

## Is design a learnable skill?

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Long before I ever started thinking about designing furniture, I knew I wanted to build furniture. I grew up watching my dad, a mechanical engineer, making things while I hung out in his basement workshop. I was in awe of the way he would look at a spot in our house, envision what he wanted to build based on a need, and then set to work making it. Voila, it was in place and in use as if the house had never been without it. We had built-in shelving, beds, outdoor furniture, radiator covers, and they all looked perfect. What I now realize is that there's a huge part of the process from the concept to the finished product that I hadn't noticed or considered. The designing.

At some point I started making things, and I quickly realized how separate yet intertwined and muddled are those two aspects of building furniture. Designing vs. building, the creative vs. the practical—where do the two things separate? Converge?

Clearly, it is possible to learn the techniques of building, and with a lot of time logged one can become skillful at it. Sure, some people have better hands than others; some are more mechanically minded and more adept at machine maintenance;

some just have more aptitude or desire for pushing lumber through machines than others. In the end, though, the techniques are concrete, teachable skills.

But can one learn how to be a good designer, or is that an innate talent given only to the lucky? I've made enough of my own furniture, seen enough furniture made by others, juried enough exhibitions, watched enough people struggle through the process, and read enough on the subject to know that this is an elusive, daunting topic. Good design can come with experience, building confidence and trusting in your instincts that something just works or maybe doesn't. I know I've learned a lot about design since I first began thinking about it (and I'm sure there's a lot more I can learn). But I am just one maker. So I turned to a few people for help wrangling the topic, people who have been making beautiful furniture for a long time, and who spend a lot of time writing about or teaching people to make beautiful furniture. I asked them if the fundamentals of good design can be taught.

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### Online Extra

For a slide show of work by these four designers, go to [FineWoodworking.com/270](http://FineWoodworking.com/270).



## Hank Gilpin

Can good design be taught? Quickly, yes, design can be taught. It might be good if the teacher has both a bit of talent and a lot of patience. Passing on the elements of design that form the current visual zeitgeist is what most teaching is about, even if the teacher has other ideas; the premise being that the objects/ideas we produce must satisfy those who buy them. We are talking teaching and most of this happens in institutions where teachers want to believe that the learners will be able to go out into what Tage Frid called the “cold, cold world” and thrive. They will have to produce stuff that people want. What people want, from my experience, is usually something familiar or at least not too challenging.

Gilpin has been designing and building fine art furniture for 45 years. He served in Vietnam as an Army photographer, and returned to the United States with the intention to study photography at the Rhode Island School of Design. A random choice of electives led Gilpin to woodworking. His first teacher (and future mentor) was Tage Frid.



What is not teachable, and what I sometimes think is the real question, is talent. Innate talent is one of the gods' gifts. It's a gift that few possess and of those who do, only some fully exploit. I'm not talking genius, but rather a simple aptitude that manifests in an ability to see a design in one's head. The skill that evolves out of that innate ability is a direct result of pushing ideas by drawing, and drawing, and drawing again. The best designers I know draw all the time, filling notebooks with evolving and changing thoughts that only later become things.



## Laura Mays

I think design can most certainly be taught. To be sure, it's beneficial to have talent or a natural affinity, or however one might describe a predisposition that is either innate or learned at an early age. But equally important are a desire to learn, enthusiasm, and the willingness to put in the time. Like almost everything, design takes a great deal of time to learn (as well as good teachers)—there's a reason why most design degrees are four years long. It's not possible to bypass the time stage. You have to be willing to fail, and fail again, in a supportive environment, and listen to teachers who tell you why and how it could be better. You have to listen with a mix of belief and skepticism.

Mays has a degree in architecture from University College Dublin and a higher certificate in Furniture Design and Manufacture from GMT Letterfrack (Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology), both in Ireland. She followed that with two years in the Fine Woodworking program at the College of the Redwoods (now The Krenov School) in Fort Bragg, Calif., where since 2011 she has been the program director.



Having said that, design is a huge category, spanning a spectrum from the almost entirely technical to the almost entirely artistic. It is not only about manipulating form and shape, but understanding user experiences. It requires a material sensitivity, an understanding of the making and assembling process, and an awareness of taste and fashion. The technical side is the easiest to teach, in a way, because it's more measurable, more definitive in terms of right and wrong. The “artistic” side is more subjective.





Lewis has been designing and making furniture for more than 35 years. He grew up in Wales, and at 16 moved to Oxford to study furniture making at Rycotewood College. In addition to running a busy shop with a team of craftsmen for 18 years, he has worked in others' shops in South Africa, the United States, and the United Kingdom. He is lead instructor for the Nine-month Comprehensive Program at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine.

## Aled Lewis

I think the short answer to whether good design can be taught is yes, though there are some caveats attached. The first thing to realize is that attaining a design for anything is a process, and within it are a few key factors that plug into the task. Obvious things like function, material, budget, etc., are just a few.

I try to encourage my students to understand that designing is within everyone's grasp and not to be afraid of it. The process is not easy; it is at times riddled with uncertainty, self doubt, and anxiety. It is often the case that unless or until you go through these emotions you cannot claim to have done your best, but if that journey has been traveled then you can defend your decisions with some authority. Sometimes teaching design is a bit like shining a light down a dark rabbit hole and encouraging a student to go there. We don't know what's down there, but we have a good idea of what to do when we find out.

In critiquing design, once the questions of function, structure, build quality, scale, and proportion are addressed, the assessment cannot be anything but subjective. That said, we are nudged along toward a viewpoint by our accumulated knowledge of what has gone before us, what we see around us, and our perceived notion of skill, craft, and artistry. The accumulation of all these elements adds some rigor to the process.



Cullen worked in machine design before he became a furniture maker. He studied under David Powell at Leeds Design Workshops in Easthampton, Mass., then moved to Boston to work with Jamie Robertson at the well-known Emily Street Workshops. He divides his time between creating furniture, teaching, and writing about design and technique.

## Michael Cullen

The foundations of good design can be taught or read about. One can learn all the exact dimensions and criteria for a good chair. One can even learn the correct joinery and can become quite adept at making a chair. And of course, one can learn about the material. But all this still doesn't guarantee the chair will be a success. Similarly, one can learn how to play a musical instrument by practicing all the right exercises and scales but that doesn't guarantee the result will be music to the ear. In my own experience, design is something much more elusive; something that isn't captured or defined through measurement or what I've been taught. It's more of a feeling about a shape that one captures in a moment of discovery. And of course good design can be born in failure; where one design idea is tried after another until just the right one appears. I like to say, "when the design presents itself—pounce, and work like hell before you think."

