# Stretching the Windsor tradition

BY PETER GALBERT

When I first delved into green-wood chairmaking from a life in cabinets and tables built mostly by machine, it was clear that I'd found my way to the work that I had been looking for. It wasn't so much the Windsor aesthetic that drew my interest as it was a desire to work quietly and closely with the material and tools. Once I began working primarily with hand tools, splitting logs and using steam bending, the road seemed to open in front of me.

I then spent years building traditional Windsor chairs to hone my skills and understand the techniques. Soon, curves and angles that had seemed taxing in my former world of sheet goods and milled lumber became easy to conceive and execute. But I wanted to push the design end, to make chairs that were less expected, yet still rooted in the brilliant Windsor technology.

In the spring of 2008, when I was invited to enter a piece into a show at the State University of New York at Purchase, it seemed a great opportunity to try some of the ideas that had been percolating as I built traditional chairs. I'd seen a curved settee in a book on Windsor chairs years before, and the notion had been knocking around in my head ever since. I thought it would be fun to build my own curved settee. For me, new chairs usually go through an evolution of multiple prototypes, but with the show just a few weeks away, I had no choice but to nail down the settee design quickly.

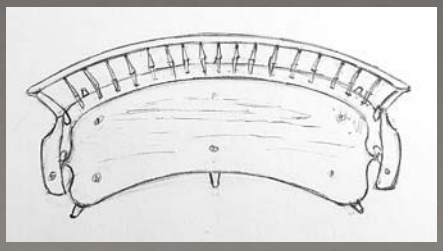
As with most of my chairs—and Windsors in general—the settee's structural anchor was the seat, and that was also the starting point for the design. The only concept sketch I did was from directly above; I figured that the shape of the seat was such a dominant feature that all the other elements would fall into place around it. Once I had worked out the shape, it was a matter of finding the angles of the legs and posts that join to it. Chairs built this way end up being a kind of puzzle, with certain key elements, such as the side posts, dictating the general shape, and the rest of the parts connecting the dots. In building traditional pieces I'd acquired a toolbox of techniques that made this clear, and as I made my way through the settee, each step and result seemed very natural and obvious.

Some new challenges did present themselves, such as the curved stretcher system beneath the seat. To find the geometry of the joints, I made a full-scale drawing showing the stretchers that run from the front legs to the back legs. Then I was able to map out the curve of the center stretcher.

I also ended up changing the splay of the legs to improve the stance. When I had the leg holes partly reamed, I inserted the



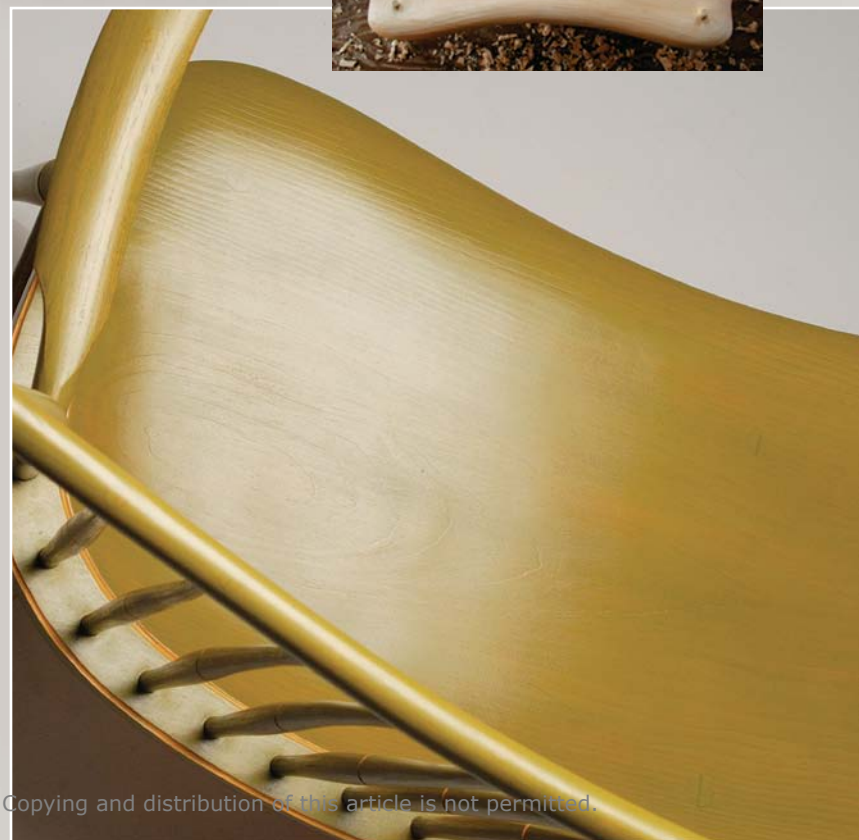
Photos and drawing: Peter Galbert



legs and saw that for this form the front legs weren't splayed enough and the back legs were splayed too much. So I changed the angles as I finished reaming—a great example of the freedom this technology gives you to change a design as you go.

With the settee built, I was pleasantly surprised at the results and set about painting it. Most of my previous chairs had been painted dark, using black milk paint layered over red, which was well suited to traditional designs. But I had been thinking I might paint the settee a bright organic color to complement the flowing nature of the design. With the deadline looming, however—and well aware that the finish can either elevate a design or cruelly diminish it—I decided not to take the risk. I painted the settee black over red.

As soon as I stepped back from the painted piece I realized that I'd chosen very poorly. Under dark paint the settee was not just subdued, it was dead. I spent the next day and a half carefully washing away the paint so as not to destroy the tool marks underneath. The seat got a fresh scraping and I repainted, layering green milk paint over yellow. The paint seemed to impart just the note of botanical freshness I'd been hoping for, and a few days later my newly named Spring Settee was on view at Purchase. □



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