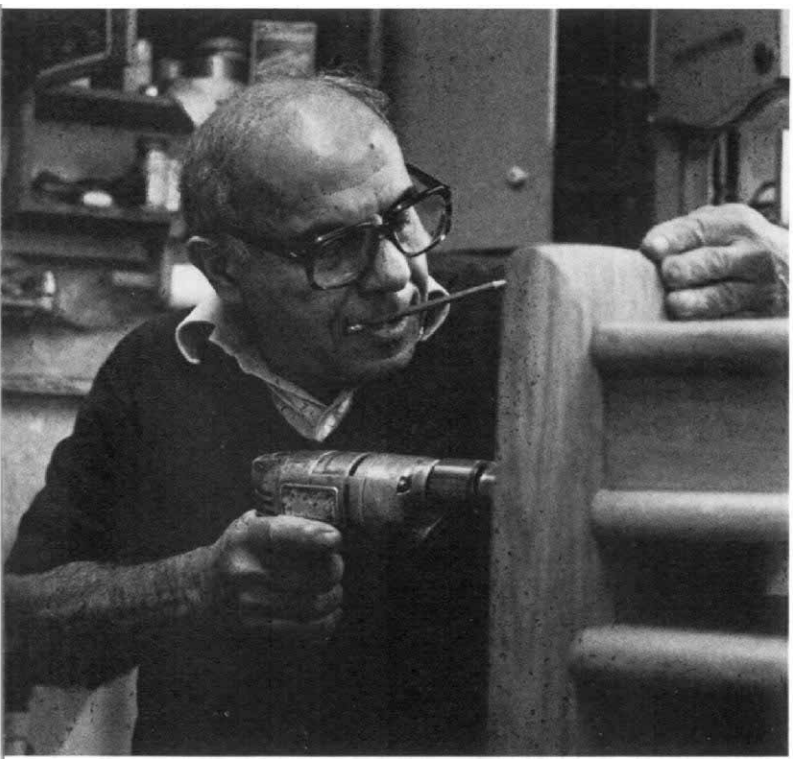
Fine Woodworking November/December 1980

Sam Maloof

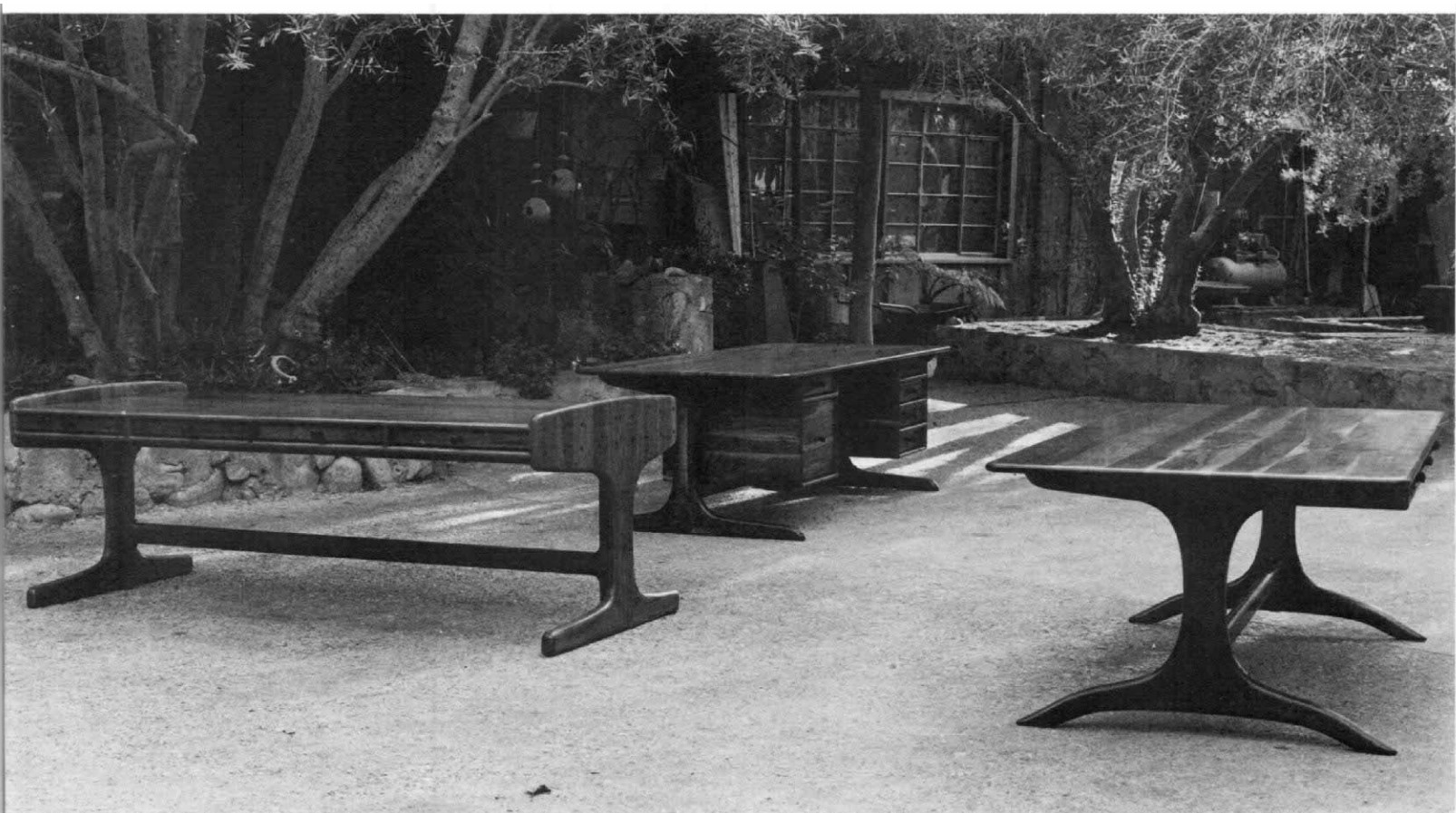
How a home craftsman became one of the best there is

by Rick Mastelli



Call to mind the do-it-yourself magazines of the late 1940s, offering plans for boxy Masonite built-ins, and you'll sense the context in which Sam Maloof began designing and making furniture for a living. Picture too the invasion of the Danish Modern, the advent of the "clean, functional, but elegant line," and you will have the context of Maloof's first marketplace. But you will have a hard time tracing the influences on his work. For one thing, Maloof claims not to be conscious of any influence. He has had no formal training in either woodworking or furniture design. The subtle but steady refinement of his pieces began in a backyard workshop more than 30 years ago; they predate his first contact with the Danish furniture his work seems in touch with. Numerous articles on him in craft magazines and Sunday home supplements have described his work as "Western," "Gothic," "classic" or "organic," but Maloof is no student of art history. He was asked once by an admirer was he Egyptian—"Your chairs remind me of ancient Egyptian chairs." No, Maloof is not Egyptian (his parents were Lebanese), nor was it until after this remark that he took a close look at the Tutan-

Left, Maloof drives assembly screws into a brown oak desk. Below, three desks await crating outside Maloof's home and shop in Alta Loma, Calif. Variations on trestle structure, pinned joints and the adroit use of sapwood for graphic effect (all of these are walnut) characterize his work. Photo: ©1980 Jonathan Pollock.



khamen exhibit in Cairo to find the similarity. Maloof is not an imitator, not tempted by trends to try the new because it is new. "My goal is to make furniture that people can be comfortable living with," he says. "If you're not preoccupied with making an impact with your designs, chances are something that looks good today will look good tomorrow."

A man of simple values, he feels the simple piece is the most challenging to design and make. Embellishments hide more than they show. He relies instead on a purity of line that follows the structure of the piece without violating the nature of the wood. He uses mainly walnut, No. 2 common for the liveliness of its figure, and he often includes the sapwood because he likes the contrast and because when he started making furniture walnut was expensive, 35¢ a foot, and why waste good wood? Characteristic too (he's one of the originators of this contemporary motif) is his exposed and sculpted joinery. "I've always exposed my joinery," he says, "Why go to all that trouble of making a beautiful joint only to hide it?" He's primarily a chairmaker, believing the chair to be the most difficult piece in the furniture-maker's repertoire—probably because it is simply joinery. He makes 20 different designs now, each with variations. To stay fresh, he will add two or three new designs a year. He also makes casegoods, tables and desks, identifiable again by their simple, evident structure. The tongues and grooves of drawer dividers are brought to the surface and faired to shape, framing neatly recessed faces. Tables are either pedestal or trestle, usually with legs like eucalyptus roots, their joints always pinned to view.

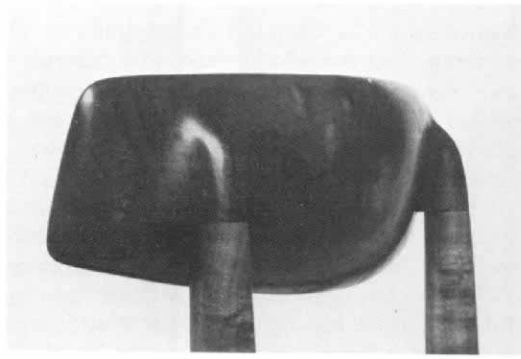
There's thus a remarkable consistency to his work—and in its coherent variations, a continual and discriminating growth. From the concentration in early chairs on lathe-turned pans meeting at sharp angles, there are now more compound, bandsawn curves. An increasingly sophisticated hard line, which on some pieces can be traced through every part, plays with the transition between curved surfaces. Intriguingly well-worked joints have become more integral with the overall shape of the piece. Throughout his work, there is the touchstone of symmetry—natural, exact, no matter how fluid the form. His is a style evolved of itself, carefully, gradually, with no dead ends.

* * *

For many contemporary designer/craftsmen, Maloof is one who's made it. He's shown his work at the Vatican Museum in Rome, at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and at the American Crafts Museum in New York. Twelve of his chairs are in the permanent collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Selling and showing throughout the country and giving generously of himself in lectures and workshops, his effect on contemporary crafts is wide-ranging and, to witness his imitators, often quite direct. What may be called California woodworking, with its organic, sometimes flamboyant shapes and sculpted joints, can be traced back to its most conservative practitioner, Maloof. He's 10 years younger than George Nakashima *(FWW* #14, Jan. '79) and almost 30 years younger than Wharton Esherick *(FWW* #19, Nov. '79). Unknown to one another until the early 1950s, and as distinctive as each of their work is, these three are the progenitors of contemporary designer/craftsmanship. Maloof was the first woodworker elected a Fellow of the American Craft Council—recognition for a contribution that requires first having worked 25 years in the field.

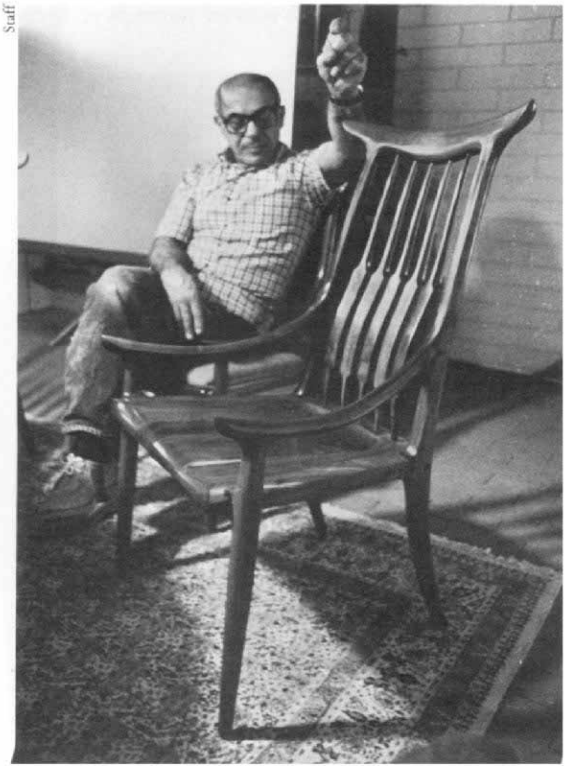
Maloof has years of work on order. He builds only what he wants to build, and he works and lives in enviable comfort. He's never sold at crafts fairs or galleries, except for small group and one-man shows—his last (four years ago) was sold out on opening night. It may be difficult for those who find themselves striving for such success to understand that Maloof did not so much strive for his situation as live it committedly from the first. Since his decision to make furniture for a living, his sole income has been from making furniture. Of course there were lean years when a down payment on a commission came just in time to pay the rent. But Maloof really

These three chairs span Maloof's career and demonstrate the consistency of his work, as well as its constant development. At left, chair from 1965 has lathe-turned spindles and softly rounded parts, complementing the wide, flat, figure-rich surfaces of the desk. Leather-upholstered chair, first made in 1955, is straight-lined and more angular. The chair at right is one of Maloof's latest designs. Composed of fluidly joined compound curves, its surfaces are sculpted with long, delineating edges.



Pedestal and wooden hinges are common to Maloof's stands and drop-leaf tables. Wood-threaded slide locks print-stand leaves at various angles. Horn-back chair with turned spindles was made in 1965—compare it to the later one at bottom right.

This comfortable chair from the set in Maloof's kitchen is sturdy after 25 years of use.



Maloof's home is his showroom. Left, dining mom includes drop-leaf table for twelve, settee benches and slant-leaf hutch. Right, Maloof relaxes alongside a recent horn-back chair, an amalgam of Oriental, Gothic, Danish and Western elements.

Photos: ©1980 Jonathan Pollock

works no differently today than he did when he started. He has never had more than a couple of helpers; he has one now. He does all his own designing, stock selection, joining, shaping, at least some sanding and finishing, even crating and sometimes delivery. He works a 60-hour week, producing 60 or 70 pieces a year, all of showpiece quality.

Maloof has never compromised the value he places on working directly for his customers and on making his own designs with his own hands. When he started making furniture, post-World War II southern California was a furniture designer's dream—one of the fastest growing, most affluent areas in the country. Other talented designers surveyed the situation and found it yielded best to prototypes that could be sold to furniture manufacturers for many times what an individual client would pay, and then often with royalties attached. Maloof has been approached to do the same; one company once proposed making a million of his pieces. But Maloof maintains it's not enough to be a designer only, that a design on paper is not a complete creation. Part of it must come from the craftsman who brings the idea into the real world. The changes it must necessarily go through, the little off here and the reconsideration of that curve there, the refinements that make the design right and give each piece its individuality, are important and fulfilling decisions. They're also more fun than supervising an assembly line. To design only or to build only from another's designs for a mass market is to be out of touch with the whole of the process, which includes the customer. "I want to be able," says Maloof, "to work a piece of wood into an object that contributes something beautiful and useful to everyday life. And I want to do this for an individual I can come to know as a friend. There's more to life than making things. Each time someone who has one of my pieces sits on a chair, uses a table or opens a chest, I want that person to know it was made just for him and that there is satisfaction and enjoyment in the object for us both."

* * *

Maloof lives in Alta Loma at the foot of the San Gabriel mountains, about 50 miles east of Los Angeles. His seven acres, bordered by eucalyptus and avocado trees, include one of the few still-producing lemon groves in the area. He remembers when the surroundings flourished with the largest citrus farms and vineyards in the world. And though he is a native, born in Chino about 15 miles from where he now lives, he doesn't have to go back more than ten years to tell how the building boom made his green-sheltered redwood hacienda an oasis of wood amid tracts of stucco houses, condominiums and shopping centers.

Maloof and his wife, Alfreda, who has managed the books, taken many of the photographs and been the hostess for the numerous house guests all these years, were married in 1948 and bought the property in 1952. Maloof was working as a graphic artist, doing silk-screens and scaling mosaic murals. He also drew for an architect. Before that were four years in the army. He'd taken to drawing in high school, the only schooling he's had, and as early as 1934 was making furniture for his parents, using the high-school woodshop at night. His first table was made of discarded plywood from concrete forms. Soon after high school he worked a year for Bauhaus graduate Harold Graham, "one of the only industrial designers I know," he says, "who could build what he designed." Graham was responsible for the window displays at Bullocks department stores—elaborate, animated scenes made of a variety of materials that "opened up a whole new world" for Maloof. There was a well-equipped shop and a journeyman carpenter to work with, and after the Christmas displays were done, Maloof helped build the furniture for Graham's house. All the while, both before and after his army service, Maloof built his own furniture on the side.

In 1952 he was 36. "There were two structures on the property when we moved in. We lived in what amounted to a shack where the guest house now stands. And I set up shop in a chicken coop with a dirt floor. But right from the start I knew exactly what I wanted." While he and his wife raised a son and a daughter, Maloof learned what he had to about woodworking and built a house, addition by addition, until it is now eleven rooms surrounding a central court, not counting the three rooms that are his shop. And not counting too the four woodsheds (he has some 15,000 bd. ft. of wood), and of course the guest house. He built all these and thousands of pieces of furniture. More than 40 of them he still lives with; his home is his showroom.

Now he works five or six days a week when he's not away giving workshops (which he vows to do less because of the

Maloof's first commission

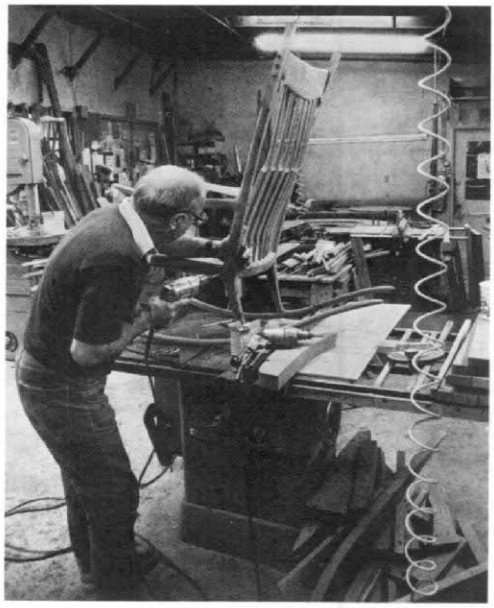
I'd been working as a graphic artist since I got out of high school; I was 32 and we had a baby. I'd made furniture for myself and my parents using night-school facilities. And I got this offer from an interior decorator to furnish a dining room. The hardest part was telling Millard Sheets, my friend and mentor in art, I was going to quit, make furniture for a living, really on the strength of this one commission. I remember agonizing over it for days. Finally I admitted to myself I wasn't indispensable to him.

The order was for a dining table, 10 chairs and a buffet. When I asked for a down payment to buy wood, the decorator looked at me askance. "You don't ask for a down payment," he said. "Only people working on a shoestring ask for a down payment." Well, of course that's exactly what I was working on, but I bought the wood myself—birch it was. I built a prototype for the chairs. I'd built chairs before, but not for sale, and I wanted to make sure these were going to be strong. So I made the prototype of birch, got up on the roof and dropped it on the driveway. It lit on the back leg and shot up like to knock me off the roof. The leg broke, but not any of the joints, so I went ahead and made the chairs. The buffet was all solid stock with triple-mitered corners, very tricky joints. I made the drawers of solid wood too, 16 of them. I got $1,200 for that job, which turned out to be exactly what the materials cost me.

But what was worse was that the decorator had me stain everything this awful grey-brown. "Are you sure that's what they want," I asked. "I'm the decorator," he said, "they'll take what I give them." When I delivered it, the woman stood by the whole time with her hand sort of touching her mouth. When everything was in place I asked if she liked it. "It's beautiful," she said, "but I don't like the color." I reminded her that that's what the decorator had picked out. "The decorator doesn't have to live with it," she said, "I do." Well, I ended up having to haul everything back out, scrape it all down and do it the way she wanted.

I don't use stains any more, and seldom interior decorators.

—S. M.



©1980 Jonathan Pollock

Custom rocking chairs, now $2,300, remain Maloof's most popular design—he's built more than 100 of them and has 60 on order now. Working atop his table saw, left, Maloof drives 4-in. sheet-metal screws into the glued leg joint at opposing angles, then plugs with ebony.

The 1,000-sq. ft. machine room is the largest of the three rooms that make up Maloof's shop. He's got two table saws, an 18-in. planer, two jointers (16 in. and 8 in.), a 20-in. and a 14-in. bandsaw, a 1-in. shaper, two cut-off saws, a hollow-chisel mortiser, a drill press, a horizontal-boring machine, two disc sanders and three lathes. Maloof's tool cabinet, right, is well stocked with routers, rasps and files.

time and energy they consume); evenings and weekends might still find him working on the house. The actual time he manages to work in the shop varies. He will often work early, change his dusty clothes at lunch to run an errand or visit a customer, work in the afternoon again, all the while keeping an eye on the lemon grove. Feeling close to all he has made, he really does go to service his furniture. If a piece needs another coat of oil because its owner isn't confident doing it himself, Maloof will find the time to oil it.

In the shop he works on four or five projects at once. In the four days I was with him last May, he was working on a 6-ft. round pedestal table with a large lazy-susan center, a pigeonhole desk in brown oak, a couple of rocking chairs and a run of eight side chairs. He would rout the table parts round in the morning, fit the spindles for a rocker after lunch, and when his assistant, Jerry Marcotte, had sanded the surfaces of the desk, they would glue that up. The next day he'd bring them all a little further along.

A large man, not tall but broad and especially strong of hand, he works like the self-taught home craftsman he is, gone prolific with focused energy. He belt-sands and glues up wherever it's convenient, usually on top of his table saw. He'll sometimes sit on the saw too, shaping a chair part on his thigh with powerful rasp strokes. He supports his rocker spindles while filing for final fit in a notch worn 2 in. deep in a ratty old workbench; that's one of the few times I saw him use the bench. He's awfully handy with a router, holding it upside-down in one hand to round over the bottom edge of a desk top as readily as he held it upright for the top edge. Why turn the tabletop over when turning the router over is easier, especially when you're used to working alone? On the band saw he can carve out a pair of compound-curved chair arms in five minutes. At the end of another 15 minutes with rasps, Surform, files and scraper he will have a pair of arms symmetrical, as he says, "to within a hundredth of an inch—I use my fingers for calipers." Templates deck the walls, but no jigs; this is how he easily varies his designs, and if a client wants the seat of his rocker an inch deeper, Maloof will do

that too. It's evident he enjoys what he's doing. He never stops thinking about his work.

* * *

Does he mind not having gone to school, not having had a sheltered time to explore and experiment? "I've always experimented," he says. "People just like what I do and buy it. As for schooling, my clients are my teachers. They're the ones who bring me the design problems. Schools get too easily divorced from the real world. In many places students graduate and become teachers without ever making a living from their work. They grow stale. There's a preciousness I see in a lot of student work that comes from having too many hours to put into it. Perfection is fine, and nothing has ever left my shop that I'm not proud of, but you have to produce if you're going to make a living. I've heard people say they have to put a piece of wood aside until the spirit hits them. That's procrastination. Pick it up and work it—you'll feel the spirit. No, I think it's an advantage being self-taught.

"I get a lot of visitors. Many young people starting out, also older people dissatisfied with their careers. They come with a picture or two of pieces they've done and they want to know if I think they can make it as woodworkers. It's the romance of being a woodworker that attracts them, but a lot of them I don't think really want to work wood. It's very hard work. As for material security, if you're happy within yourself, you don't need a lot of things. I think anyone who knows what he wants to do and has faith in himself can do it. Talent, of course, is important too. Being a supersalesman goes only so far—you have to have something to sell. If it's recognition you're after, that tends to leave pretty quickly when it's quick to come.

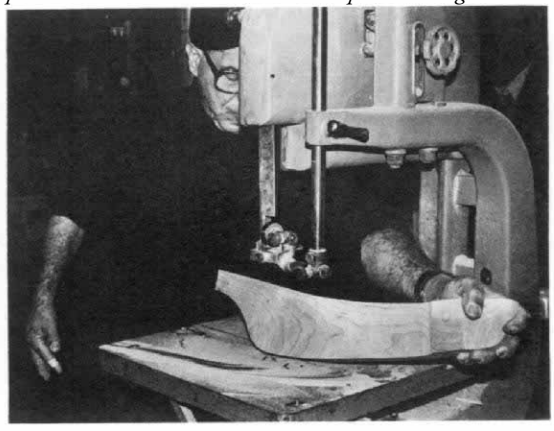
"I have a romantic view of what I do. I love wood and I love my tools. But I have a practical side too. I've made a living for more than 30 years as a woodworker—raised a family, built a home. It's been good for me. It's brought me in touch with a lot of people." →

Maloof in 1956. Photo: Alfreda Maloof.

Assistant Jerry Marcotte helps position an 8-ft. bar clamp on a brown oak desk.

Router on trammel rounds a 6-ft. pedestal table. Inner circle will contain a lazy susan.

Maloof deftly bandsaws a compound-curved chair arm. It's a challenge that requires a narrow, taut blade and the ability to keep the work supported on the table where the blade passes through.



Maloof on his techniques

There are no secrets in joinery. It's a matter of figuring it out. But it was so hard for me, if I can help other people learn, then I will. A person who doesn't share is losing something.

I'm very careful about using mortise-and-tenon joints. I think they remove too much wood and are weaker than dowel joints. For instance in my pedestal tables, where the legs are mitered to the column, I'll run three ¾-in. dowels across the miter line, then secure those with ¼-in. pins. For added support I'll rout out for two crossbraces on the bottom of the pedestal (photo, top right). I rout the first brace ½ in. deep, glue that in and rout the other one across that only ¼ in. deep. Then I pin these at the ends. It's very strong. The column itself is square in section, plowed out to receive the tongues of the vertical parts of the legs.

For chairs I used to use dowels, but screws are stronger and they take out less wood. The joint I use now on a lot of my chairs I make with a dado blade and a router. The front legs aren't usually canted, so they're a little simpler. First I dado a 2-in. wide, ¼-in.- deep notch in the edge of the seat blank, which is 2 in. thick. Then I run a ¼-in. rabbeting bit, with the pilot in the notch, over the top and the bottom of the seat. This produces a rabbet with a ½-in. radius.

For the leg I start with 2½-in. square stock and dado three sides of it, 1½ in. wide and ¼ in. deep. Then I lathe-turn the waste off above and below the joint. Shaping I do with rasps and files and Surform. To get the corners of the joint to fit in the seat rabbet with the ½-in. radius, I use a ½-in. rounding-over bit. It fits perfectly.

For the back legs I've had some special rabbeting bits made, one with a 3° cant in one direction for the top of the seat, the other with a 3° cant in the other for the bottom. The leg is then dadoed on a 3° angle to match.

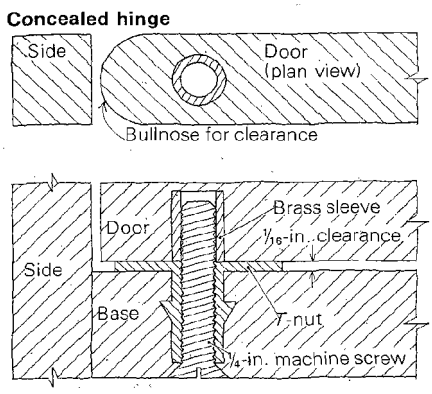
I put the legs and seat together by first gluing and clamping. When they're dry I fair the joint with chisels and files. Then I drive in two 4-in. sheet-metal screws, dipping the tips in glue for lubrication and toeing them at different angles to lock the joint. They're counterbored and plugged.

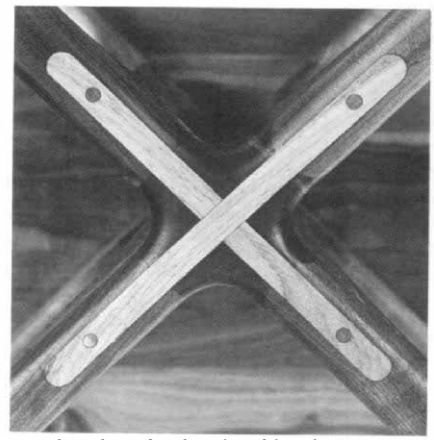
I use white glue for everything, except for mixing with sawdust to fill defects. I used to use white glue for this too but it shrinks, so I use clear epoxy now.

When I glue up panels I don't look at the end grain to see which way the rings are oriented. A lot of people argue over whether they should alternate or all go in the same direction. I choose the most beautiful side to be the face, and I've never had trouble with warping. I use dowels to locate the boards in relation to one another. It saves struggling with the piece during glue-up. I bore the holes on a boring machine so the space is ⅛ in. deeper than the length of the dowel, allowing room for expansion and contraction.

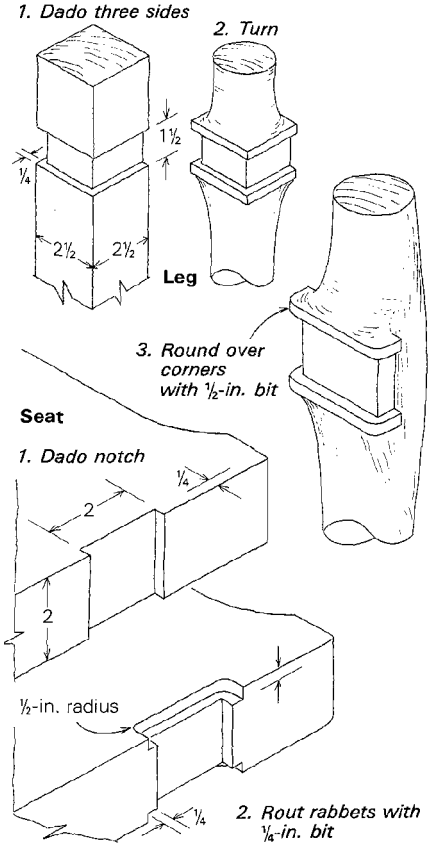
For hinges on cabinet doors I use a pin at the top and a machine screw through a *T*-nut at the bottom, as shown at left. I locate the top pin first, position the door and drill through the bottom of the cabinet into the bottom edge of the door with a ⅜-in. bit. A ¼-in. *T*-nut has a ⅜-in. O.D., so that fits into the bottom of the cabinet. I put a sleeve with a ⅜-in. O.D. and a ¼-in. I.D. in the hole in the bottom edge of the door, position the door again and screw a ¼-in. machine screw up through the *T*-nut into the sleeve. This way I can easily remove the doors if I have to and there's no hinge showing.

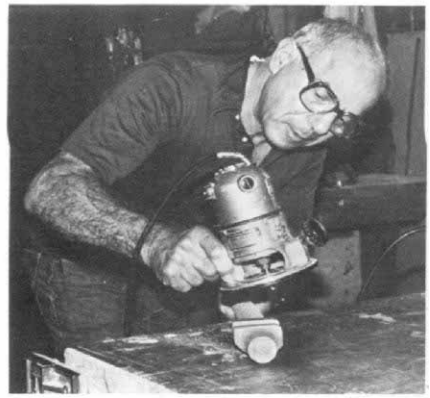
The finish I've used for the longest time is oil and beeswax. I take ¾ gal. of boiled linseed oil and grate in a handful of beeswax. It wants to be the consistency of cream. You have to rub hard when you apply it, once a day for three days, then buff with steel wool when it's dry. I used to use this on all my furniture except tabletops because a wet glass will leave a ring. Now I first apply two coats of a three-part finish (⅓ oil, ⅓ thinner, and ⅓ polyurethane varnish), then follow that with two coats of the oil and beeswax mix. — *S.M.*





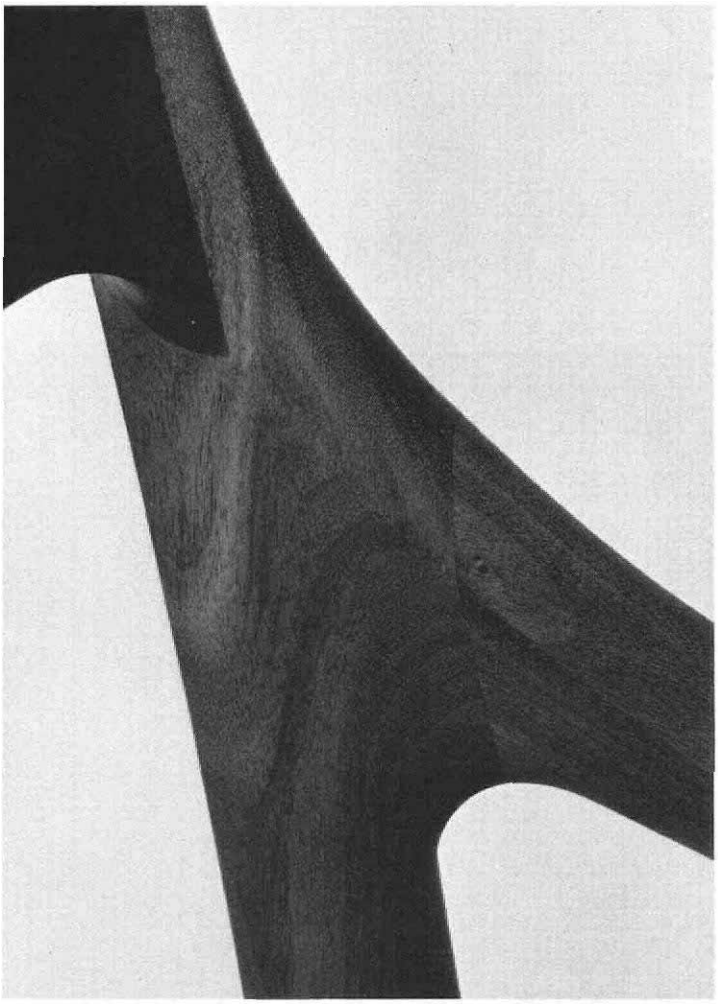
Underside of pedestal table shows cross-bracing, routed in and pinned.





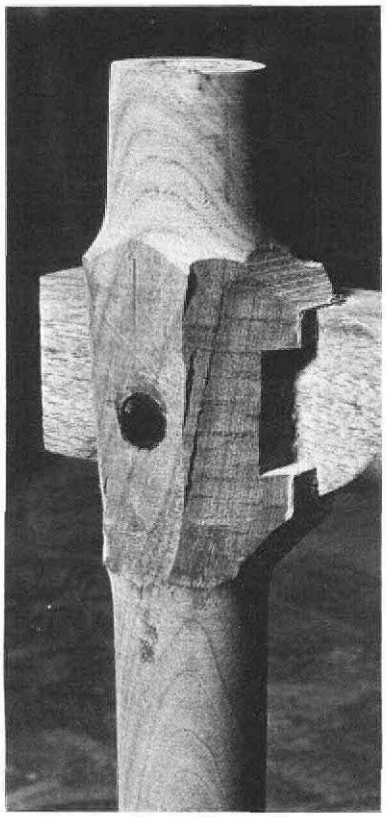
Leg joint is shaped with rounding-over bit.

Drawings: Christopher Clapp



'It's one thing making that hard line, and it's another making it mean something,' says Maloof. Pencil line, right, locates that hard line.

Side chair of walnut, first made in 1968, now sells for $1,400.



The router joint, as seen from the outside and from the inside, in progress, left, and finished, above.

Photos: © 1980 Jonathan Pollack