



“You just have to try, you have to use your imagination.”

# Sam Maloof on Design

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

On a cloudless day on his four-acre California compound, 89-year-old Sam Maloof is in constant motion. He spends time on the bandsaw, as he does almost every day, making freehand, curving cuts on sinuous chair parts and table legs. He solves woodworking problems with his three assistants. He walks his sloped property with the agility of a much younger man, stepping lightly over construction debris and walls in progress. When he speaks to his head maintenance man, he switches easily into Spanish.

Around people, he is respectful, even affectionate. But he seems happiest and most focused when he is creating.

Though he is most widely known for his chairs and rockers, Maloof has designed some 500 different pieces of furniture, including many tables and case pieces, as well as two homes. His original house, in a lemon grove in Alta Loma, was displaced

## On trusting his eye ...

“I draw with my bandsaw—with no lines or anything. A very well-known blacksmith said, ‘I use my hammer as my pencil; I use my anvil as my table.’ I use my bandsaw as my pencil. When I’m working, I’m looking at both [edges of the cut] and I’m looking at the saw, too. I don’t recommend it to people—I’m afraid they’d cut their fingers off.

“I don’t have any of the parts manufactured by parts makers. I could very easily; it would save me a lot of time. When I make a chair, I make it and evolve it to the very finish. I’ve made it for that individual.”





## On the evolution of the rocker ...

"I was making my spindles kind of fat [at the bottom], so they did give me this lower lumbar part. They just came [straight] down. They sat good, but then I started doing them so they actually curve, and I thought, well, this is the way to do it. They're very sensuous, and I still make them this way now.

"I like the combination of hard lines and soft lines very much. It [arose from] an error. My son was working with me and he was daydreaming or something, and he cut too deep. I said, 'Well, let's see what we can do about it.' So I saved it by making a hard line.

"I make the rocker [with a reversing curve at the tips] so if a child gets in it, they can't push it back too far.

"Then the horns [at the top of the back posts], they don't mean anything, but when you go to move the rocker, you hold on there. And then the seat is very deep in the back, so when you sit, it automatically just slides you right back to where you get good lumbar support."

### **Hard lines accentuate the soft curves.**

*Malooof's earlier rockers (above) are characterized by upholstered seats, round spindles that swell outward to support the back, and a stretcher system for strength. Later (below), he developed a sculpted wood seat; curved, flattened spindles; and an interlocked, screwed joint at the seat rail that allowed him to omit the stretchers for a cleaner look. He also added hard edges to the soft sculpted curves.*

by a freeway. The state declared it a historic landmark and moved it in 2001 to a new, larger site a few miles uphill, where it is now open to visitors. At the time, Malooof was dealing with the death of Freda, his wife and lifelong business partner, so he embraced the relocation as a chance for a new start. For one thing, it allowed him to design and build a second house, to live in.

Malooof's new property offered lots of opportunities to create. There was the chance to design cavernous new lumber sheds, which he placed so they frame his view of the San Gabriel Mountains. He also has a spot picked out for a gallery to showcase the work of emerging artists.

### **Talent is innate, but must be nurtured**

As a boy, Malooof already was designing and drawing things, a sketch pad always at hand. His first serious job was as a graphic artist in Los Angeles. When he joined the







## On the “Maloof round” ...

“I didn’t want to have an edge on the drawers where it [would have to be] flush. But I could have the round on the outside that made a beautiful detail, and if [the drawers] weren’t quite accurate, they still looked accurate—I’ll be very blunt about it.

“I did it that way before other people did it, and all of a sudden I saw a lot of people up north doing it. And instead of calling it the Maloof round, they called it the California round. I could name people...”

**Round edges and inset drawers.** One of Maloof’s favorite design elements is rounded case edges with flat doors and drawer fronts set back.



Army during World War II, his superiors discovered his drawing skills and put him to work as a mapmaker. Today, after delivering pieces to the White House and the Smithsonian Institution, after being hailed as a national treasure, he still is sketching and designing, changing his furniture and surroundings, looking forward always.

It’s hard to pin down Maloof on the question of design. Basically, he knows beauty when he sees it. He believes that design can’t be taught—the talent is either there or it is not—but he allows that one’s innate talent can be nurtured.

For woodworkers who wish to improve their design skills, he recommends frequent drawing and sketching. “I still do that. I think of something, and I’ll pick up a piece of paper, and I’ll do a sketch of it and put it in my pocket. And one idea begets another idea.” He also suggests exposure to art in all forms. Most of all, he recommends designing and making lots of pieces. To those who admire his work but are afraid to design their own, he says: “You just have to try; you have to use your imagination.

“You have to ask yourself, ‘Do I just want to work in wood and copy beautiful objects?’ I see nothing wrong with copying,





## On nature ...



"I remember about 1955 we had a horrible rainstorm, and this area was all groves. The water was 2 ft. high, torrents of water, raging rivers. Somebody had some eucalyptus trees, and their roots were showing after the waters had receded a little bit. We made a left turn and Freda said, 'Sam, there's your table legs.' The roots came up like that (he gestures), just absolutely beautiful. And I reeled back and thought, 'Gosh, it does look like one of my pieces.'"



***Straight from the shop floor.*** To preview the final shape of a table pedestal, Maloof traces a half-template on the floor near his bandsaw, trusting his eye as always.

but how much more satisfaction do you get when you know you designed that piece, when it is your piece?"

Maloof also values the experience that blossoming woodworkers can have at schools or in other communities of peers. "I find that students are not selfish; they help one another and critique each other's work. They feed on one another."

However, he warns against domineering teachers: "Some instructors demand

that you work the way they work, and so there become just many little followers of this person or that person. I see a lot of work where I can tell where that person went to school right off the bat.

"I think a good teacher gives the whole rope to the students and lets them do what they want to do. I don't think you should curtail the excitement or the invention or the new direction. Sometimes [the student] falls flat on his face; other times it's great."

### **Trust your instincts when creating, but put function before form**

Maloof had no formal training in art or furniture making, so there is a completely personal quality to his work—polished yet unsophisticated—which strikes a chord in a wide range of people. Throughout his career, Maloof simply did what made sense to him, trusting his own eye and instincts at a time when the concept of the studio furniture maker didn't exist.

Maloof's design philosophy is deceptively simple: to make pieces that function well and are beautiful—or "byoodeeeful," as he says, referring to anything from a tree to a pottery vessel to a joinery



## On timeless beauty ...

"Elizabeth Gordon, who was the editor of *House Beautiful* for many years, called me one day. She said, 'Mr. Maloof, I saw your [curved bench] in New York and I'd like to feature it in the magazine.' This was the first time anything like this had ever happened to me. And she said, 'Are you Egyptian?'"

I said, 'No.'

'Have you ever been to Egypt?'

'No.'

'Have you ever studied Egyptian history?'

I said, 'No, why do you ask?'

She said, 'Your pieces have a feeling of old Egyptian furniture.'"







## On design that spans oceans ...

"I'd never been to Japan, and I didn't have any books on Japanese architecture. I came from a small family, from a small farm town, and we never traveled or went on vacation to any exotic places. And then when I went to Japan—I've been there four times now—I began to notice things that I do that were done in ancient times. It was the same way when I was in the Middle East."



**Wide overhangs.** On cabinets, chairs, and window trim, Maloof often favors a long projection, reminiscent of Japanese architecture.





# 500 pieces, one perfected ...

"I can't say that I've done a piece that is absolutely complete, that I don't want to make a change on it at all. But I must say that my little low-back chair—I think I perfected it. I can't do anything else to it. I think it looks well, it sits well, it's built well.

"Those arms aren't really arms. When you sit down in a chair, there's nothing to reach for. These are handles. You can raise yourself up, instead of putting your hands on the sides of the chair. And then they are stretchers. Instead of having the stretchers below the seat, I have the stretchers up here. They give it strength, but you don't have to have any stretchers down at the bottom. As for a high arm, well, a lot of times I've seen chairs where the arm hits the edge of a dining table."



detail. But function comes first. "I've seen tables that you couldn't eat off of, chairs you couldn't sit on, cabinets that were so shallow you couldn't put a pair of socks in them," Maloof says. "They were beautifully made and nice to look at, but I felt a piece could be very beautiful and very functional at the same time, and that is really the center of what I do. I want my chairs to invite people to sit on them. This has been my objective since my first commission."

As for designers who consider sculpture or art first and function second, Maloof says, "It's art furniture, and I think some of it is very interesting. I take my hat off to them. But to be different just to be different, though, is just a lot of poppycock.

"Some potters, they have a style and they stay to it. Other potters will continue changing—this direction, that direction. I heard a very well-known potter say, 'I've got to figure out what's going to sell good this next year.' That is for the birds. I've chosen to do what I do and I try to do the best work I can. And every year I add two or three pieces to what I've done." □

*Asa Christiana is managing editor.*



## **In his 80s, Maloof rebuilt his life.**

The new property at the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains holds his new lumber sheds, his old house and workshops, and the new house (above) he recently designed. The new home meant a second chance to design and build a spiral stairway (left). He keeps a carving gouge nearby to work on the surface detailing when he has time.