

40 Years of Inspiration

How *Fine Woodworking* influenced generations of woodworkers

BY STEVE SCOTT

F*ine Woodworking* magazine debuted in the winter of 1975, after founders Jan and Paul Roman sent postcard invitations to 20,000 potential subscribers. Four decades later, the impression the magazine has made on the craft is clear—and everlasting. *Fine Woodworking* has fostered a creative community, preserved and advanced a craft, inspired and taught everyone in it.

“I remember waiting with anticipation to see what the first issue was going to be all about,” recalls period furniture maker and teacher Phil Lowe. “Here you had this publication that was sort of letting the trade secrets out. It has played a tremendous role in keeping the craftsmanship alive.”

The magazine also became an important showcase, creating a common awareness—that hadn’t existed before—of what was current in the craft.

“I love seeing what other people are doing,” said furniture maker Hank Gilpin. “What are the different minds in different parts of the country developing and creating, and where is their inspiration?”

To celebrate *Fine Woodworking*’s 40th anniversary, we asked many of our most noteworthy contributors to tell us what reading the magazine has meant to them, and to share their favorite article. Taken together, their stories are like pieces in a marquetry pattern depicting the magazine’s influence.

Online Extra

Read the original articles that inspired our contributors. They’re available free for a limited time at FineWoodworking.com/extras.



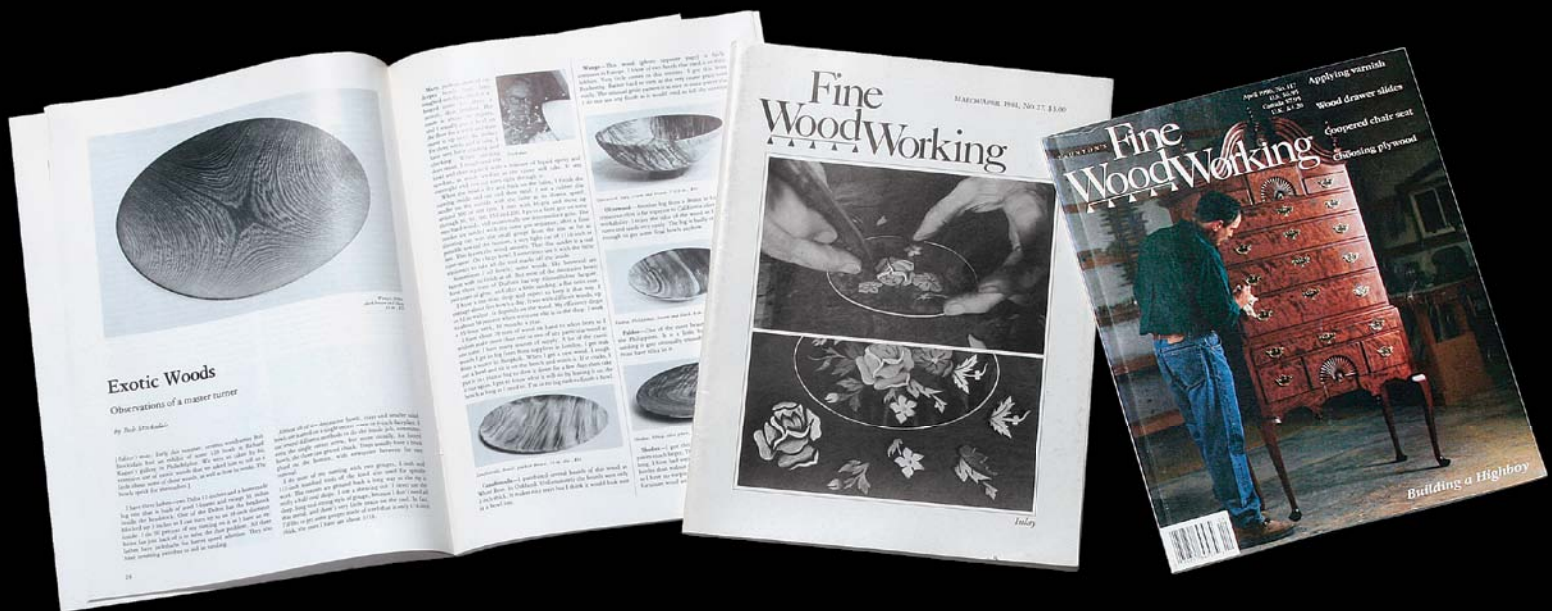
FWW #3—the whole issue

Garrett Hack is a man of many pursuits: furniture maker, author, teacher, gentleman farmer. So it’s no surprise that he would choose more than one favorite article. He instead chose an entire issue—#3. The issue’s table of contents reads a little like a lineup card for the ’27 Yankees, stacked with some of woodworking’s heaviest hitters: Tage Frid, R. Bruce Hoadley, and Jere Osgood among them. Frid’s article on mortise-and-tenon joinery is one that Hack still uses in his teaching.

“I always admired the way he wrote quite simply about things,” Hack said, recalling some of the article’s lessons: “Don’t use four shoulders around a tenon. Keep your tenons as wide as possible. Angle the tenon instead of the mortise.

“That’s lasting stuff.”

Hack also took heart from Osgood’s article, which celebrated and commented on the furniture craftsmanship then being practiced in the Northeast. At that time, in the summer of 1976, Hack had done some woodworking in school and recalls that he was beginning to weigh the role that the craft might play in his future. In hindsight, he said, *FWW* #3 may have helped tip the scales. “The following year, I applied to a program in artistry which Jere Osgood was running,” he recalled. “So that was in some ways the first step.”



Exotic Woods

BY BOB STOCKSDALE, FWW #4

Hank Gilpin says, “I started out as a furniture maker, but then I became a wood guy.” His Rhode Island shop supports that claim, holding thousands of board feet from a huge variety of domestic species. Over the years, it is the “wood” in *Fine Woodworking* that has captivated him most.

“I go ‘wow’ when I see a picture of end grain, and glaze over when I see a dovetail,” he said. “Without a doubt, the most valuable and interesting and direction-changing articles for me were the articles on wood.”

Early in his career, Gilpin decided to work only in domestic species—to save money. So it’s ironic in some ways that the article he remembers most clearly was titled “Exotic Woods.” Renowned turner Bob Stocksdale introduced nearly two dozen species, noting each wood’s origin, color, texture, and working properties.

But more than the particulars about the wood, Gilpin was struck by the author himself, and the depth of his knowledge. “He discussed each wood with a kind of intimacy that really impressed me,” Gilpin said.

That article, along with others by R. Bruce Hoadley and, later, by Jon Arno, helped deepen Gilpin’s appreciation for the material.

“I’ve worked in more woods than anyone you know,” he said. “Those articles are what got my eyes open.”

Inlaying Mother of Pearl

BY RICHARD SCOTT NEWMAN, FWW #27

Steve Latta’s woodworking career began in a bicycle shop. In the mid-1970s, Latta was an undergrad student at Ohio University with a part-time gig truing wheels, replacing brakes, and adjusting shifters.

One day, “I overhauled a local furniture maker’s bike. He thought I might be good with my hands so he offered me a job.” Latta accepted and swapped one set of tools for another. “I took to wood really easily. I just went with the flow and it has worked out well.”

I’ve said it before, you can teach yourself the craft in the pages of *Fine Woodworking*, and I really stand by that.

And in that Athens, Ohio, cabinet shop, “everybody read *Fine Woodworking*,” Latta recalled. “It was everywhere.”

Latta was drawn to early articles by Silas Kopf and others, but specifically remembers being challenged and inspired by the work of furniture and instrument maker Richard Scott Newman. “With Richard’s stuff, I didn’t know how he did it,” he said. Latta points to an article on Newman’s work titled “Inlaying Mother of Pearl” as introducing him to the world of decorative inlay—a technique that’s central to his own work.

“There is a 100% direct correlation between seeing his work and what I do now,” Latta said, “I just don’t do it as well as he did.”

Curly Cherry Highboy

FWW #117, #118, #119

In the mid-1980s, **Chris Gochmour** was waiting tables at a Salt Lake City restaurant with a brand new English degree and no idea what he was going to do with it.

Woodworking seemed like an option, although apart from a shop class in high school he was largely self-taught.

“I really had no instructors, except for *Fine Woodworking* and books,” he said. “I just would go to the library and get books and books on woodworking. I’ve said it before, you can teach yourself the craft in

the pages of *Fine Woodworking*, and I really stand by that.”

Gochmour recalls a series of three articles in issues 117 to 119 by Randall O’Donnell, a comprehensive how-to on the construction of an early American highboy in curly cherry. Gochmour admired the thoroughness of the presentation, and O’Donnell’s smart blend of machines and hand tools. But what struck him most was how the article made a gargantuan undertaking seem approachable.

“When you look at the whole, it can be daunting and overwhelming,” Gochmour said. “But this article breaks it down into manageable components. It gave me confidence in handling larger commissions.”

Water and Wood

The problems of a difficult pair

By R. Bruce Hoadley

When the subject of water and wood is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is the old adage: "Water and wood don't mix." It's a truism, and one that has been repeated for centuries. But in the world of fine woodworking, there are many instances where water and wood do mix, and the results can be anything but disastrous. In fact, the combination of the two can be a powerful ally, one that can help you create pieces of furniture that are not only beautiful but also more durable and long-lasting than those made with traditional techniques.

| Species | Grain | Color | Texture | Workability |
|-------------|--------|-------|---------|-------------|
| Alder | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Basswood | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Birch | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Chestnut | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Cottonwood | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Elm | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Hickory | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Maple | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Pine | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Poplar | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Redwood | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Spruce | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Walnut | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| White Oak | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |
| Yellow Pine | Coarse | Light | Smooth | Good |

Hand Dovetails

They're really not that hard to do

By Alphonse Mattia

Overcoming a lot of the common and most common mistakes of dovetailing is the matter of hand dovetailing. Hand dovetailing is a technique that has been used for centuries, and it's one that is still used today. It's a technique that is both simple and elegant, and it's one that can be used to create pieces of furniture that are not only beautiful but also more durable and long-lasting than those made with traditional techniques.



Drawer Bottoms

Its variations on a theme

By Alan Marks

Drawers have long been considered one of the most difficult elements in furniture, and they are no exception. They are a part of the furniture that is both functional and decorative, and they are one that can be used to create pieces of furniture that are not only beautiful but also more durable and long-lasting than those made with traditional techniques.



Water and Wood

BY R. BRUCE HOADLEY, FWW #4

Christian Becksvoort is the prototype

for a solo craftsman. With a house in rural Maine and his shop just steps from his back door, he builds pieces of his own design based on the Shaker furniture he admires most. But at the start of his career, he spent time working in other people's shops, fixing other people's mistakes.

The shops would build solid-wood case pieces with interior web frames glued into place in all four corners, he recalled. "The sides would shrink and the web frame would not," leading to split case sides and unhappy customers. When he started on his own, he was determined to avoid those sorts of headaches.

"Working alone, you really don't want your pieces ever coming back (for repairs)," he said. "That's not a paying proposition."

In his effort to build pieces more intelligently, he found an ally in R. Bruce Hoadley and his early articles on the material properties of wood. He especially remembers Hoadley's piece titled "Water and Wood."

"Those articles got me going on my favorite rant, which is wood movement," Becksvoort said. Using his own experience and Hoadley's teaching, Becksvoort began designing his own pieces with seasonal wood movement in mind. "In 35 years, I've never had a piece come back," he said.

Hand Dovetails

BY ALPHONSE MATTIA, FWW #2

Jim Richey has edited and illustrated the

magazine's Methods of Work column for 38 years. His favorite article is "Hand Dovetails" by Alphonse Mattia.

"I'd been a carpenter all through college, put myself through college building houses, but I'd never done anything like joinery by hand," he said. "That was just a revelation to me, and it was a very clear article, with very clear photographs and illustrations

In his effort to build pieces more intelligently, Becksvoort found an ally in R. Bruce Hoadley and his early articles on the material properties of wood.

and lots of little tips like angling the tip of your marking gauge. Lots of little things like that."

After reading the article, Richey said, he tooled up. He mail-ordered a dovetail saw from Woodcraft, sharpened his carpenters' chisels, and "I ended up making an elegant little marking gauge just for dovetails, which I still have," he said. "And I still have that original dovetail saw."

"Dozens of pieces of furniture later, I still enjoy that chop chop chop and tap tap tap. It really did change the way I approach projects and woodworking."

Drawer Bottoms

BY ALAN MARKS, FWW #9

"I consider myself to be a Fine Woodworking baby," said contributing editor Michael Fortune. He trained to be a commercial furniture designer, a background that taught him how to operate at production scale. He credits the magazine with teaching him to work as a solo craftsman.

"A lot of what I know has been gleaned and adapted from various articles in those early years," he said. "Even to this day, I go

through every issue and there is something that I incorporate."

The strongest example, Fortune said, is an article by Alan Marks titled "Drawer Bottoms." The article pointed Fortune to the NK system of building drawers with bottom-mounted wooden slides that reduce friction while ensuring that the drawer travels squarely inside the case. "It's just such a wonderful way to make drawers," Fortune said. "I've used that countless times, and I've referred students to the same article."



Boston Bombé Chest

BY LANCE PATTERSON, FWW #45

Miguel Gómez-Ibáñez, president of North Bennet Street School, says it is not really possible to squeeze the construction of a bombé chest into a five-page magazine article. There is just too much to relate, from the ball-and-claw feet to the serpentine front to the cock-beaded drawers.

But back in 1984, Lance Patterson—an instructor at NBSS then and now—gave it his best. The article, “Boston Bombé Chest,” has since become required reading at the school.

The article does not take readers through the chest project step by step, but offers clear descriptions and drawings of several key components, including the shaped drawer fronts and the tapered drawer boxes.

“It’s not only unique, but important for somebody to have written that stuff down,” Gómez-Ibáñez said. “*Fine Woodworking* really did a wonderful thing in being the vehicle to document this piece of work. It’s the definitive article on bombé furniture.”

Gómez-Ibáñez said he’s never built the chest himself, but has used many of the techniques that Patterson demonstrated in the article. “It’s something I’ve returned to many times,” for reference on a variety of projects, Gómez-Ibáñez said. “There are a lot of issues like the tapered box construction that so befuddle me that I have to reread it every time I do them.”

Curved Slot-Mortise and Tenon

BY BEN DAVIES, FWW #26

Marc Adams, owner of the nation’s busiest woodworking school, began reading the magazine in the late 1970s as a young cabinet shop owner desperate for guidance.

“I had never taken a woodworking class and I had never taken a business class,” Adams said. “I was one of those guys that just was starved for information ... reading *Fine Woodworking* cover to cover and trying to get everything I could out of it.”

For a youngster like me—I was 24—you’re just soaking up as much information as you can and trying to figure out your own path.

Among the articles that stuck with him was a piece by Ben Davies titled “Curved Slot-Mortise and Tenon,” which describes how to execute a mortise-and-tenon joint in curved work.

Adams said he has incorporated the curved mortise-and-tenon repeatedly through the years, most notably in the design of a document box that his students make each year for a charity fund-raising event.

“I’m always after the unique things,” Adams said. “I was always looking for a detail in the joinery or a detail in the process that could change my work.”

Profiles of craftsmen: Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, Art Carpenter, and others

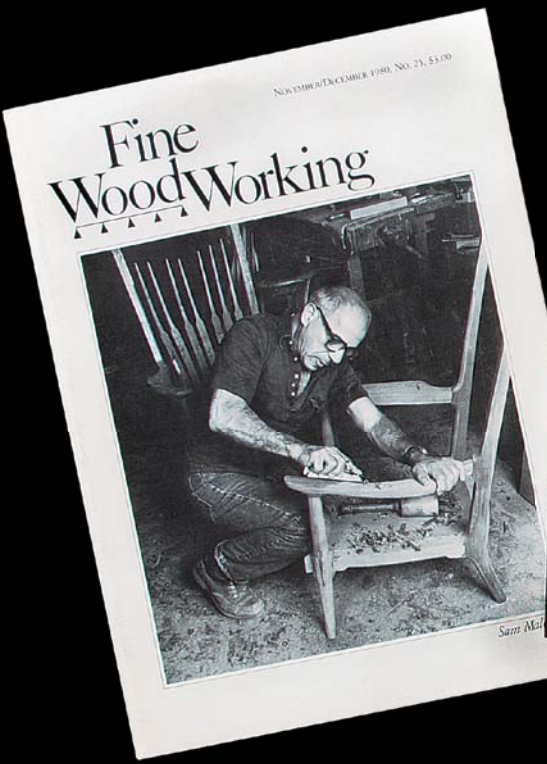
Many readers recalled that, in its early years, the magazine reached a far-flung group of solitary craftsmen and turned them into a community.

“We didn’t even know each other existed because we all hid out in our shops,” said former contributing editor **Gary Rogowski**. “It’s a bit isolated.”

The magazine helped woodworkers to connect, broaden their horizons, and learn.

“I would just eat these magazines up,” he recalled. “For a youngster like me—I was 24—you’re just soaking up as much information as you can and trying to figure out your own path.”

The articles Rogowski was drawn to most were the profiles of solo craftsmen such as Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, or Art Carpenter. The articles were a winning combination of inspiration and practical advice. “You could get a little philosophy, but also see the work,” he recalled. “I loved those articles.”



Sam Maloof

BY RICK MASTELLI, FWW #25

Roland Johnson found *Fine Woodworking* in an unlikely place.

"I vividly remember the day that I found (*Fine Woodworking's*) Biennial Design Book in a hippie hardware store in St. Paul," he said. "It just took the top of my head off; I'd never seen stuff like that."

The discovery came as Johnson was trying to launch his own woodworking career in a small shop near the Twin Cities. "I bought all the back issues of *Fine Woodworking* and

Mastelli describes Maloof's transition from home-shop hobbyist to the country's most popular and successful custom furniture maker.

subscribed to it, and that's where I learned all my woodworking."

One article that stuck in Johnson's memory was Rick Mastelli's 1980 profile of Sam Maloof. In it, Mastelli describes Maloof's transition from home-shop hobbyist to the country's most popular and successful custom furniture maker.

"Sam was instrumental in inspiring me," Johnson recalled. "He talked about getting started and starting from nothing. He was approaching middle age before he really got going on woodworking."

Leaded Glass Made Easy

BY MICHAEL PEKOVICH, FWW #211

Over the years, *Fine Woodworking* has introduced readers to a wide variety of allied crafts, from upholstery to hardware making to Japanese paper. Skills and materials like these aren't part of every project, but they add an important dimension to the work.

As an example, **Nancy Hiller** points to Michael Pekovich's article in issue #211 on making leaded-glass panels. The Master Class was a companion piece to his article on building an Arts and Crafts display cabinet. "He made it look do-able," she said. "He broke down the process into a

methodical series of steps and he gave all of the necessary information about the tools and materials one would need."

Hiller, a Bloomington, Ind., furniture maker who specializes in Arts and Crafts designs, said her first attempt took much longer than she expected.

"It started out being frustrating and daunting, but by the end of it I was elated because I had a new skill, at least at a rudimentary level."

A Chair Maker's Workshop

BACK COVER, FWW #153

The magazine's profiles of individual furniture makers left the deepest impression on **Mario Rodriguez** as an aspiring craftsman. "They explored the things that inspired those people and motivated them and encouraged them to go on," Rodriguez said.

One such piece, the back cover of issue #153, profiled Windsor chair maker Curtis Buchanan. "Here's a guy banging out maybe three or four chairs a month, doing a little teaching, a little writing. With a lot of hard work and a little luck, he's placed himself in a very unique situation. If somebody is daydreaming about making a living as a woodworker, they are daydreaming about Curtis's life."

Also influential for Rodriguez was an article he read as a young apprentice carpenter titled "In Search of Period Furniture Makers" (FWW #23) by Rick Mastelli.

"He went around New England and contacted people who were building meticulous reproductions," Rodriguez recalled, "and these guys were incredibly open," about their work. "Here was this very diverse set of guys who were making it. I found that article to be very encouraging."



Gluing Up

BY IAN KIRBY, FWW #31

Bob Van Dyke, director of the Connecticut Valley School of Woodworking, discovered *Fine Woodworking* not in a shop or lumberyard, but on his dad's reading table.

On visits to his parents' home, "I'd see his black-and-white *Fine Woodworkings* sitting out, and I started reading them," Van Dyke recalled, "and then I started stealing them from him." At the time, Van Dyke was a restaurant chef and hobbyist woodworker. He eventually switched careers and got his own subscription, not necessarily in that order.

He said articles by Tage Frid and Ian Kirby left the deepest mark on him. In particular, he recalled Kirby's article titled "Gluing Up." The article is filled with practical advice, leavened by Kirby's dry wit. "A common lament in woodworking," he notes, "is that 'everything went perfectly until glue-up, then everything went wrong.'"

Portions of that article still make their way into Van Dyke's lesson plans at Connecticut Valley. "When I do the fundamentals class and we're gluing up the 46-in.-long tabletop for the hall table, I refer to Ian's article and how the clamp exerts 45° of pressure from the centerline. I remember there was a diagram in the article, and I basically draw that diagram on the tabletop that I'm demonstrating the glue-up on."

Furniture construction series

BY WILL NEPTUNE, FWW #130, 138, 163

Count **Dan Faia** as another North Bennet Street School instructor whose favorite article was penned by one of his own teachers. In the classroom, Faia recalls, Will Neptune had a gift of gauging just how much new information his audience could digest.

"He was a high-energy guy, but he could handle a beginner without intimidating you," Faia recalled, "and he could also deal with a master."

That trait shines through in a series of four articles Neptune wrote in the mid-1990s on basic furniture construction. The articles "had nothing to do with what the piece looked like," Faia said, "they had to do with how it was built."

The first, titled "Engineering a Table with Drawers" (FWW #130), describes a design that Neptune said is "endlessly adaptable" and can be used to build everything from a desk to a Shaker nightstand to a Pembroke table.

"It's very technical, but there's no misunderstanding of the information," Faia said. "It's very clear and concise."

Neptune later laid out the same basic approach for sideboards (FWW #138) and chests of drawers (FWW #163).

Making Music with a Plane

BY JAMES KRENOV, FWW #126

Jennifer Anderson, a woodworking instructor at Palomar College, studied under James Krenov toward the end of his career at College of the Redwoods, so it stands to reason that her most vivid *Fine Woodworking* memory involves him.

Anderson was just a few months away from starting classes at Redwoods in the late 1990s when she found issue #126 on the newsstand.

"I grabbed the magazine because JK was on the cover," she said. In his article, "Making Music with a Plane," Krenov writes in general terms about the joys of making and working with wooden planes and how they afford "a flexibility that relates to the kind of person you are and the kind of work you do."

Krenov's article is followed in the same issue by Redwoods instructor David Welter teaching readers how to make their own wooden plane.

Anderson refers her students at Palomar College to both articles to learn more about making their own planes.

"You don't have to be an engineer to make really sweet work," she said, "And these tools are basically the vehicle, the way that you do it."