Talking Shop With Hank Gilpin

If he were a piece of wood, he would be, "White oak—wire brushed and without a finish. That's me."

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Hank Gilpin has been making custom furniture in a converted church in Lincoln, R.I., for three decades. His work has been collected by museums and featured in many books and magazines, and it affords him a good living. After serving in Vietnam as an Army photographer, Gilpin studied woodworking under Tage Frid at Rhode Island School of Design. He works entirely in solid wood, using a wide range of domestic species, and his furniture relies on traditional joinery and extensive hand-tool work. Gilpin's love of wood and trees has led to a parallel career in horticulture: These days he designs gardens and landscapes as well as furniture. I spoke with him recently in his back garden.

JB: Your mentor, Tage Frid, taught the whole gamut of woodworking techniques, yet you focus strictly on solid wood. How did you develop that approach?

HG: When I was in graduate school in the early '70s, everyone was doing Art Nouveau-inspired work. All kinds of flowing lines, awfully difficult things—laminating, steam-bending, and veneering—all that stuff that's so outrageously time-consuming. When I opened my shop, economic forces dictated simplicity. If I could sell a piece of furniture for $200, I was really pushing it. So I became Mr. Mortise-and-Tenon and Solid Wood.

At one point in the early days, I had a one-curve rule. I realized that if a piece had more than one curve in it, I wasn't going to make any money. Then I took it a step further and said, okay, there can't be *any* curves. This has to be straight-line design. I have to design pieces that are out of the planer and the tablesaw, and still have some kind of interest. They could have a million tenons and mortises because I could whip through those. Obviously, I abandoned the no-curves rule, but it was good discipline.

JB: How do you see yourself in relation to your contemporaries who make more sculptural, self-expressive furniture?

HG: Early on I realized that I'm either not interested enough or not talented enough to do a certain type of expressive work, but I'm really good at another type: the simple, practical pieces that have a little bit of zing to them. Compared to what other people were making, these were somewhat lesser-priced, functional pieces.

JB: What is on your mind when you design?

HG: I listen very carefully to what a client says to me. Then I look around and get a feel for what they are all about, and I try to make something suitable in my own way. I never ignore the client's needs. That's the practical aspect, and it's a big, powerful force. They've got to be able to sit at this table. They don't want it talking to them when they're sitting at it.

JB: You are contacted frequently by aspiring woodworkers. What do you say to someone who tells you they want to do what you do?

HG: I'm brutally honest. I tell them it's impossible. Then I work

Gilpin pairs domestic timber with inspired design. *For this 8-ft.-long gallery bench commissioned by the Smith College Museum of Art, Gilpin chose an exceptional batch of curly white oak.*

backwards from there. If you want to make a living making wooden objects, there are some absolutes to consider:

- You're not going to make a lot of money for 10 years, if ever.
- You have to be totally dedicated to your work; your life is secondary.
- You have to live and work in the same place.
- You have to work more than anybody else.

I work 60 to 70 hours a week. I don't mind. I don't watch television, so I have plenty of time to draw, sketch, and think. Every night I'm doing my little business.

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JB: Do you work alone?

HG: I usually have a couple of people in the shop with me. I need the interaction. And to make a profit, you need other people working with you. There's not enough time in the day to run a business and also be at the bench long enough to make money. You can't do it. Fifty percent of my time I'm not doing anything related to making things.

JB: You use hand tools and machines extensively in your work. What's the best way to teach these two components of woodworking?

HG: I don't think you can understand machines until you understand what they replaced. People in my shop don't go near a machine for two years. By then they have absolute, complete control of handwork and the furniture-making process from post-machining to the end. Once they've got the hand skills down, the sequence goes: drill press, bandsaw, mortiser, tablesaw, jointer, and planer.

If you throw someone on a milling machine in the beginning of a job, they have no idea what's at the end of all that effort. If you work backwards, then, by the time they get back to the milling, which is the most important part of a job, they see the whole picture; they know where they're headed.

JB: Why is milling so important?

HG: Two things. First, I generally work with wood that is carefully selected for each piece—and there isn't any extra stock. So milling mistakes can be problematic. Second, and more impor-

Photos: Jonathan Binzen

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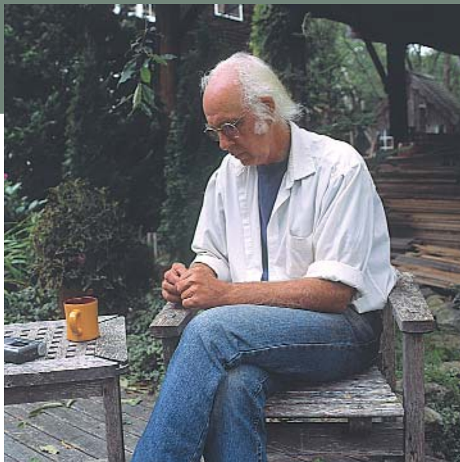

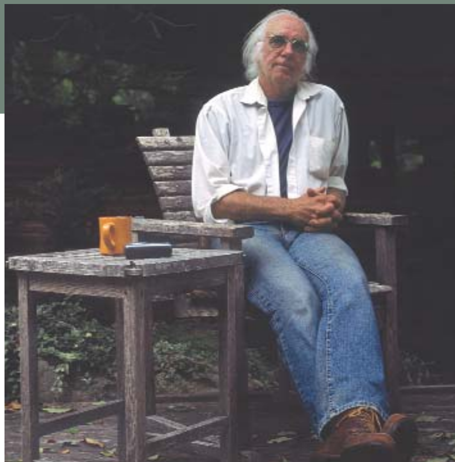

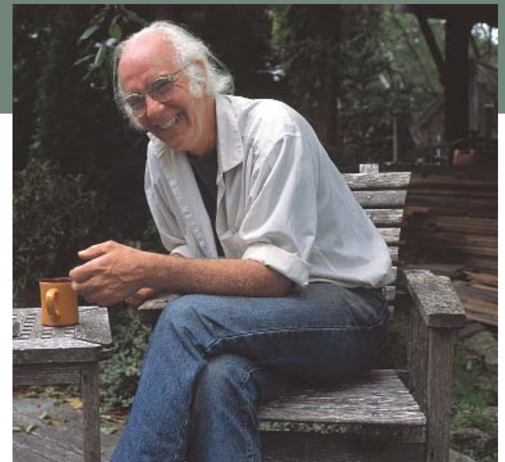

tant, is that I change the design at the milling stage on virtually every piece I do.

At the beginning of a job I've got a pile of wood and a rough sketch. As I'm pulling the wood, I start my working drawing. I walk back and forth from the pile to the drawing, making sure the wood can match it, because there are always limitations. Maybe I have 5/4 stock, but it was cut a little lean at the mill, maybe there's a twist in the board, or maybe the face grain is exceptional.

When I cut the parts to size, the working drawing is still very casual. Then, when I start milling, I might say, whoa, this piece is a little more interesting than I thought, or I see that I'm going to get more thickness out of the board than I expected. I know from experience how close I can cut things and still have lots of options.

JB: Did you continue studying furniture after graduate school?
HG: Nonstop. I read everything I could get my hands on. I wanted to know every style, every technique. And in 1976 I went to Europe for six weeks. I wrote ahead to a bunch of museums and got letters back giving me basically carte blanche access to their collections. That was amazing. When I got there, I gravitated instantly to England, 1903, the time of the original Arts and Crafts guys.

A couple of years later, I did the same thing in California. I wrote to Randall Mackinson, whose books on the Greene brothers had just come out, and asked if I could visit the Gamble House. Grad students lived in it at that point, and I got to stay in the house and study it for a week. Wow, that place was unbelievable.

JB: You work in Rhode Island, with its deep furniture tradition. Has being there affected your furniture design?
HG: One thing I quickly realized is that if you are a New England woodworker and you want to make a living here, you have to appeal to the New England aesthetic. I'm surrounded by antiques, surrounded by history. So, as I studied the furniture and did a lot of repair work on antiques, I started to think about how I could use these forms as inspiration to create pieces of my own. I wanted to make furniture familiar, comfortable, and practical enough to be embraced by New Englanders.

I like highboys, so I might design a piece that had a highboyesque quality about it. I wouldn't make any explicit historical reference; I'd just look at the stance, the format, the way that it functioned, and use those as guides while I drew my own pieces. And fortunately, once in a while, somebody would ask for one. □

Jonathan Binzen, a former editor of Fine Woodworking, *is a freelance writer.*

Table explores extremes of domestic wood. *Gilpin built this end table with tropical sea grape. He has acquired a wide range of exotic-seeming American woods on trips to Florida.*