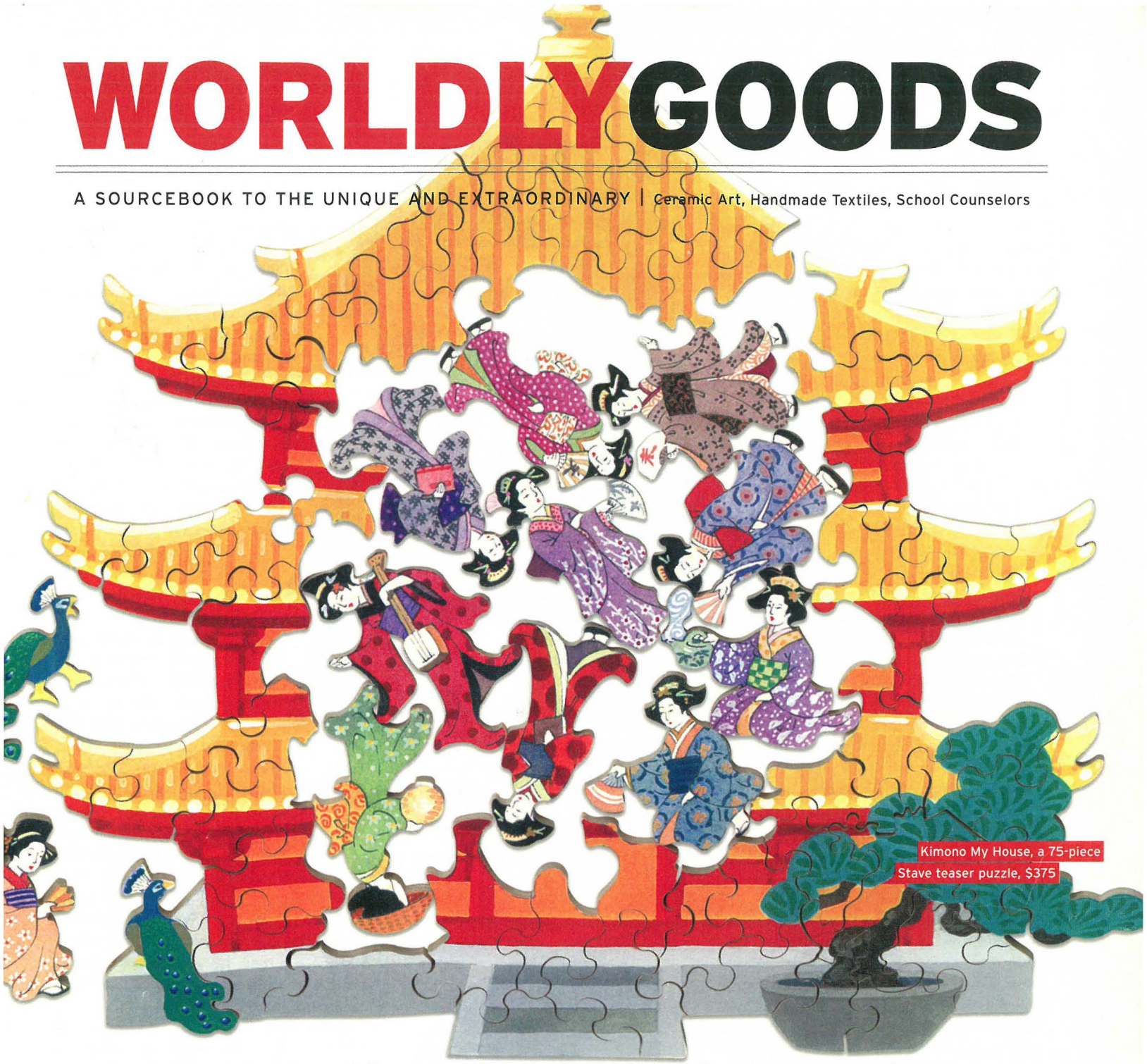

Kimono My House, a 75-piece Stave teaser puzzle, $375

Puzzling Investments

How an entrepreneur's beguiling jigsaw creations won a cult following. **BY EVAN MCGLINN**

Chief Tormentor and Doctor Diabolical are two of the nicknames that have been given to Steve Richardson, the owner of Stave Puzzles in Norwich, Vermont. For more than 30 years he has delighted fanatics with the most difficult and beautiful jigsaw puzzles in the world. His closely guarded customer list includes Stephen King, Bill and Melinda Gates, a slew of Du Ponts and Rockefellers, and Barbara Bush. "I find the puzzles most relaxing, and I keep one in Maine all the time," says the former first lady, who is such a big fan that she insisted on meeting Richardson when she visited a nearby town in New Hampshire in 1992. "I think he is a genius."

The 68-year-old puzzle master, who dresses like an elegant New England preppy and favors Lands' End cashmere sweaters,

was essentially a laid-off MBA and computer whiz with a love for games when he founded Stave in the early seventies. Since then, what began as a two-person shop has grown into a thriving boutique business with 25 employees and revenues of more than $2.5 million. Management guru Tom Peters once tapped Richardson's puzzles for his product of the year, describing Stave as part of "a class of unsung companies that do things right."

Most Stave puzzles cost between $125 and $6,000, though limited editions have climbed as high as $21,000. Devotees spare no expense in feeding their habit: Once a client sent a private jet to Vermont to pick up one of Richardson's "little elves" to sketch his house before flying him back.

In addition to traditional puzzles, Stave makes "teaser" and "trick" puzzles (see "How They're Made"). If you have never toyed with a Stave, be prepared: They are extremely clever. Some puzzles may fit together multiple ways, but only one is correct. Leftover pieces are intentionally thrown in and can spell a secret greeting—such as "Ho, ho, ho" in a holiday puzzle. Fake-you-out pieces with phony corners and cuts along separate colors give people fits. Abutting pieces don't interlock. Some pieces fit only if flipped over. While many love this sort of madness, Mrs. Bush says she prefers the more subdued creations. "I don't like the ones where Steve puts a hole in the middle and I have to fill it in with eighteen monkeys," she jokes.

Richardson's puzzles are rated in his catalogue—one to five lightning bolts for the trick puzzles, one to four swords for the teasers. A trio of puzzles listed under "Steve's Torture Chamber" are strictly off-limits to beginners. "We won't even sell them to you unless you have completed a four-bolt puzzle," says Richardson. Special puzzles come with pixie dust to "increase your puzzling powers," and if you are not satisfied, Stave will give you a full refund along with a bottle of aspirin adorned with the company's signature clown.

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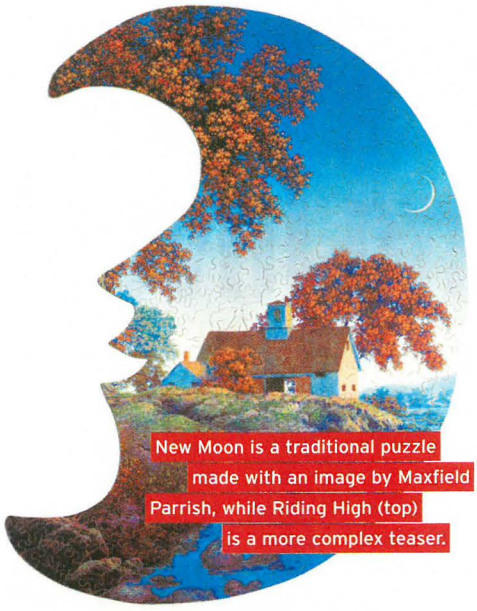


New Moon is a traditional puzzle made with an image by Maxfield Parrish, while Riding High (top) is a more complex teaser.

All this puzzling creativity started back in 1970 when Richardson was let go from a Vermont computer company after just six months. He and the firm's newly unemployed design director, Dave Tibbetts, decided to turn their mutual passion for games into a business. The two men acquired the rights to use *New York Times* crossword puzzles for use in games, calendars, and jigsaw puzzles. For a few years their company, which they named Stave in 1974 (the word means "to break into pieces" and is a combination of Steve and Dave), scraped by making custom games and puzzles.

Then Richardson got the first of two phone calls that would forever change his life and his business. A man from Boston had seen their listing in the Yellow Pages and asked if they made wooden puzzles. Richardson told him they did only cardboard versions, but he was intrigued. "He told me about these two guys in Manhattan who owned a company called Par Puzzles," says Richardson. "He said one of them was retiring and the other had died and they were closing up shop. He was desperate for a puzzle." When Richardson learned the man was paying Par $300 for a 500-piece puzzle, he was floored. "David and I were only getting three dollars for a cardboard puzzle," he says.

Richardson hopped in his Saab and drove to the man's office in Boston to have a look at his collection. "I just groaned," he says, recalling the beautifully shaped pieces. "I thought there was no way I could do that." But Richardson hid his anxiety and asked to borrow a puzzle. He promptly showed it to his father-in-law, an engineering professor at Dartmouth College, who offered him his unused 24-inch Delta jigsaw to fiddle with. "I went home and sat in my garage in the summer of 1974," Richardson says, "with no blades and no wood and not a clue how to make these things."

Getting the right wood was relatively painless, but the saw blades were another

FROM TOP: GEOFFREY SOKOL; COURTESY STAVE PUZZLES

story. "I went to the local hardware store and bought Delta blades and farted around with the saw, but there was a lot of slop between the pieces," he says. "I couldn't make the hairpin turns used to create the Par puzzles." He spent three months contacting every blade manufacturer in the United States and Europe. "Then one day," he says, "bingo! In came the right blade from Germany."

For artwork he bought inexpensive Renoir and Monet prints at the Harvard Coop and struggled to attach them to the wood. Finally he developed a process, which he keeps secret (all Stave employees must sign a nondisclosure agreement). By the fall of 1974 Richardson was confident he had a design that could rival Par's. He and Tibbetts—whom he bought out two years later—decided to run six small ads in *The New Yorker* promoting their handmade wooden puzzles. "We rolled the dice and said this was all or nothing," says Richardson. On the Monday after the initial ad ran, Richardson received the second key phone call of his career.

This time it was the secretary of a man from Cape Cod. Richardson refuses to disclose his identity, revealing only that he is a prominent figure in the pharmaceutical business. "He wanted a catalogue, and on Tuesday I mailed him one," says Richardson. "On Wednesday I received a check from him for $75 for a sample puzzle even though he'd never seen one. On Saturday I received another check from him for $1,800—he ordered every puzzle we offered, and he still hadn't seen any! I would have been happy to sell one $300 puzzle a month. In that week alone I made almost $2,000." The phone call would turn out to be more fruitful than he ever imagined. "That customer," says Richardson, "went on to purchase $50,000 worth of puzzles from us every year for twenty years."

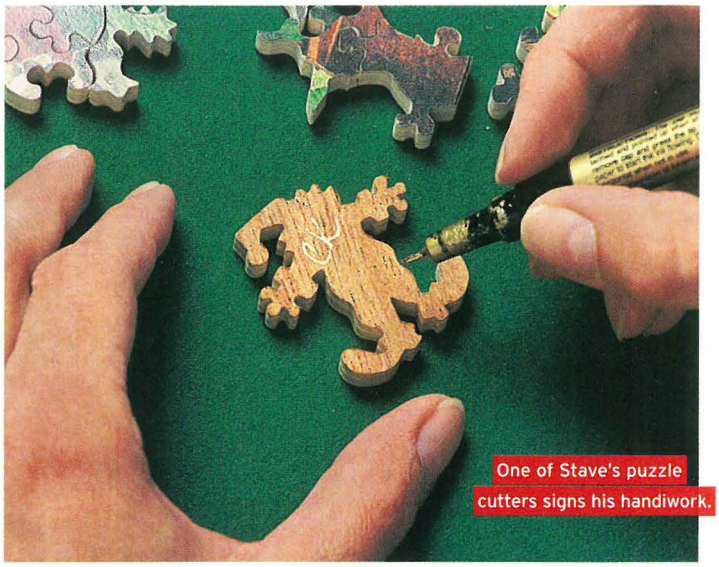
The Stave catalogue now features more than 1,500 puzzles, which can be specially cut to include a piece that forms someone's name. The company also makes custom puzzles using clients' photos and art. Each one is signed and dated by the cutter. Tom Morris, a former general manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and one-time executive director of the Cleveland Orchestra, has been a client for over 30 years. "I get a new one every Christmas," he says. Morris commissioned a puzzle from Stave based on a photo of conductor Arthur Fiedler leading the Boston Pops. The interlocking pieces, surrounded by negative space, create an image of Fiedler's iconic head. The piece with his eye on it must be inserted last for the puzzle to fit together correctly.

Twice a year Stave throws puzzle parties at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee, or Twin Farms in Barnard, Vermont, where participants pay more than $1,000 a night to spend a weekend toying with his creations. "I went to Twin Farms in 2000 and made the mistake of playing with one," says Tom Holton of Birmingham, Alabama, who has been to many of Stave's puzzle parties. He is now a member of the company's "puzzle time-share" program, a group of about 75 puzzlers who pay between $3,295 and $4,295 to receive a new 425- to 600-piece puzzle every six weeks. After they've gone through a half-dozen puzzles, they rate each one and are allowed to keep their favorite.

Today, when Richardson is not at the workshop—where he occasionally still cuts a puzzle or two—he stays trim by running two miles a day along Norwich's quiet main street during his two-hour lunch break. Or he might be practicing his golf swing at the custom-designed driving range in his home office over his garage—in the same house he bought 37 years ago. Every winter he retreats with his wife, Martha, for two months to the Caribbean island of St. John to recharge his batteries and come up with new ideas for driving his avid customers bananas.

"You know, I've been in business long enough now that I have the third generation of families buying puzzles from us," he says, pausing to reflect on that thought. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

Stave puzzles can be ordered by calling 802-295-5200 or at stave.com. Prices, which typically range from $125 to $6,000, are based on size, complexity, and number of pieces.



One of Stave's puzzle cutters signs his handiwork.

COURTESY STAVE PUZZLES

One early customer

went on to purchase $50,000 worth of Stave puzzles every year for 20 years.

How They're Made

Every **Stave puzzle** starts with a print (the company has 1,500-plus to choose from) adhered to a piece of sandwiched wood—comprising four layers of birch and one of cherry. Each puzzle piece takes about two minutes to cut with the jigsaw, meaning a 250-piece puzzle requires more than seven hours to cut, sand, and finish. Because all the puzzles are done by hand, no two are exactly alike.

Along with **traditional** puzzles made using art by Van Gogh, Klimt, Maxfield Parrish, and others, Stave creates "teaser" and "trick" puzzles from images the company commissions. A **teaser** is a small puzzle tailored to drive owners batty with negative spaces, confusing designs, and irregular edges. A **trick** puzzle, meanwhile, might fit together three or more ways, but only one is correct. The 44-piece Champ, for example—named after the mythic creature said to inhabit Vermont's Lake Champlain—has 32 possible combinations. In other words, 31 dead ends.

To further frustrate and delight fans, Stave never includes images of the completed puzzles in its elegant boxes. "We work like the devil to make these puzzles," says company founder **Steve Richardson.** "I want to make darn sure their owners work like the devil to put them together."