



The Best Woodworker You've Never Heard of

For 55 years,
the amazing Jere Osgood
has blended
modesty and mastery

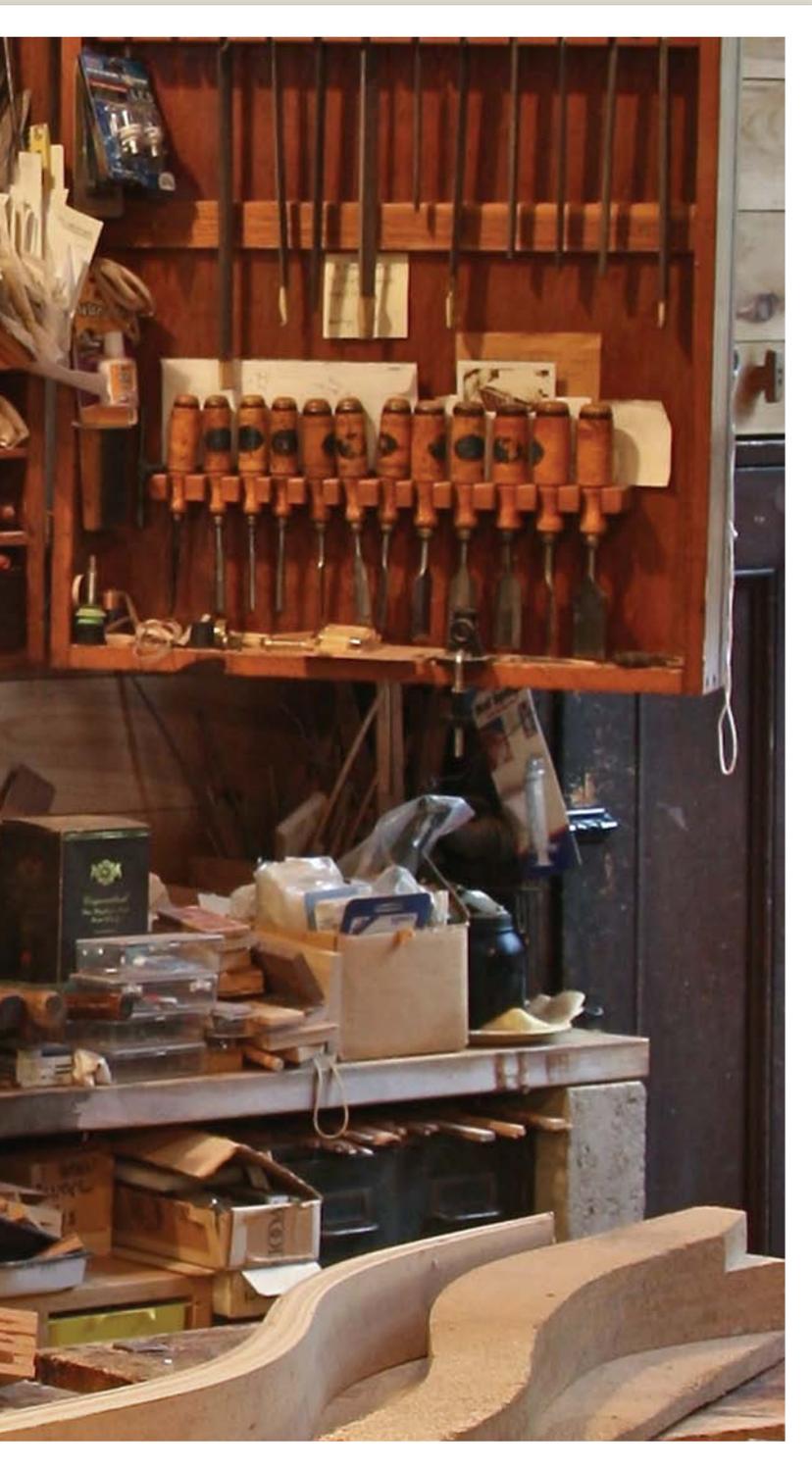
Jere Osgood is one of the most remarkable furniture makers in America. He also happens to be one of the most humble, and, considering the scope of his achievement, one of the least well-known. In the 55 years since he opened his first shop, Osgood has continually reset the boundaries of innovation in furniture-making style and structure. His work has been acquired by museums, widely exhibited, and he has earned The Furniture Society's award for lifetime achievement.

Celebrated for the daring curves of his desks and the subtly convex sides of his casework—as well as for the path-breaking techniques he uses

to produce them—Osgood is also noted for a painfully shy manner and a voice that starts in a mumble and tops out at a whisper. Diffidence may not seem an ideal attribute for a teacher, yet in 15 years of full-time teaching in the 1970s and '80s, Osgood proved a powerful mentor to a large number of students, many of whom are now among the country's most prominent furniture makers.

Osgood's own education in woodworking began in his father's basement workshop on Staten Island, N.Y., in the early 1940s. His father was not an advanced woodworker, but he instilled a resourcefulness in his son that stuck: If you wanted something, you made it. Osgood,

BY JONATHAN BINZEN



whose first name is pronounced “Jerry,” also learned from two uncles and a grandfather, all of them avid amateur woodworkers. At every family gathering, Osgood recalls, “You’d go in the front door and immediately down into the workshop.” Before he was 10, Osgood, an only child, was making his own toys. By the time he hit his teens, he had built his own workbench (which still sees use in his shop) and was repairing and refinishing furniture for neighbors. He also began building furniture for himself and others. One early commission was for a large bookshelf he built the winter he was 14—and delivered through snowy streets on his sled.

At 22, when he enrolled at Rochester Institute of Technology in



Signature piece. Osgood’s shell desk brings together two of his major technical innovations in a beautiful package. The legs are examples of his bent-tapered lamination and the lid, inspired by the body of a lute, is made with his compound-stave lamination.



Museums and galleries agree.

Osgood first had a piece in a museum show in 1958, when he was just 22. Since then his furniture has been collected by major museums and featured in dozens of books. For the past 30 years, he’s shown his work at Pritam and Eames in East Hampton, N.Y., the country’s foremost gallery of contemporary furniture.



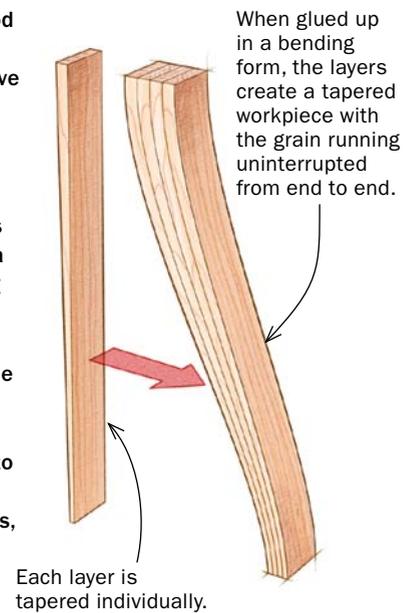
DESIGN MEETS ENGINEERING

Osgood's furniture is packed with brilliant solutions to technical problems. He prefers curved lines to straight ones, and this has pushed him to make major breakthroughs in bending wood. He is equally ingenious when it comes to other structures and the joinery that binds them.



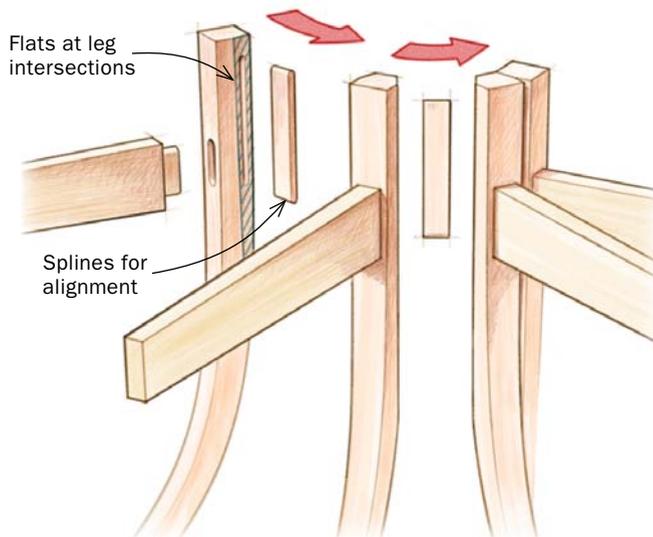
TAPERED BENT LAMINATION

This method, which Osgood developed around 1970, produces a laminated curve that tapers in thickness without compromising strength or appearance. Previously, to achieve the same effect, woodworkers cut through the layers of a laminated curve, reducing its strength and exposing wide glue lines. Osgood's innovation was to taper the individual layers so they would run continuously from one end of the part to the other. Steam-bending can create the same forms, but Osgood prefers bent-lamination for its greater predictability.



CLUSTERED LEGS

Osgood often supports desks and small tables on a cluster of splayed, curved legs. He developed a system of joining the legs that delivers strength and stability while retaining an appearance of lightness and the illusion that the legs are just barely attached.



1958 to study under Tage Frid, Osgood was already showing his work publicly and had two pieces in an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in Manhattan. And he had spent the previous two years studying architecture at the University of Illinois.

All this did not impress Frid, the legendary Danish craftsman and teacher who would later become *Fine Woodworking's* most important early contributor. Frid had learned woodworking the old-fashioned way, serving a traditional apprenticeship in Copenhagen beginning at age 12 and working for years in a variety of Danish cabinetmaking shops. Osgood still remembers with a

wince Frid's gruff assessment of his homegrown hand skills and unorthodox joinery: "You've got to start all over. All this stuff you were doing before you came here—forget about it!"

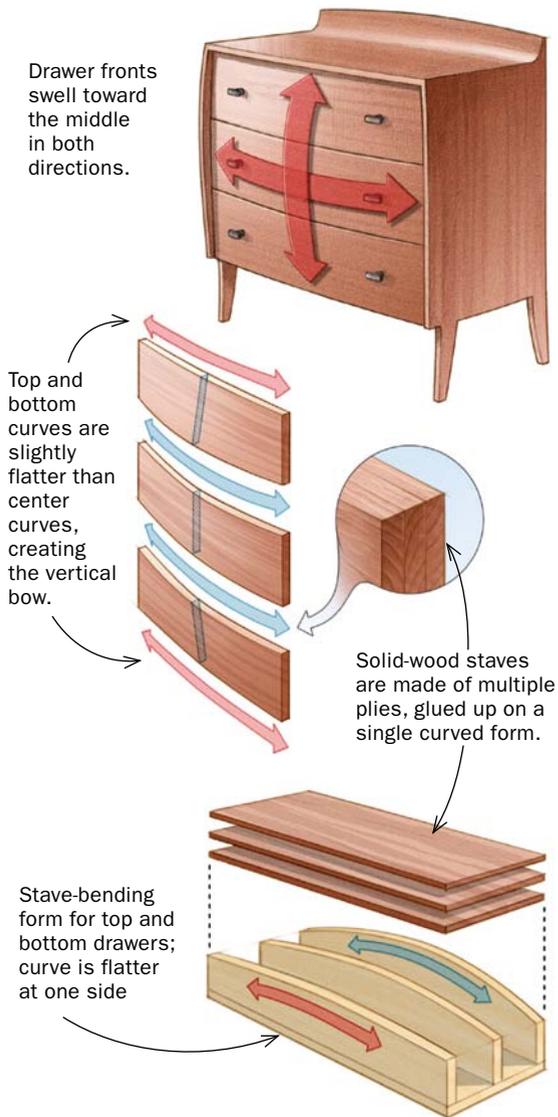
Setting a quiet example

Osgood never fully warmed up to Frid's outsized personality—or to his sometimes clunky designs—but he absorbed all he could from Frid's vast knowledge of woodworking skills, joinery, and structure.

Several years after leaving RIT, Osgood set up shop in northwestern Connecticut and through the 1960s supported himself and

COMPOUND-STAVE LAMINATION

In the late 1960s, bored with flat-sided furniture, Osgood began building case pieces with sides and drawer fronts that swelled outward in a compound curve. Wendell Castle and others at the time were carving organic furniture out of large, stack-laminated blocks of wood. Osgood thought that was wasteful and produced heavy-looking furniture. He wanted to build pieces that were lighter, subtler, with more economical use of material. His solution was the method he calls compound-stave lamination, a hybrid between coopering and bent lamination.



his wife and two boys by cranking out hundreds of accessories—clocks and bookends, bowls and stools—which he sold through America House, then the best craft store in Manhattan. As the decade progressed, he began building larger pieces of furniture.

He also began teaching a weekly class in woodworking in New York City. Frid's teaching style had been a charismatic mixture of showmanship, humor, and browbeating—on a foundation of rock-solid instruction. When Osgood began teaching full-time in 1970—first in Philadelphia, then at RIT, and finally at Boston University's Program in Artisanry—he gave students that same firm founda-

tion, but with a different delivery. "He didn't lecture," one student recalled, "you got it by osmosis." Students remember Osgood as "understated," "subtle," and "good for about one sentence a week." Still, the message got through, and Osgood launched an astonishing array of successful furniture makers, talents as diverse as Tom Hucker and David Lamb, Michael Hurwitz and Garrett Hack.

Innovative techniques

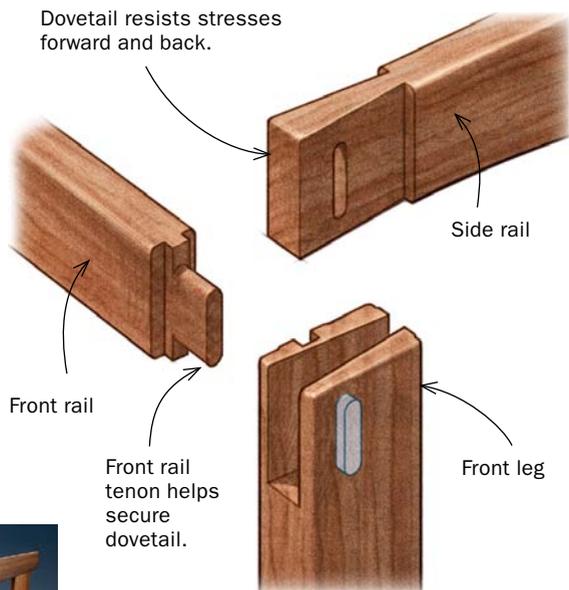
After Frid chastised him for inventing joinery ("It drove him up the wall," Osgood says), Osgood held back long enough to learn

REINVENTING THE CHAIR

Osgood has always designed his chairs for visual impact, but along the way he has re-engineered every aspect of the typical wooden chair, inventing and adapting techniques to produce maximum strength and comfort with minimal weight and waste.

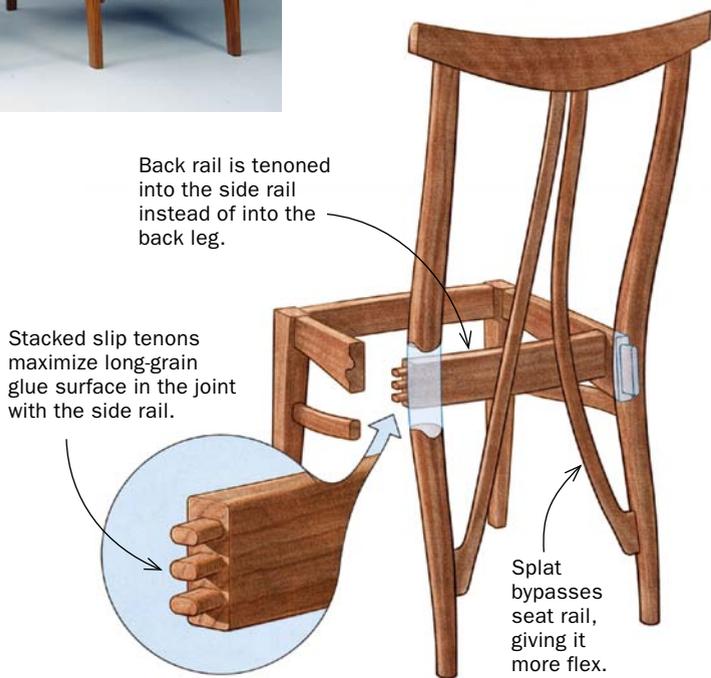
LOCKING DOVETAIL SECURES THE FRONT LEG

Wanting a chair that would resist racking stresses without a stretcher system, Osgood devised a locking dovetail to join the front leg to the front and side seat rails.



SHIFTING THE REAR SEAT RAIL FORWARD

Osgood's seat-rail arrangement strengthens the structure while adding flowing lines and more flexibility to the back. He uses slip tenons for much of his joinery, which simplifies the challenges of joining curved parts.



all the traditional joinery Frid had to teach. But within a few years of graduation, Osgood began experimenting again.

And he flipped Frid's favorite dictum on its head. Frid always told students they should "design around the construction." In other words, determine how a piece should be made, and then figure out how it will look. Osgood did the opposite—first sketching the shapes he wanted and then deciding how to build them.

Because the shapes he conjured usually involved complex curves, he often had to dream up new techniques. He was careful, though, always to base his new techniques on sound, traditional principles. Osgood's chief innovations are methods for making curved and tapered legs and compound-curved case pieces. But he also pioneered a long list of other joints and structures. Some he's used in just a few pieces—like the spoked brass hardware he fashioned for his shell desk—others he's repeated and refined through a series of pieces, like the cluster joint in his side table and the ingenious joinery in his side chairs.

Unerring design

Osgood's furniture is impressive both for its aesthetics and its engineering—and perhaps most impressive for the way the two are so seamlessly integrated. The deeper you look into Osgood's work, the more novel details and custom solutions you see. But like all of the seen and unseen efforts in Osgood's furniture, when you stand back they blend into the design as a whole.

When Osgood was in his early teens, his grandfather, an architect, gave him a set of drafting tools and encouraged him to practice. Through that experience and his two years of architecture school, he became very comfortable designing on paper.

SERIOUSLY PLAYFUL

Osgood's furniture ranges widely in mood, from the flamboyance of his desks to the understatement of his side chair. But all of it reflects the same rigorous process of design and the same ability to blend arresting form with flawless function.



Performance piece. With simpler functional requirements than bureaus or chairs, writing desks offer Osgood a chance to build more expressive, sculptural forms.



Osgood still designs each piece thoroughly on paper before he begins to build. Other makers may shift course as a piece goes together; Osgood tries to have every issue worked out beforehand.

After arriving at a form he wants to pursue in his sketchbook, he develops it further on paper and then builds a full-scale mockup from pine or cardboard. He doesn't bother with scale models, feeling that much of the impact of a piece is lost when it is miniaturized. He does extensive full-scale drawings before building the real piece, often generating dozens of separate drawings to nail down every detail.

Curves are Osgood's oxygen; not perfect geometric arcs, but curves drawn from nature. "Somewhere, way back there," he says, "I got dissatisfied with the square furniture form." So he began trying to design into his furniture a sense of movement, as in the flow of water or wind, or the natural bends a tree makes as it grows.

As a boy, he spent summer vacations by a lake in Vermont and loved the giant cedars he saw there. The memory of their roots, washed clean by the water, inspired the curving legs of his desks and side tables. Osgood has always felt a kinship with the forest, and still walks every day through the woods that surround his home in New Hampshire. He says the slightly bulging sides of his case pieces are meant to link the furniture "to the organic origins of the wood—its treeness—which flat boards do not express."

Now 75, Osgood has been working wood for seven decades. In the past year or two, health problems have kept him from being as productive as he'd like, but he's determined to get back to the bench as soon as he can. Reflecting on his life and work recently, he described the pleasure he still finds in developing designs and solving problems in the shop, and then he said, "It's been a good career." He spoke in his usual reedy whisper, and a listener had to lean forward to hear. But through his furniture, with its clarity, daring, and cleverness, Osgood speaks in a different register, and his voice carries right across the country. □

Jonathan Binzen is a consulting editor.



▲ **Bringing curves to the cabinet.**

Osgood enlivens his case pieces by slightly bowing out the sides, doors, and drawers in compound curves. One student asked him why he put so much effort even into curves and details that were sometimes barely noticeable. "You'd notice," Osgood told him, "if I left them out."



◀ **Modest but masterful.** This cherry side chair illustrates Osgood's ability to design furniture of striking simplicity that fits in easily with other pieces, rather than standing out as his desks do.