

Inspiration surrounds us

Nothing is more daunting to a woodworker than a pristine piece of white paper. And when it comes to design, we often fall back on reproducing work that already exists. This makes sense from the standpoint of learning techniques, like when a painter re-creates the *Mona Lisa* or a sculptor copies Michelangelo's *David*. To translate this example from fine art to furniture making, think of a woodworker who re-creates a Sam Maloof rocker. Often regarded as the pinnacle of woodworking, a Maloof rocker offers the craftsperson an education in a bevy of woodworking techniques.

But once you have a grasp on technique, where do you go from there? Most woodworkers look at other furniture for inspiration, taking the shape of a leg from one chair and the crest rail from another, or appropriating the top of one table and putting it on the base of another. When the stars align, the result is a functional object that is pleasing to the eye. But often the result just misses the mark. We've all been there.

A fresh path to inspiration

When I teach furniture design, I steer my students away from the cut-and-paste tactic by offering a variety of alternative approaches. One of my favorite methods is to find inspiration in all objects. Art, architecture, plants, animals—anything from

our everyday surroundings can be a rich source of inspiration. A good example of this methodology is a series of pieces I made where high-end fashion served as the spark.

While browsing through a newspaper, I came across the 2009 collection of fashion designer Zac Posen. I was blown away by the sculptural form of the arms and neckline of a dress, which were created by pleats. I immediately began thinking of furniture, and more specifically, how the soft folds of fabric might translate into a hard material such as wood. In that brief moment, without intention, inspiration was gleaned and the design process begun.

Sketch the spark into reality

With the dress as a reference, I began to sketch. One sketch led to another until I enlarged the shoulder and upper arm portion of the dress using a grid transfer technique. Drawing by hand allows you to discover information about an object that would otherwise be lost. As you draw, you become conscious of the





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object's attributes: repetition, geometry, symmetry, asymmetry, texture, color, and pattern. When I connected my hand and eye to draw the dress, I discovered that the repetitive peaks and valleys and gentle sweeping curves of the pleats created a visual movement I wanted to capture in my furniture.

From there I began researching other sources of inspiration with a similar aesthetic, such as icebergs, running water, and mushroom gills. Those images became sketches and those sketches led to more sketches. I drew the entire object,

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enlarged portions, colored some, until the curves, peaks, and valleys eventually found themselves incorporated into furniture forms.

Whether it's a Sam Maloof rocker or the pleats of a dress, inspiration can come from anywhere at any time. Our goal should be to remain open to it and harness that inspiration as it comes, and then turn it into the best work we can make. □

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From fabric to furniture

Blending the concept—in this case, the pleated fabric of a dress—into furniture was not too difficult. Since visual movement would be the focal point, I wanted the furniture to serve as a backdrop. Simple forms in nondescript woods would highlight the carvings best. Using my sketches and the aid of friends with CNC machines, we developed a drawing using Rhinoceros software and began prototyping the carvings. After a few attempts, we established the cutting pattern and now have a file that can be used repeatedly. This type of carving can easily be farmed out to any fabrication company with a CNC machine for hire. These days it's very common and affordable.

The last carving path on the CNC leaves a fairly clean surface, with a fine grid-like texture. Using a medium-grit sandpaper, I knocked back any fuzz. Once I had a consistent surface I applied several coats of milk paint to the carved surfaces, lightly sanding between coats. I applied a hand-rubbed oil finish using a wet-sanding technique. This left a silky smooth finish akin to the pleats on the Posen dress. —J.A.

