

Woodworkers on the Rise

From the 1970s through the 1990s, craft furniture flourished. The generation of woodworkers who learned from towering figures like James Krenov, Tage Frid, Jere Osgood, and Sam Maloof produced work of great diversity and distinction.

But for the past 10 years or so, assessments of the woodworking field have been relentlessly dire. Studio furniture has been pronounced dead again and again. Like any other style, people said, it's had its day and now it's done. But a

funny thing happened on the way to the graveyard—all sorts of younger makers have emerged, producing exciting designs and practicing impeccable craftsmanship. From Texas to Toronto and Brooklyn to Bellingham, backyard shops and urban co-ops are bulging with great young woodworkers. With our 40th anniversary at hand, we've taken the opportunity to present a handful of these young makers. We could easily have filled the entire issue with such work, and in the coming months you'll be seeing articles by others from this impressive new generation.

Jeremy Zietz

Jeremy Zietz is just 31, but he already brings a rich education and experience to his furniture making. Right out of college, where he studied industrial design, Zietz worked for five years in product design, helping develop medical devices, computer mice, sports equipment, and much else for international companies. The



work was fascinating, but Zietz wanted to design on a more intimate scale and to make the things he designed. He took a nine-month course at the Vermont Woodworking School, and afterward got a job as a designer and craftsman with ShackletonThomas, a company in Vermont that sells its furniture across the country.

At the same time, Zietz took part in an informal mentorship program with Garrett Hack. Every three or four weeks for nine months, Zietz and a handful of other aspiring furniture makers would spend a day in Hack's Vermont shop. For Zietz, it was an opportunity to absorb Hack's approach to light, strong case construction and intricate string inlay. He applied what he learned to his Tree of Life chest of drawers.

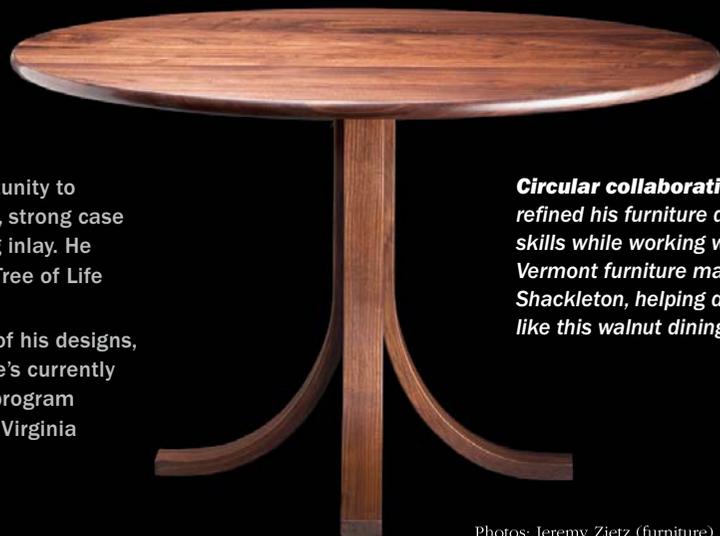
Despite the accomplishment of his designs, Zietz is not finished studying: He's currently midway in a two-year master's program in wood and furniture design at Virginia Commonwealth University.



Chest of life. Growing up in Chester County, Pa., Zietz admired the exuberant painted designs on early Pennsylvania German furniture; he decided to translate that boldness into a Tree of Life design executed in maple string inlay on his walnut chest of drawers.



Coopered cabinet. Blending technical challenges with artistic ones, Zietz built this collector's cabinet with coopered staves of quartersawn ash.



Circular collaboration. Zietz refined his furniture design skills while working with Vermont furniture maker Charles Shackleton, helping design pieces like this walnut dining table.

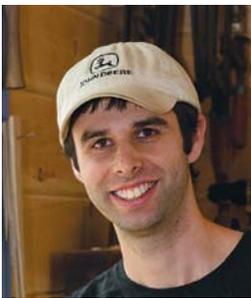
Six superb makers from the current bumper crop

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Elia Bizzarri

Elia Bizzarri has been avidly working wood since the age of 8, when he started watching Roy Underhill on *The Woodwright's Shop* (which aired right after Bizzarri's other favorite show, *Mr. Rogers*). Home-schooled by his mother in what he says was "a very free process," Bizzarri spent years making things in wood by trial and error while using the family picnic table as his workbench and the backyard as his shop. When, at 16, his parents bought him a pre-fab shed as a woodshop, "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," he says. "It was an amazing vote of confidence."

That same year, he took a ladderback chair class with Drew Langsner at Country Workshops in North Carolina. The following year, at 17, he studied chairmaking with John (now Jennie) Alexander, author of the seminal book *Make a Chair from a Tree*, and with Curtis Buchanan, the eminent Windsor



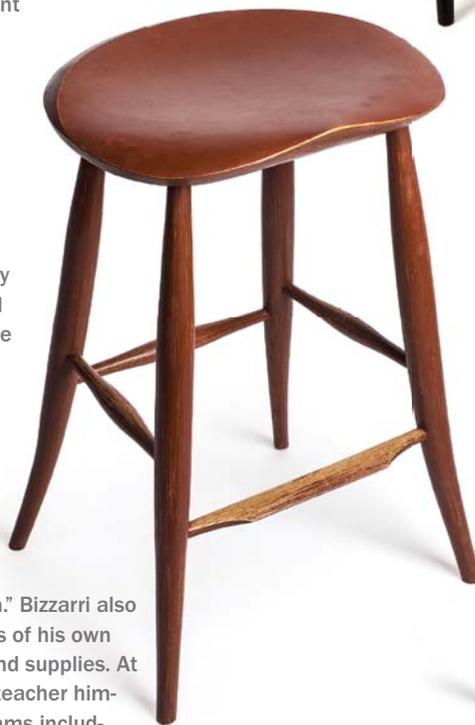
chairmaker in Jonesborough, Tenn. Watching these masterful makers in action was, Bizzarri says, "the coolest thing I'd ever seen—I soaked up all the knowledge."

Over the next five or six years, in a sort of serial apprenticeship, Bizzarri returned to work with Buchanan many times, sleeping in the loft of his small shop and cooking with a burner on the benchtop.

These days, in the shop he built himself in Hillsborough, N.C., Bizzarri produces a range of Windsors, some built to Buchanan's versions of traditional designs. "Curtis has spent 30 years tweaking his chairs," Bizzarri says, "and they're so pretty—I can't think of any way to improve them." Bizzarri also makes contemporary chairs and tables of his own design along with chairmaking tools and supplies. At 31, he's now a formidable maker and teacher himself, having taught at prominent programs including North Bennet Street School and the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, and having been featured, fittingly, on two episodes of *The Woodwright's Shop*.



Period apprenticeship. In his late teens, Bizzarri served an informal apprenticeship with Windsor chairmaker Curtis Buchanan. A decade later, Bizzarri builds impeccable chairs, many to Buchanan's traditional designs, and has become a teacher himself.





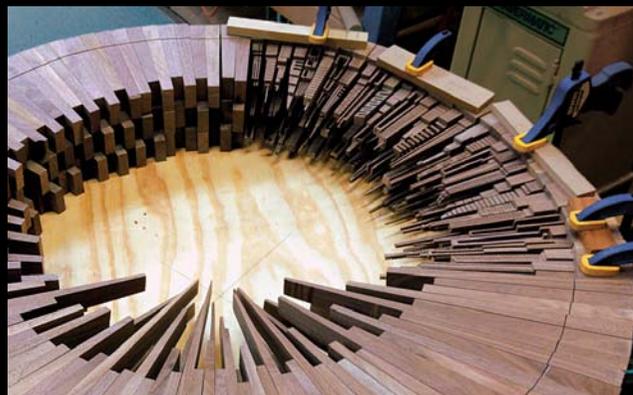
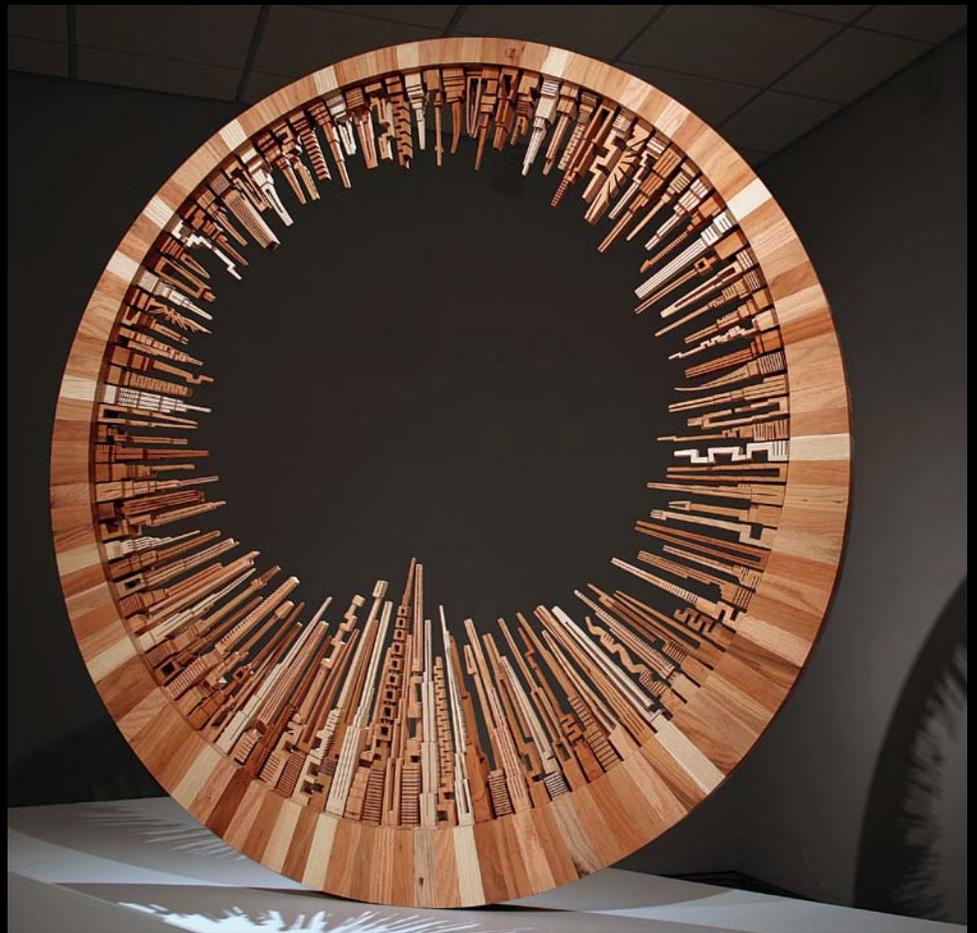
James McNabb

“At moments of frustration,” James McNabb says, “I try to just shut off my brain and make something.” One evening in the spring of 2012, McNabb got frustrated. He was four months away from his master’s thesis exhibition at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and struggling with new designs; he couldn’t figure out how he would fill his show. “As a coping mechanism,” he remembers, “I took a few scraps of wood and went to the bandsaw. I just started cutting pieces spontaneously. When I put a few down in a row, all of a sudden they looked like architecture—little abstracted cityscapes.”

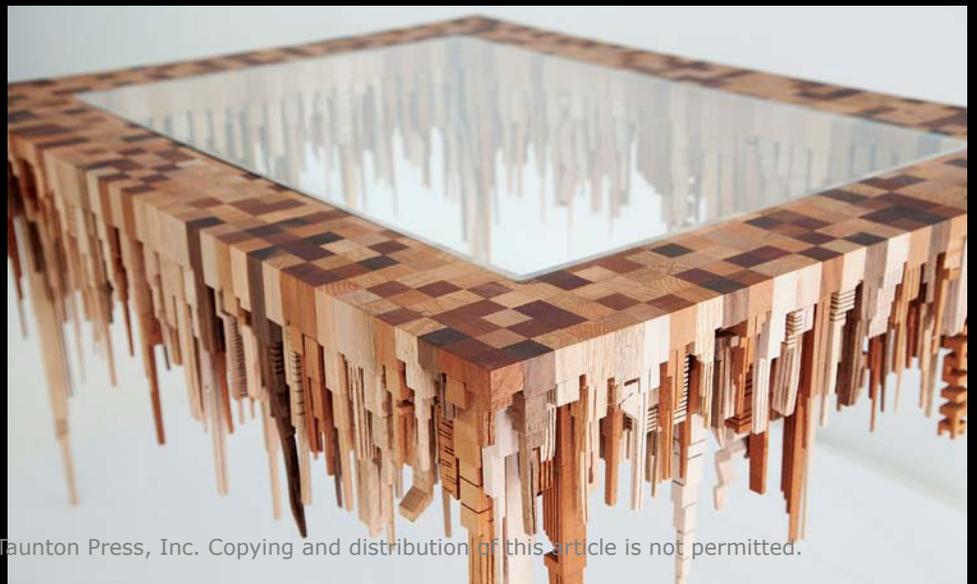
Each tiny freehand edifice gave him more momentum, and he worked right through the night, sawing out 200 before he stopped. Four months later, his entire show was populated with bandsawn buildings.

Before his revelation that night at the bandsaw, McNabb had been headed toward a career as a custom furniture maker. He’d spent his undergraduate years in the furniture program at Rochester Institute of Technology, where “they breed a super high caliber of craftsmanship, and I gravitated to that philosophy.” But soon after sending photos of his bandsawn buildings to the design blog Colossal, his life took a sharp turn. The work went viral, and before he knew it, McNabb had an art gallery representing him, the *New Yorker* magazine commissioning a bandsawn Manhattan and running a full-page photo of it, and as much work as he could handle.

Now 30 and working in a shared shop in Philadelphia, McNabb says he could never have predicted the course things have taken, but he’s not looking back. And he doesn’t miss the stress of designing furniture. “Part of the point of the bandsawn work,” he says, “is the spontaneity—no drawings, no patterns—it’s like sketching with a bandsaw. Each building is like a little meditation.”



From scraps to sculpture. Launched on a whim, McNabb’s series of bandsawn buildings has blossomed into a career in the fine arts. With clients around the world seeking his sculptures, McNabb still saws out each building freehand and without drawings—an exercise in spontaneity.





Libby Schrum

Libby Schrum, 37, lives in the small, bustling-in-the-summer seaside village of Camden, Maine, and builds custom furniture in a purpose-built shop attached to her house. Her furniture is inspired by the clean lines and planar forms of Mid-Century Modern pieces, as well as by the simplicity of Shaker furniture.

Growing up in Texas, Schrum had two passions: art and sports. Aiming for a career as a basketball coach, she studied sports management in college. But when her dream of coaching faded, she wasn't sure where she was headed. Then, for an art class assignment, she designed a bed, and though she had never given furniture a thought before, she realized she'd love to be able to build what she had designed.

Searching online, she came across the Center for Furniture Craftmanship and signed up for a 12-week class, making the trek from Texas to Maine in the spring of 2001. She fell in love with Maine as well as with working wood, and stayed on at CFC for a summer assistantship and then for a yearlong studio fellowship. After wandering down the coast for a master's program at Rhode Island School of Design ("which was all about concept"), Schrum returned to Maine and spent several years working in local boatyards and cabinet shops before opening her furniture business in 2010.



Mid-Century Modern meets its maker. Schrum blends a passion for beautiful craftsmanship with an eye for Mid-Century design. Her coffee table in white oak and her liquor cabinet in white oak and wenge exemplify the pairing.



Two schools of thought. Schrum was inspired by the bold geometry of Mid-Century furniture while studying at the Rhode Island School of Design. She credits The Center for Furniture Craftmanship, in Maine, with developing her skills as a maker and designer. Both influences are evident in her occasional table (left) in veneered bamboo plywood and paint, and her desk in zebra wood and maple.

Photos, facing page: James McNabb (top three); Aurelie Laurent, Petit Jules (bottom); this page: Jonathan Binzen (portrait) Libby Schrum (top three); Jim Dugan (bottom left); Chris Pinchbeck (bottom right)



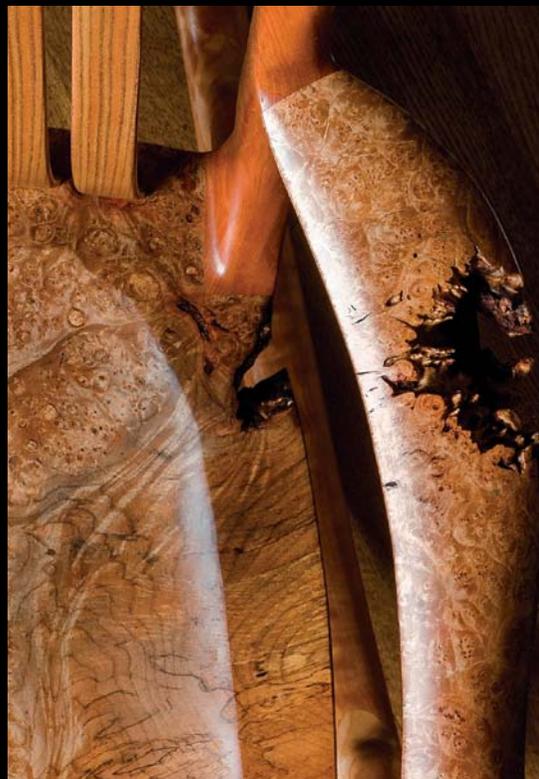
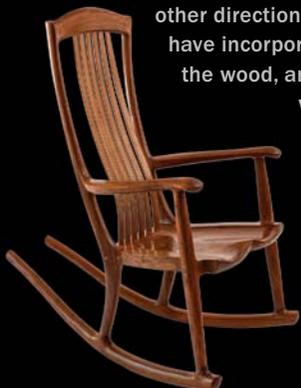
Tor Erickson

Tor Erickson grew up in the woodshop, watching—and later helping—his father, Robert Erickson, build the chairs that established his sterling national reputation. Robert, who was raised in Nebraska, found his way to northern California in the late 1960s and there, on a way-off-the-grid communal property near Nevada City, built the house and shop where Tor grew up and learned to work wood.

Tor, now 36, was an only child, and has always been attracted to designing and making things, from dams in the nearby stream as a boy to water systems in Uganda while working for a relief agency as a young man. And he always enjoyed stints working in the woodshop. But through his 20s, as he spent much of his time working as a carpenter, it wasn't at all clear that he would wind up working with his father full-time.

After college in Iowa, where he studied history, Tor returned to California and worked as a carpenter. Two and a half years ago, however, he came to a crossroads. "My dad and I had a talk, and I asked him whether, if I did get more involved, he'd be open to my ideas—open to making some changes." The answer was yes, and father and son have been working together since, continuing to produce many of the chairs and tables

Robert has developed over the decades while also stretching the business in other directions. At Tor's urging they have incorporated more metal with the wood, and have also worked with solid burls, veneer, and stone.



Like father, somewhat. Since becoming a partner in his father's business, Tor Erickson has pushed to reinterpret some classic Erickson chair designs, using materials like California walnut burl.





Martin Goebel

Martin Goebel, 33, is trying to crack a very tough nut: how to make traditionally joined, solid-wood pieces that will last lifetimes—for half of what most custom furniture makers would charge. The route he's chosen to reach his goal is automated technology. Most of the 300 or so pieces that emerge from his St. Louis shop each year are made in batches with parts shaped to his 3-D CAD drawings by local companies with CNC routers and lathes. When the parts are ready, they return to Goebel's shop for assembly and finishing.

Far from being apologetic about the robotic assistance, Goebel feels it's essential to making a living in the field. "I think there's a disconnect," he says, "between handmade furniture and furniture that people actually buy." And his viewpoint is hard-won. At age 19, having feasted on James Krenov's books, he traveled to northern California to attend Krenov's furniture-making program at the College of the Redwoods. Afterward, he spent six years working solo, making custom furniture and selling through galleries. The extremely long hours and very low return "took the joy out of it for me," he says.

So in 2008 he headed to Rhode Island School of Design, writing a master's thesis called "Synthetic Craft," a roadmap for automated production of fine furniture that he still follows. Since returning to St. Louis and setting up Goebel Co. in 2010, he's found that CNC production enables him to focus more on design. He says the "iterative process"—designing and building numerous prototypes and versions of a piece—leads to far greater refinement in the final design. But, he says, "CNC is not a silver bullet. It's just the next tool in the toolbox. Used unwisely, it's a good way to screw up a whole lot of material faster."



Comfort shaped by machine. Goebel's Luna chair, with its lowered rear seat rail and woven webbing, is designed for pure comfort. Its parts are milled by shops with CNC machines, then assembled, sanded, and finished in Goebel's workshop.



Making heirlooms affordable. Although deeply trained in handwork himself, Goebel relies on CNC routers and lathes to shape the parts of many of his pieces, which lets him build in batches and bring down prices significantly.



The custom component. Although he's committed to creating most of his furniture in numbers using digital technology, Goebel still makes some one-of-a-kind pieces as well.