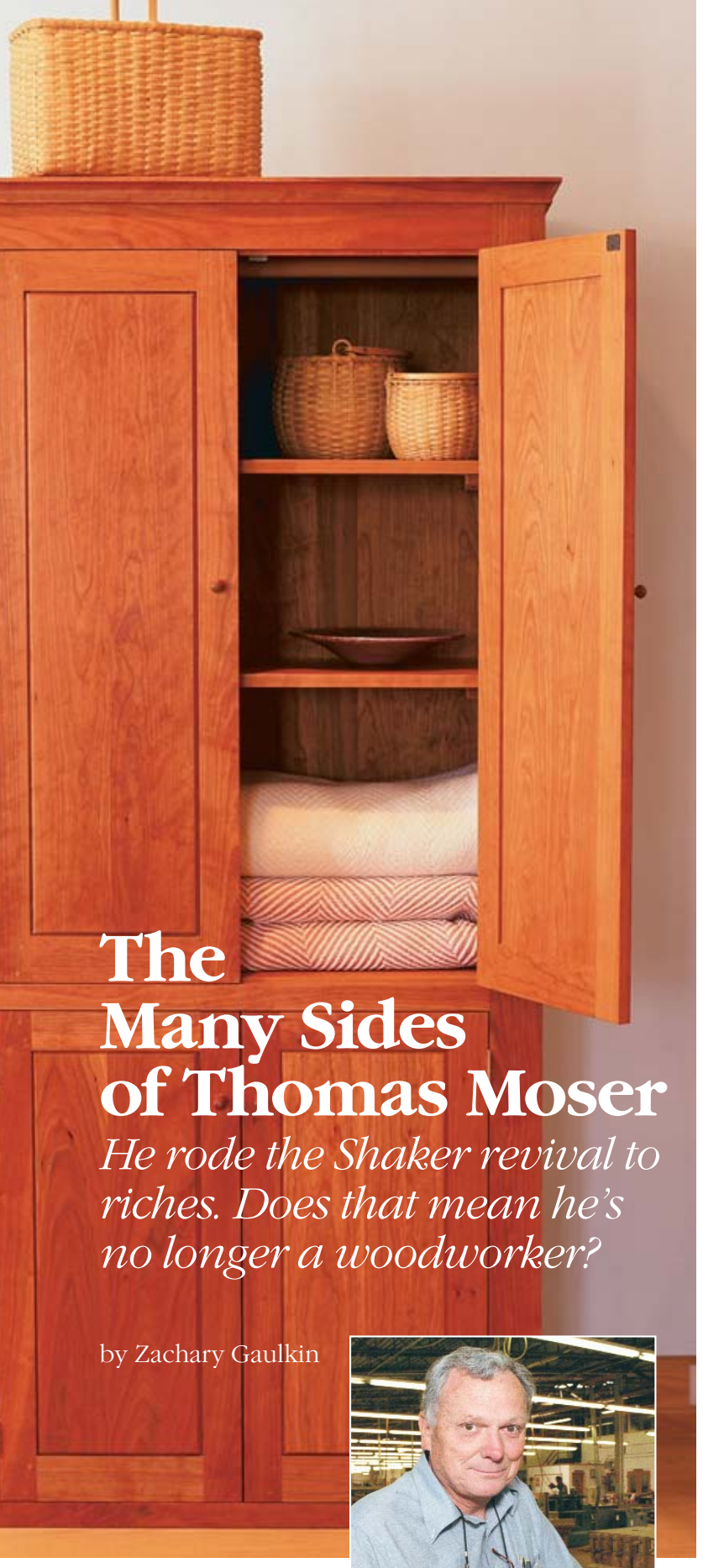
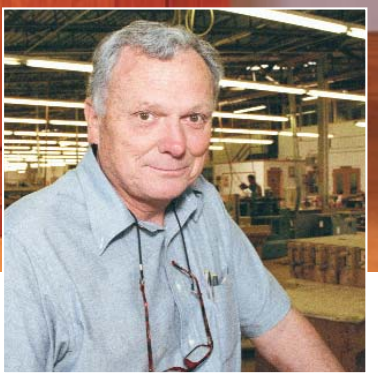


The Many Sides of Thomas Moser

He rode the Shaker revival to riches. Does that mean he's no longer a woodworker?

by Zachary Gaulkin



***Furnituremaker and businessman**—Thomas Moser's shop grew from three employees in 1972 to more than 100 today, leading some woodworkers to say, "he's not one of us." But many who know him say he still has the soul of a woodworker.*

"We make furniture just like the Shakers did," Thomas Moser told an audience of woodworkers during a recent lecture. In the next breath, he described his shop: 65,000 square feet, 110 employees, a computer-guided router for cutting chair seats and a machine that dries glue in seconds using high-frequency radio waves. Just like the Shakers.

How can he get away with this statement? Because it's true. Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers of Auburn, Maine, builds furniture the old-fashioned way. The shop uses solid wood, dovetailed cases, mortise-and-tenon framework and hand-rubbed oil finishes. Compared with others in the high-volume world of production furniture, Moser might as well be making it like the Shakers.

Whatever you think of his furnituremaking style, Moser's effect on woodworking has been huge. He found a way to build handmade furniture in a factory, he created a market for solid wood and natural finishes before they were fashionable, and his two books on Shaker furniture have inspired countless woodworkers and raised the public's appreciation for traditional joinery. After 25 years in business, Moser is still the role model for woodworkers trying to hit it big.

With a record like that, he should be a woodworker's hero, and yet his success has made him something of an outsider. He is often viewed as a businessman rather than a woodworker and, worse, one who advertises a handmade product but no longer delivers it. This is just one of Moser's many paradoxes. His name is synonymous with craftsmanship even though he never became a master cabinetmaker himself; he has a skilled eye for form and a wealth of knowledge, yet many woodworkers write off his success, attributing it to smart marketing; his furniture has the look of the handmade, yet he's a manufacturer. Where is the truth? As usual, it's somewhere in between.

Don't confuse product and process

Moser's manufacturing approach—often scorned by one-of-a-kind woodworkers—is perhaps his greatest contribution to the field. Many have tried to imitate him, and even those who grumble about his assembly-line production call him a pioneer. No one disputes that his workmanship is far superior to mass-produced furniture and often surpasses custom work.

Moser was certainly not the first to mechanize craft. Michael Thonet, the Henry Ford of furniture, produced his bentwood chairs in the 19th century. Gustav Stickley's honest, Craftsman furniture was made in a factory. Moser's hero, the designer Hans Wegner (Moser went to Denmark to meet him) perfected high-quality woodworking on a production scale. Like these legends, Moser balances technology and what he calls "the imperative of the material," the soundness of solid-wood design that he believes was lost in the industrial revolution.

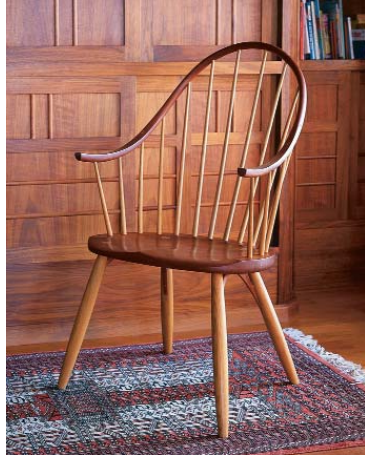
Moser pulls it off by separating product and process. "In the early days of our shop, we also tried to replicate the methods (of the 19th century). We used Arkansas stones and stropped our chisels on leather. But that, I discovered in time, was a bit of an artifice. I got more and more interested in the means of producing furniture."

His business started out like any custom shop: An order came in

and one cabinetmaker handled the whole job, from picking out the lumber to putting on the finish. As the orders grew, things changed. First came the fluorescent lights, then air-powered tools. The handplanes started to disappear, and the creeping mechanization created unease in the shop. Moser was unfazed. "To them, it was bad enough that we had to use electricity."

Today, the true cabinetmakers are gone, but Moser retains handcraft where it counts. The parts are milled in advance, aged and carefully stored to match grain and color. The furniture is not assembled until an order comes in. Doors and drawers are fit by hand. Some curved chair backs are laminated in the radio-frequency machine, but dovetails are cut on a router not much differently from the way a hobbyist with a dovetail jig would do it. Moser describes his methods in his catalogs, and he stands behind his furniture (it comes with a lifetime guarantee). "The goal from the beginning was to make it quicker and still have the same result," says Stewart Wurtz, a Seattle furnituremaker who worked for Moser in the mid-1970s.

Moser's signature piece, the continuous-arm Windsor chair, is an object lesson in his evolution. The seats that had been carved with a chainsaw and smoothed by hand are now shaped on a computer-controlled router. The compound curve of the bent-laminated back is glued up on steel forms, and the ash spindles are made by a subcontractor. Traces of DNA remain, though. Someone still shapes the sculpted back by hand and drills the holes for the wedged spindles by eye. "Mechanization actually improved the chairs," says Wurtz. "In the early days, it was all handmade, and there were errors here and there."

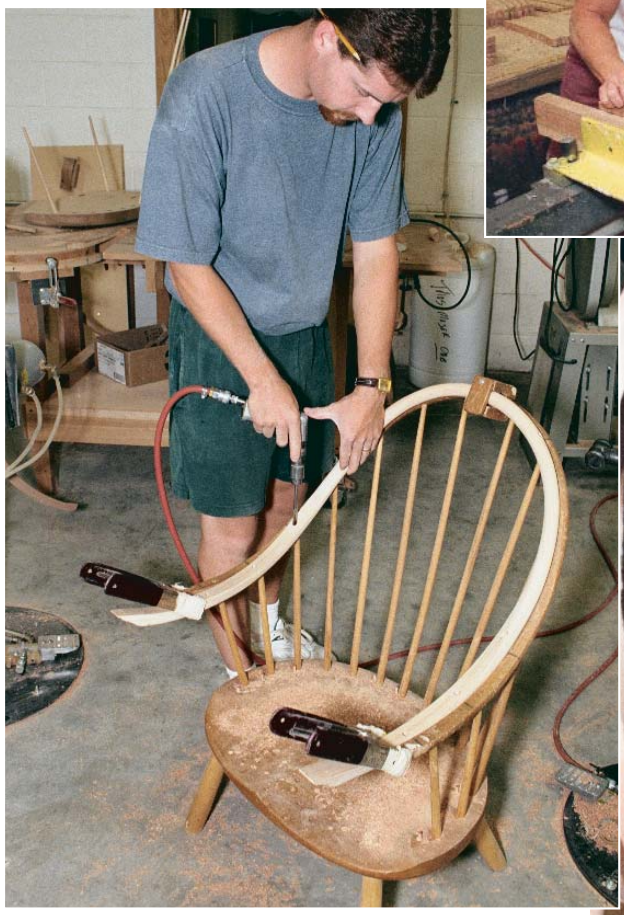


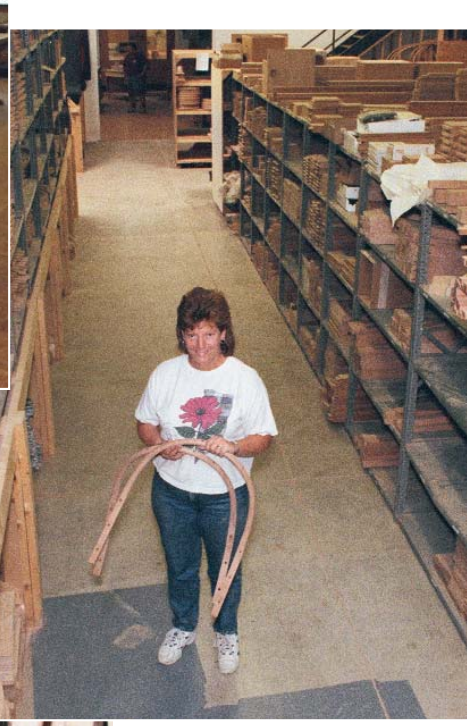
"I don't design for catharsis." *Moser's design sense is distilled in his trademarked continuous-arm Windsor in ash and cherry: a simple, respectful treatment of a proven form. He replaced the lower stretchers with laminated knees to reinforce the legs.*

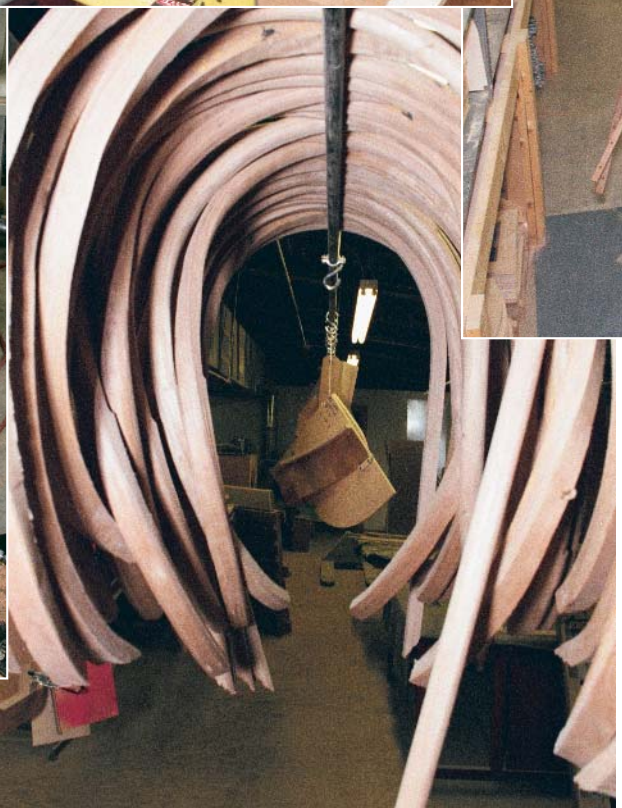
Marketing is a big part of making

From the outset, Moser seemed to have had a far grander vision than working at a bench. In 1972, he left a job teaching English at

Take away the pneumatics *and this is how a garage woodworker would glue up a chair (right). The holes for the spindles on Moser's Windsor (below) is done the same way it was in 1972.*







Parts are made in advance. *In a concession to efficiency, Moser stocks parts for its biggest sellers (near left). To maintain the quality of a one-off piece, the inventory is carefully managed to match color and grain. Lena Paradis (above) holds up the bent-laminated back of the shop's continuous-arm Windsor.*

Photos: author

How do you make a classic? Start with classic forms. *"Classic to me has universality in mind, and universality is what makes great design," Moser says. This Windsor-style settee with its bent-laminated stretcher is modern and familiar.*

Bates College to open a shop in New Gloucester, Maine (his factory is now in nearby Auburn). Contrary to popular belief, he didn't go into furnituremaking cold. For years, he had repaired antiques, built reproductions and renovated old homes. It was through these projects that he found a calling in furniture.

He is a competent woodworker, but he never became a top-flight cabinetmaker. As one former employee quipped, the smartest thing Moser did was to stop making the furniture himself. He might disagree, but the talent Moser hired had a lot to do with his early reputation. Moser is fond of his "alumni association" (some are now close friends), and he claims they are the ones who are richer—literally—for the experience. "I can point to three or four million in annual sales today by people who used to work here," he says. (Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers, by contrast, has more than $8 million in sales.)

It wasn't always easy, especially in the beginning. He had four sons (they now work in the business) and had to sell his house to keep the shop afloat. He took all work—cabinetry, doors, a waterwheel. One customer recalls finding the whole family, including Moser's wife, Mary (who is also his full-time business partner), sanding tabletops in the shop.

Within a few years, Moser chose a path that bordered on heresy in the counter-cultural 1970s—marketing. He had a catalog before others thought of mail order, and he advertised it in *The New Yorker* magazine. Showrooms followed in Portland, Maine, then New York, San Francisco and Philadelphia (which has since closed). His timing was perfect. He rode the Shaker revival to riches.

Timely furniture can also be timeless

Marketing aside, the essence of Moser's success is his ability to design winners. Talk to former employees and you get the feeling he has an instinct for classic forms. He's beyond confident. He's fearless. "I hope I don't sound boastful, but in a way, we are purveyors of taste," he says, dashing all hope of humility. "My assumption is that I've got a pretty good eye. What I like I think other people will like."

His furniture bears him out, at least in the sense that many people like it. John Rattenbury, the founder of Taliesin Architects and a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, furnished his 1997 design for *Life* magazine's Dream House with Tom Moser's furniture. "It's got a timeless quality," Rattenbury says. "It's warm. It's not pretentious. It's not only well-crafted and refined, it's nicely in scale."

In the cutthroat contract trade, which accounts for half of Moser's business (the other half is retail), his niche is reflected by his client list: the University of Pennsylvania, the J. Paul Getty Trust Center in Los Angeles, law libraries at UCLA and Yale, and *The*

Branching out from traditional roots—*The Arts-and-Crafts look of Moser's "Windward" series is also smart manufacturing. The furniture is almost entirely composed of square-sectioned members that can be combined to create chairs, tables, beds and settees, such as the one shown at left.*

New Yorker offices. By now, he's left his Shaker roots far behind. "His pieces fit with all styles of architecture," says Barry Stallman, an architect in Portland, Maine. "It's more traditional, but there's a timelessness to them. You could put one of his chairs in a Frank Gehry house and it would fit right in."

Timeless is the buzzword, and Moser designs explicitly to achieve that effect. But how can you choose to make something timeless any more than you can set out to write the great American novel? Moser has a ready answer: "Some people design products for cathartic reasons. When they're finished, they feel good about it. I don't design for catharsis. Catharsis is usually something nobody wants to be around. We do it for people, not just for ourselves, and if you do it with that mind-set, maybe you can make something that's a classic."

Still getting dirty in the shop

He embraces technology, he runs a multi-million dollar company, but he is still very much a woodworker. "He's got the soul of a woodworker," says Johns Congdon, who worked for Moser as a designer and now makes custom furniture in Vermont. "He still gets excited when he looks at a piece of wood."

I found him one afternoon not in his cramped, utilitarian office but ripping veneer on a tablesaw for a chair prototype. He helped build his new home (it recently appeared in *Architectural Digest*), and he chose to restore a fiberglass motor-sailer even though he probably can afford to go cruising in something new. His eyes still light up at the sublimity of a Shaker pulley, and he recently interrupted a meal to sketch a dining chair he saw in a restaurant. "I can't stop myself," he says. "I've got so many things I want to build."

How can it be that he's "not one of us," as more than one furnituremaker told me? Jealousy plays a part, but there's another reason. It's not just that he's broken a bond dear to many woodworkers—the personal conversation between maker and material. It's the belief (though not altogether fair) that he allows his customers to think one-of-a-kind craft is what they are getting.

At the same time, he has singlehandedly raised the tide for everyone. "He should get credit for exposing the world to us," meaning the custom craftsman, Congdon says. "You can say that he is running off of us, but we're running off of him, too." The fact that people argue about whether one of the country's most successful furnituremakers has somehow fallen from grace because of that success is perhaps the biggest paradox of all. □

Zachary Gaulkin is an associate editor of Fine Woodworking.

"Everything we do is based on historical forms." *From his sketches, Moser goes directly to prototypes. Rick Foss (below) helps with the prototypes and then builds jigs and fixtures for the manufacturing. The pace is fast. This lounge chair went from concept to showroom in a matter of weeks.*