

A Breeding Ground for Furniture Makers

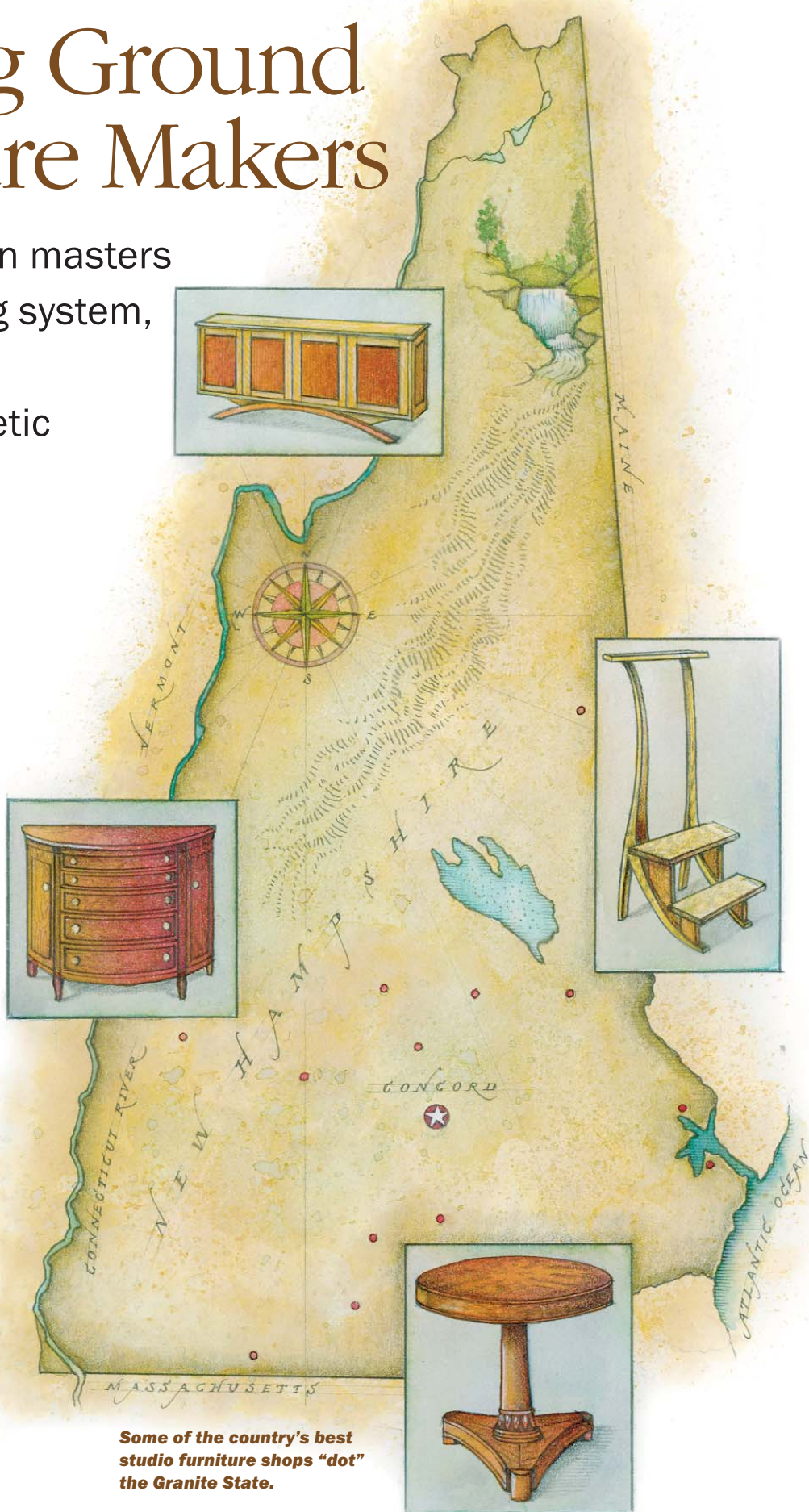
New Hampshire's modern masters have crafted a mentoring system, a marketing approach and a blossoming aesthetic that may land them in the history books

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

Three years ago, after a furniture-making apprenticeship in North Carolina, Thomas McLaughlin was ready to return to his native New England. The obvious location was Massachusetts, where he grew up and where his children's grandparents were waiting, but a chance meeting with a New Hampshire craftsman changed his plans.

During a summer vacation in the White Mountains, he ran across the shop of David Lamb, an established furniture maker in Canterbury, N.H. Over the next few summers the two became friends and began sharing portfolios. McLaughlin was astonished by the level of Lamb's work. He also was intrigued by the abundance of studio furniture makers in the state and the three-tiered guild system at work there, attracting people to custom woodworking, helping them turn professional and then supporting them afterward.

He heard about the Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers, formed in 1993, which has an inclusive, educational mission and an extensive video library of members' techniques and projects. Then Lamb told him about the more exclusive League of New Hampshire Craftsmen, the nation's oldest state craft organization, which has a well-attended annual juried fair, permanent gallery and network of seven retail



Some of the country's best studio furniture shops "dot" the Granite State.



“We have a friendly competition, trying to outdo each other.” — Loran Smith, New Durham

Making a name for New Hampshire. The state’s top furniture makers banded together in 1994, forming the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association to market their work to buyers beyond the region. Gathered in Canterbury, N.H., at the group’s recent annual meeting are, from left along the curved back row, Thomas McLaughlin, Howard Hatch, Ted Blachly, Terry Moore, Garrett Hack, Jon Brooks, Jon Siegel, Jere Osgood, Jeffrey Cooper and Jo Stone; and in the right foreground, from left, are Loran Smith, Wayne Marcoux, Bill Thomas, Omar Clairmont and David Lamb.

shops. What piqued McLaughlin’s interest most, though, was a brand-new, third organization, launched by the state’s master furniture makers, Lamb among them.

The new group was called the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association and was the brainchild of local stockbroker Anthony Hartigan (see Notes & Comment, *FWW* #138, p. 24). Hartigan devised an innovative method for marketing studio furniture outside the small state. In a nutshell, the group finds local patrons to commission pieces that are put up for auction at an annual, well-publicized event. If and when a piece sells at auction (each has a minimum selling price), the artist simply makes a duplicate for the patron. If the piece doesn’t sell, the patron gets the original.

The keys to success for the new venture were educating affluent local citizens

about the tradition of fine furniture making in the state and the concept of patronage, and publicizing the auction to potential buyers in Connecticut, New York and beyond. The first exhibit and auction was held in 1996, and the new approach was an instant success.

Last September the group held its fifth annual exhibit and auction at the posh Mount Washington Hotel and Resort. The event offered the work of 30 furniture makers and, as a new twist, welcomed seven guest artists from outside New Hampshire, including Silas Kopf, Kristina Madsen and Hank Gilpin.

Lamb assured McLaughlin that he had the right stuff for the Masters Association, and McLaughlin was convinced he could “hit the ground running” in New Hampshire. In the end, his relocation decision was

easy. He set up shop in Canterbury in 1997, making 18th-century reproductions. “It has worked out well,” he said.

McLaughlin regularly has pieces in the Masters Association auction and the League’s annual fair. He is an active member of both groups and of the Guild and teaches furniture-making classes at Canterbury Shaker Village.

A three-tiered system

The creation of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association completed the state’s furniture-making hierarchy, said Terry Moore, a founding member of the Masters Association and the Guild. Woodworkers typically start in the Guild, work to get juried into the League and then work toward the Masters Association, he explained. The Masters group represents the highest level of craftsmanship, supporting the state’s top furniture makers and giving up-and-coming woodworkers something to strive for.

Moore pointed to the recent career of Loran Smith as “the common progression.” Smith had been making high-end kitchens when he began to attend Guild meetings. This is the usual first step, Moore said, because the Guild is basically educational, and members can just sit back and absorb. The Guild has annual shows, but they are not formally juried.

The Masters members began to notice Smith’s furniture at the Guild shows. “It was obvious that this guy had what it takes,” Moore recalled. After three or four years, Smith exhibited a serpentine chest of

The Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers has an inclusive, educational mission. Some of the group’s 300 members attended a recent seminar at the workshop of David Lamb, in Canterbury. Inside, Loran Smith, the group’s current chairman, gave a demonstration on molding techniques. Like many in the Furniture Masters group, Smith and Lamb remain active in the Guild, helping others reach their potential.



drawers with inlay, and Masters members said, "This guy is ready." Smith was juried into the League shows and invited into the Masters Association.

Smith's furniture-making career hit a high point recently when he sold a Federal sideboard to U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg and was invited by Gregg's wife for a VIP tour of the White House.

The League and the Masters Association are similar in that each has a juried show and demands more than one piece from a woodworker, but the Masters' jury process is tougher, and its deadlines, from proposal to delivery, are tighter. "The Masters separates the men from the boys," Moore said. Members are expected to propose at least two new pieces each Feb. 1 and deliver the finished work by June 1 for the catalog photo session. They must also know how to price their work. The deadlines push members to grow each year and to generate new designs. "They force us to think about what we are doing and how we do it," Moore said.

Both the League and the Masters Association help aspiring furniture makers realize their goal of getting out of commercial jobs and into studio work. "I'm a product of the system," Moore said. "I was building kitchen cabinets when I stumbled onto Living with Crafts." Living with Crafts is a 20-year-old exhibit that presents furniture in a series of room vignettes at the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen's Fair, which is held each year at the Mount Sunapee Resort in Newbury.

The New Hampshire definition of fine furniture

At the heart of the League and the Masters groups are their three-person juries. Currently, Moore and Jere Osgood serve on both juries, exerting a unified force on studio furniture making in the state. The juries are strict but supportive. Applicants who fall short on their first try are deferred, not failed, and are given specific pointers for future success. According to Moore, deferred woodworkers often are invited to bring pieces to a jury member's shop for informal mentoring.

Pieces are graded on a one-to-five scale for originality or for execution of a traditional design, for artistic decisions such as clarity of intent and integration of elements, for command of the medium, for attention to details and for functionality. In

THE HOTHOUSE EFFECT: NEW HAMPSHIRE'S CROSS-POLLINATION

The founding members of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association created an environment in which the states' best could inspire each other to new heights. Members' influence on each other is evident in this year's auction catalog. The hot-house effect is strong but subtle, always stopping short of imitation and allowing a wide range of design voices to coexist.



Contrasting edge detail marks the group's work. Subtle varieties of this motif have spread from the work of founding members Terry Moore (demilune commode in fiddleback mahogany with ebony detail) to newer members like Wayne Marcoux (sofa-hall table in cherry with bloodwood detail). Two tables by David Lamb, another founding member, employ contrasting edge beading. His center table has crotch and mottled mahogany veneers and raised beading in cocobolo; his demilune table is made of mahogany with stone top, feet and apron detail.





“I’m inspired to push my usual work to a higher level. It’s not easy when you’re alone in your shop to go that extra mile.”—Thomas McLaughlin, Canterbury

Willing to learn. After Gerald Fitzgerald’s work was accepted into the League of New Hampshire Craftsmen’s Fair, the jury had one further suggestion for him: to play down the use of contrasting wood in his Arts and Crafts-inspired tables.



concrete terms, the juries expect pieces to be completely finished, including backs, bottoms and insides. There can be no glue drips, tearout or rough surfaces left anywhere. Joinery must be mechanically sound and tightly fitted.

“Then, pay as much attention to the finish as you did to the joinery,” Moore tells potential exhibitors. They must prepare surfaces well; apply the finish carefully with no runs, drips or overspray; and “finish the finish” with wet sanding, steel wool or other fine abrasives. A coat of wax is usually recommended.

Pieces must be refined beyond the level of a project plan in a woodworking magazine. Sometimes a prospective member is a good craftsman but hasn’t found his or her design voice yet. On the other hand, a straight reproduction of a Shaker table might score low on originality but could still make the grade because it is well done and “fulfills its intent” as a reproduction. “We try to judge pieces for what they are,” Moore said.

Reacting to constructive criticism—Gerald Fitzgerald of Middleton, N.H., made it into the League’s Living with Crafts ex-

hibit on his second try. His first attempt was a set of contemporary Arts and Crafts-style tables with half of the components made of bird’s-eye maple and the other half of black walnut. The jury deferred him based on the overall execution of the pieces. They pointed to metal fasteners used to attach the tabletops, corners left too sharp, light machine marks detected when they held each surface in a raking light and the quality of the topcoat, Fitzgerald recalled. For his next attempt, he attached the tabletops with wood buttons, put a 1/16-in. roundover on all edges as the jury suggested, did more scraping and sanding of each surface and switched from a brushed-on to a wiping varnish. Fitzgerald’s work was juried in, but Moore added a final piece of advice, saying that the use of contrasting wood was too extreme. Although Fitzgerald thought that was “a matter of opinion,” he limited the use of contrast in the new tables he crafted for the show, making them of cherry with walnut used only for wedges in the through-tenons.

Fitzgerald puts great value on the access he gets to the state’s best makers. For example, Osgood recently took time to look over some boxes Fitzgerald built and then encouraged him to make his own hardware from brass and leather.

The jury sees two reactions to criticism and deferment. Some, like Fitzgerald, re-

main “humble and teachable,” Moore said. Others just get angry and defensive, saying basically, “I’ve been selling them this way for years.”

Moore’s reply to the disgruntled applicant is, “That’s fine. Maybe you don’t need our help. But if you want to sell them through us, you’ll have to make some adjustments.”

He told me about one woodworker active in Guild who entered a Queen Anne chair for consideration by the League. The cabriole legs were well done, but they were not highly polished, and there were gaps in the joinery where the legs met the crest rail. Overall, there simply was not enough attention paid to detail.

The jury pointed out these things, suggesting that the man clean up the shoulders of his tenons. The furniture maker chose to ignore the advice and brought back the same chair when he reapplied, protesting, “This is the way a country craftsman would have built the chair 100 years ago.”

The jury countered by sticking business cards in all of the joints and failing the chair again. The League’s “Guidelines for Wood,” sent to prospective exhibitors, calls for all pieces, including reproductions, to “be the best quality by *today’s* standards.”

“There can be no laziness evident or inattention to detail,” Moore said. “Why relax

The right stuff. Loran Smith first caught the attention of the New Hampshire Furniture Masters Association with a serpentine-front chest of drawers in the Federal style. Now an Association member, Smith recently sold this Federal sideboard—of mahogany, with crotch veneer, makore banding and maple stringing—to U.S. Sen. Judd Gregg of New Hampshire.



your standard after putting 40 to 50 hours of work into a chair?"

Inspired by each other

Even the most established Masters Association members benefit from the yearly pressure to develop new pieces and the interaction with other members. If not for these factors, Moore said he would not have attempted or completed his harlequin desk, which involved veneering a harlequin pattern of diamonds over bulging panels (the piece is featured on the back cover of this issue). "We have a friendly competition, trying to outdo each other," Smith said.

"Every exhibit inspires me to take more risks, to break away," McLaughlin said. "I'm also inspired to push my usual work to a higher level. It's not easy when you're alone in your shop to go that extra mile." Being around craftsmen like Moore, Lamb and Osgood, McLaughlin has learned "the disposition of 'no compromise' that you have to maintain to do great work."

A "New Hampshire school" emerges—

Moore believes that the influence the Masters Association members have on each other is creating a New Hampshire aesthetic that will someday be recognized in history books. "It's the hothouse effect," he said, describing the fertile environment that allows design motifs to move through the group. The cross-pollination is evident in this year's Masters auction catalog. For example, Moore and Lamb tend to use a contrasting edge detail, such as that on their demilune commode and center table, respectively. But they have noticed subtle variations spreading through the group. "In 100 years people will say, 'That's typical New Hampshire detailing,'" Moore said.

If the group's work is beginning to gel into a distinct school of design, the reasons are manifold. Aside from influence on the group of the dominant jurors and mentors, there is the simple fact that so many members work or have worked together. Masters Association member Ted Blachly, for example, worked with Moore in 1992 and has assisted Osgood since 1993.

The Osgood effect—Osgood's influence is strong on the group, from his meticulous approach to his well-known design elements. The latter also can be seen in this year's catalog. Subtly reminiscent of Os-



The influence of Jere Osgood is pervasive. Osgood exhibited these curly maple library steps this year, but his characteristic tapered bent laminations showed up in the legs of Wayne Marcoux's sideboard, made of curly maple with contrasting bloodwood detail around the edges of dyed panels. Marcoux's piece was on the cover of this year's auction catalog. Also, Ted Blachly's cheval-glass mirror, in rosewood with brass detail, has a leg-meets-leg element, at the frame's pivot point, that reflects a favorite Osgood motif.



good's work are the tapered bent laminations in the legs of Wayne Marcoux's sideboard, the leg-meets-leg motif at the top of the stand on Blachly's cheval-glass mirror and the saber-shaped legs on Moore's harlequin desk. Moore said he is "flattered" that Osgood remains so involved in the League and the Masters groups. "He's one of the best we have today in the world, and financially, he doesn't need to be here."

McLaughlin said Masters Association members share a desire to "preserve and protect this art form, fine woodworking."

To that end, the group's next goal is to open a furniture-making school, according to current chairman Howard Hatch. The project is in its conceptual stage, and the group is scouting locations for the facility. Hatch said the school will cater to all levels, not just to professionals.

The state's furniture makers are not only bullish on their future, but they also are taking steps to guarantee it. "In the upcoming decade," Moore said, "New Hampshire is the place to be for furniture makers." □

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