes in Cigarrummet and he has already received requests for more. I am not exaggerating, when I say that Albert's pipes stand out as something extra special among the usual brand pipes. However, he sells most pipes to order and then online. There are about as many Swedish as foreign buyers, and many return as customers from time to time.

Albert has traveled a lot and in addition to the pipe auctions in Malmö, he has visited the Chicago fair no less than four times and he plans to go back soon. I ask if this is where he gets the chance to see new pipes from different manufacturers but no, it mainly happens on Instagram. I ask which pipemakers Albert thinks are the best or perhaps the most interesting and he mentions Chris Asteriou from Greece as one of the most skilled right now and Brighton James, from the USA, as one of the most interesting. Their pipes are truly elegant and often sell for thousands of dollars. Albert also has a strong connection to Italy, where he, together with his family, travels to a campsite they have visited for many years. He says that when they went to Italy for the first time, he was relatively new to pipe-making so he needed to buy briar. He knew that briar grew around the Mediterranean and started looking for an Italian who was willing to sell and found the good Romeo "Mimmo" Domenico, whom he has now known for many years. He contacted Mimmo who of course, in the Italian manner, not only sold him briar, but also of-

fered a good dinner in his family home.

A pipe takes about ten to fifteen hours to complete, but he does not have time to make as many as before due to his studies. However, he believes that he has found greater joy in not chasing a large production but being able to manufacture the pipes at a pleasant and enjoyable pace. He admits that he once thought about making pipes as a part- or full-time occupation but quickly realized that having his hobby as a job almost took away all the fun of it. No, pipe-making has never been about making money. But how do you actually make a pipe? I ask him. I probably know the basics, what they are made of and have seen the occasional Youtube video on the subject. But I still don't feel completely sure. I ask Albert to tell me, briefly, how it works.

You start with a piece of briar and an ebonite round rod, which is a made of hard-vulcanized rubber. The block is examined and Albert sprays it with water to be able to take a closer look at the grain. The contours of the head, the shape itself, are sketched directly on the block. The head is then shaped with a band saw and grinding wheel until it gets, in principle, its final shape. A centerline is drawn across the barrel head to drill the holes centered. Wooden trestles are glued on the outside to support the drilling. The two holes are then drilled, by hand, into the lathe. The ebonite is drilled and turned to fit the tap hole, the shape of the stem is roughly formed on the grinding wheel and then shaped with hand files and finished with sandpaper and polishing. The head is sanded, sandpapered, colored and polished, then you have a finished pipe!

He explains that the drilling itself has not developed significantly from the first years, but it is in the finish of the pipe you really get to use all your knowledge. The basic knowledge is very important to learn well, because when you know the basics, you can start to break the conventions and create your own style. He is unsure if he has a design language that is so to speak his, but I think you can see a common thread in the pipes he makes, and for me they feel very Swedish in a way I really can't explain.

Albert shows different materials he uses to decorate the pipes. There are bamboo varieties, boxwood, cow horns and precious metals. Working in silver is relatively new, he earlier used brass but has now upgraded and the metal is press-turned into the right shape. He also goes deeper into his personal expression and notes that he both likes to smoke and make smaller pipes, and I can only agree.

When I travel home, I think about our conversation and look forward to see how Albert's pipes will develop over the next ten years. Thirty years. Forty years. What a bright future!