

Art Carpenter

The independent spirit of the
Baulines Craftsman's Guild

by Rick Mastelli

Ten years ago, in days left over from the Sixties, the Baulines Craftsman's Guild set out to establish a Northern California version of the apprenticeship system, and it is unique among craft organizations for having succeeded. Hundreds of craftspeople have gotten started through the Baulines Guild. Most of the woodworkers among them apprenticed with Art Carpenter, who by the time the Guild was founded had already established himself as one of the principals of contemporary woodworking. In 1971 his work appeared along with that of Wharton Esherick, George Nakashima, Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle at the inaugural show of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C.

For many woodworkers, Art Carpenter (who does business

Art Carpenter's first chair, an experiment using rawhide and lathe-turned parts, satisfies his criteria for good furniture: 'First, it looks like a chair—it doesn't look like an eagle or a tree—you know right away where to put your butt. Second, it lasts, it's rugged, it will stand the use for which it was meant for many years without repair. This has been a desk chair in my shop for 22 years, and its joints are as tight today as they were when they were made. Third, there is a directness and clarity of construction, which gives pleasure to the hand and to the eye. And fourth, it is relatively fast to produce, given the primitive methods of my shop.'

under his mother's maiden name, Espenet) is more than a role model—he has nurtured the growth of a generation of independent designer-craftsmen. Ask the successful woodworkers in the San Francisco Bay Area how they began and you'll hear, "I taught myself, except for some time I spent with Art." Even those who don't spend more than an afternoon at Carpenter's shop leave with practical direction to make it on their own—which is really the spirit of the Guild. The Baulines Guild works because it is the simple extension of the self-styled craftsmen who characterize the Bay Area. It probably would not have worked so well were it not for the special place Bolinas is, but it's hard to imagine the Guild at all without Art Carpenter.

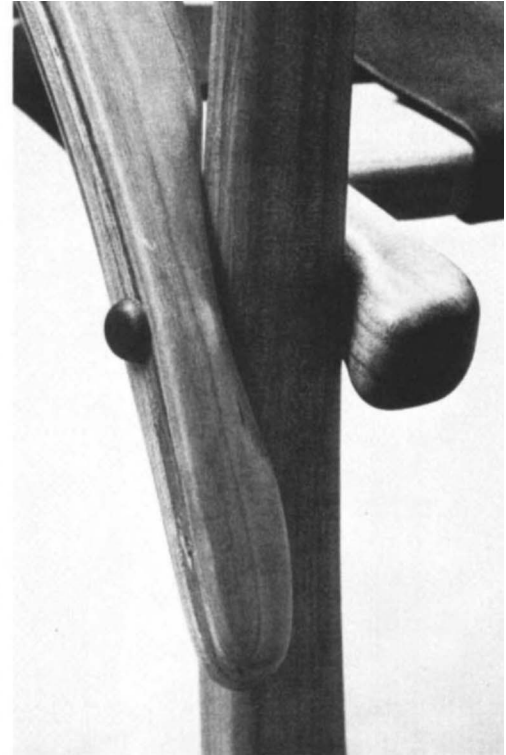
Bolinas is a reclusive coastal town (the guild that took its name disguised the spelling), about 30 miles north of San Francisco. Hidden behind the hills of Marin county, it is a bastion for unusual talents and fruition-seeking souls. There are no signs nearby to lead tourists to Bolinas; an ad hoc group, sometimes seen in T-shirts emblazoned with a giant mosquito, the logo of the Bolinas Border Patrol, has torn them down. Its lagoon is where whales played, according to the Portuguese name. In the summer of 1579 Sir Francis Drake parked his galleon near here, claiming Marin for England. But Bolinas has always been a separate place.

When two oil tankers collided in the fog under Golden Gate Bridge in 1971, thousands of people—bus drivers, children, businessmen, hardhats—dropped what they were doing and rushed to save the waterfowl and to scoop oil-laden straw from the coastline. At Bolinas, hundreds on the beach sawed and hammered day and night, building a many-sectioned boom to protect the entrance of Bolinas Lagoon, a haven for egrets and blue heron. According to Tom d'Onofrio, whose proposal one year later initiated the Baulines Craftsman's Guild, many who came from San Francisco to participate in this paroxysm of spirit stayed. "When we started," d'Onofrio says, "most of us were radicals out of the Sixties in Berkeley and we wanted to effect social change. I for one have always felt that if the individual is self-fulfilled through his work, he will spread that influence to others, leading to greater harmony in the society. I've watched hundreds of our students move out into the world to do their thing, and I've seen the positive influences of self-supporting craftsmen."

D'Onofrio's idea came to him while he was working for Art Carpenter, who had moved west in 1948, a pioneer dropout. Born in New York City in 1920, Carpenter graduated from Dartmouth College with a degree in economics, and had intended to become an accountant, like his father. Then he served four years in the Pacific during World War II, an experience that he says "relieved me of some regard for the



Early wishbone chair, above, is made of hickory, and was obviously inspired by the bone structure that lent its name. Fifteen years of refinement have yielded the version in cherry at right. The front and back legs are seven and five bent, tapered laminations, respectively, and the chair is held together by 1/4-in. hex bolts and nuts. The plugs that fill the counterbores are removable, so the chair can be knocked down into its eight basic parts. The detail photos show what Carpenter means when he says, 'I'm into sloppy joints.' Independent members allow finishing before assembly, and the members are free to expand or contract with changes in moisture content, without affecting the soundness or seamliness of the joints. Exemplary of the best of what has been dubbed the 'California roundover style,' these edges are shaped by machine, but then hand-tooled to give their surfaces 'vibrato.'



expectations of my culture and my peers." After the war he bought and sold Oriental art. In 1947, he went to see the New York Museum of Modern Art exhibition of ordinary objects of noteworthy design. Included was the furniture of Marcel Breuer, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Charles Eames. The show gave him direction. "I was no artist," he says, "I was no craftsman. But maybe I could make things anyway, things that might be considered beautiful."

And so at age 28, he drove to San Francisco, wanting to try his life far from New York. There he bought a lathe, which was the simplest tool he could think of, for making the simplest objects. Turning taught him the working properties of wood and other materials such as brass and ivory. Within a

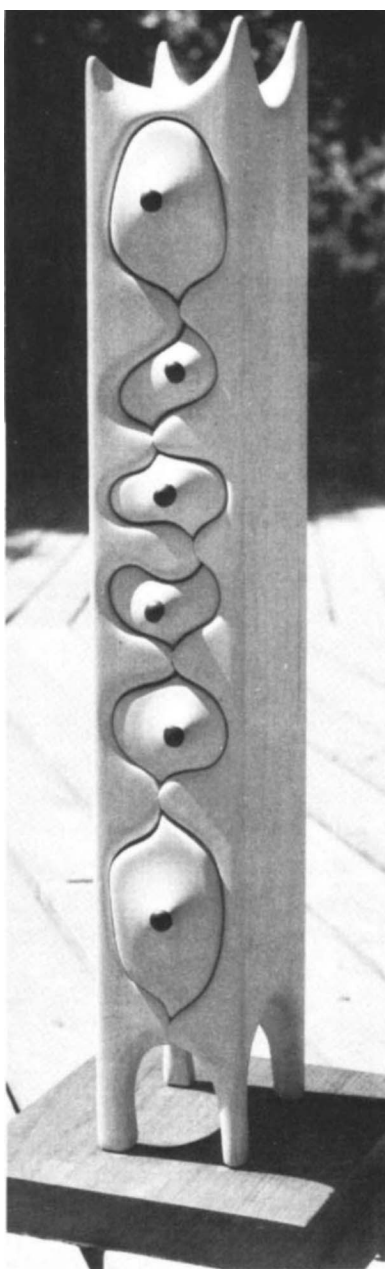
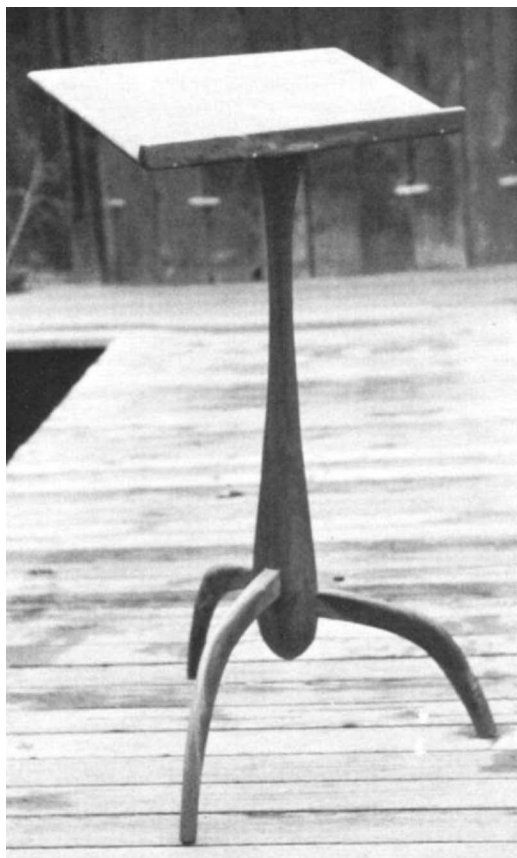
year he was selling bowls around the country, and his work found its way for four consecutive years (1951-1954) into the Museum of Modern Art's Good Design Shows, the very exhibitions that had inspired his venture. He says of these designs that the best are the simplest: "Never use a compound curve where a single sweep will do—never use a prefigured mathematical shape where a spontaneous one will do."

During this time Carpenter was augmenting his equipment and his repertoire. He added a bandsaw, drill press and radial-arm saw to his shop in San Francisco's Mission District. He still owns these, and like his lathe they are primitive, the sort of acquisitions only a resourceful craftsman could appreciate. In 1952, he made his first chair (photo, facing page). By



Carpenter's first machine was the lathe, on which he learned how to work wood. He quickly achieved national recognition as a craftsman. Bowls like these (of prima vera, teak and mahogany), above, appeared in the Museum of Modern Art's Good Design Shows of the early 1950s. Carpenter defines his challenge as the making of things both useful and beautiful.

Modern artists like Miro and Klee seem to have inspired some of Carpenter's work, such as the book stand, below. The bandsaw box, right, is a breakthrough in economic production.



Early chair and bench, above, suggest animal-like forms, a theme Carpenter continues to refine. Below, the perky prototype for a recent stool is a happy combination of free-form slab top and asymmetric, geometric base.



1957 he was married, raising a family, and building everything from commissioned furniture to assemble-it-yourself kits. He even sold lumber and woodworking supplies. "That was a time of feeling directions," he says. "How could you best survive in this racket? I guess I started to get a little more recognition as a craftsman, which was rather flattering, so I went in that direction... You have to remember, I didn't start off as a craftsman but as a small manufacturer. I tried making everything I could. I remember consciously thinking, 'Could somebody actually survive making things with their hands, can I make a living doing that?' I hadn't heard of Maloof or Esherick. I had no role models. It was an experiment in a way of life."

By 1958 the experiment found him employing seven people and spending more time managing the books than working in the shop. He decided to leave it all in San Francisco, to move to Bolinas. There he built a great round house, lost it through a divorce, and built a series of single-room structures (traveling from the bedroom to the kitchen ensures a pleasant walk outdoors), each an experiment with a different type of construction. They all follow Carpenter's precepts of simplicity, attractiveness and functional sense. Lightweight bubbles set on pilings, they'll be simple to lift back into place after the next earthquake.

It wasn't long before both clients and acolytes were seeking him out, and the Baulines Guild naturally evolved. "It wasn't me that started the teaching trip," Carpenter says, "it was the Sixties. It was that big group of dislocated flower children who eventually figured out that they needed to do something, and they didn't want to do it with IBM. I'm very sympathetic to that. I was a flower child before there were flower children. Which is why I try to be helpful. I have a fundamental belief—the more independent people there are, who are not connected with any organization, the better society is.... The idea that there are so many more designer-craftsmen today than there were ten years ago just turns me on. I want in every possible way to see them survive. Independence of thought requires independence of economics."

It is Carpenter's spirit of independence more than anything else that has influenced others, and it has shaped the Baulines Guild. A *Newsweek* article in 1973 dubbed him "the Guild's grandmaster." Carpenter himself has said, "I don't want an institution, I want a shop." And so instead of an institution, the Guild is simply workshops. Its facilities can be reduced to a file cabinet and an address (see box, p. 68). Its purpose is simply to put interested (and interesting) people in touch with one another. The details of the apprenticeship are worked out by the craftsperson and the apprentice. What began as a cadre of ten accomplished craftspeople in 1972 grew to thirty within a couple of years. Now hundreds of woodworkers have worked with and for one another, often for only a few months, sometimes for years, to become partners or shopmates. The dozen or so other guilds that have grown up in California (see p. 106), not to mention those in the rest of the country, can find spiritual predecessor in the Baulines Guild. Most of these other guilds, however, are marketing organizations, sponsoring craft fairs, fronting stores. The emphasis of the Baulines Guild is education, exploring the economic viability of sharing your experience.

A typical apprenticeship with Carpenter amounts to three months, during which time you work for Carpenter in the morning, and on your own projects in the afternoon. Three



Carpenter's equipment is as modest as some of his designs. His router table is a piece of particleboard with router and fence attached, all placed on an empty oil drum, to catch shavings.



After routing, Carpenter shaves an upright for a run of music stands, the master for which is at right, an earlier version at left. He prefers doing small batches of furniture, up to 15, because he can get production momentum without getting bored.



Carpenter moved to Bolinas in 1958, to escape becoming a businessman rather than a woodworker in his San Francisco shop. He's built a number of single-room structures, like this studio, light enough to be lifted back onto their pilings after an earthquake.



'I can stand here for hours,' said Carpenter while developing his latest captain's chair, which uses the same bending form for front and back legs, only turned upside down. These two pictures, of the first version, left, and the second, right, were taken seven months apart. 'I sometimes resent the lack of immediacy in wood, and wish it were clay that I could squish and re-form, or paint that I could splash on in one stroke and there it would be. . . . Wood is a very bullheaded material.' At right are some of his 1/8-scale models, which he has found can be mailed, to clinch commissions. These are experiments in various kinds of bases: an asymmetric pedestal for a free-form top; a free-form sheet-steel base for a more regular boat-shaped top; and a four-legged base for a round tabletop that is a structural member.



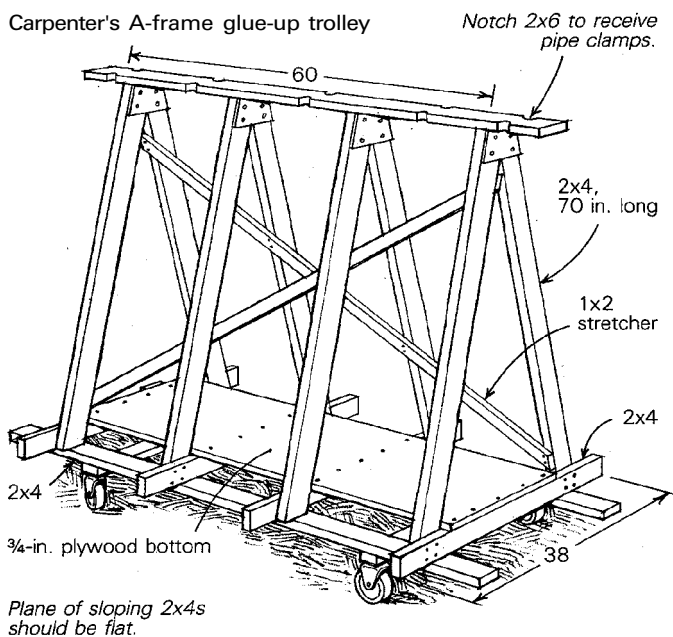
months will provide a sense of what Carpenter does, and of the pace necessary to run a business. Longer than that, says Carpenter, and you end up having no ideas of your own. You pay \$450 a month, and provide your own housing, materials and insurance. This arrangement, which is cheaper and less restrictive than most formal schooling, is attractive enough to keep enthusiastic novices coming.

One thing that makes the apprenticeship so enriching is that Carpenter is himself self-taught, and still learning. Because he has had no training in woodworking, he is not bound by what may be the "correct" way to do things. His ingenuity and sense of economy have provided unique, now widely assimilated solutions to common problems. His shop is rich in both original and shared ideas. He tells the story of a German cabinetmaker who visited his shop in San Francisco and taught him to use a backsaw and chisel to make dovetails. Carpenter began dovetailing his furniture, but soon discovered he could not saw and chop fast enough to survive. So he devised a router jig that would cut dovetails accurately and consistently in one-fourth the time. Various forms of the dovetail jig (see p. 69) have become indispensable to those who rely on the router as a joinery tool.

As a contemporary cabinetmaker he confronted the problem of being adequately compensated for making all those four-sided drawers that must precisely fit precisely made cases. He turned to his bandsaw, and figured out how to cut and excavate his drawers from solid and laminated blocks of wood. Because of its economy of material and effort, and its versatility of application, the bandsaw box (*FWW* #25, pp. 64-67) is another of his widely practiced innovations.

Though Carpenter sometimes ascribes the motivation for such breakthroughs to laziness, economy of production is the real impetus. Economy of production makes it possible for a small-scale furnituremaker to survive, he says, without catering to an elite clientele. It is part of Carpenter's trip toward independence. "I want to make furniture that a broad spectrum can afford," he says. "I don't have industry's markups or distribution charges, so I can compete. It's important to me to keep prices at a consumer's level, not a collector's level. I want what I make to be lived in and on and around. Anyone can make a \$1500 chair. But a \$500 chair [the wishbone chair, p. 63] deserves its own accolades."

His sense of independence also informs the way he teaches. D'Onofrio remembers the first day he worked for Carpenter, being given not a mundane sanding task but the finishing-up of a piece scheduled to appear at the Oakland Museum. Carpenter doesn't coddle; there are only three months to practice surviving as a woodworker. He is terse, careful to help in solving apprentices' technical problems without imposing his ideas on their designs. Regarding the glue-up of a tabletop, for instance, he will share what he's learned from years of trial and error: He springs his edge joints for a tighter fit at the ends (to accommodate shrinkage from moisture loss), he dowels for easy alignment, he uses plastic resin glue because it has a longer set-up time and it creeps less than aliphatic resin glue, and he glues up on an A-frame cart (drawing, above right) that makes large tops wieldy. He cures his assemblies in a curtained alcove warmed with an electric heater, and he finishes his tops with up to 12 coats of a mixture of equal parts of varnish, linseed oil and turpentine, wet-sanding with progressively finer grits, 220 to 600, to fill the pores. But how to arrange the boards to compose the top, that is the

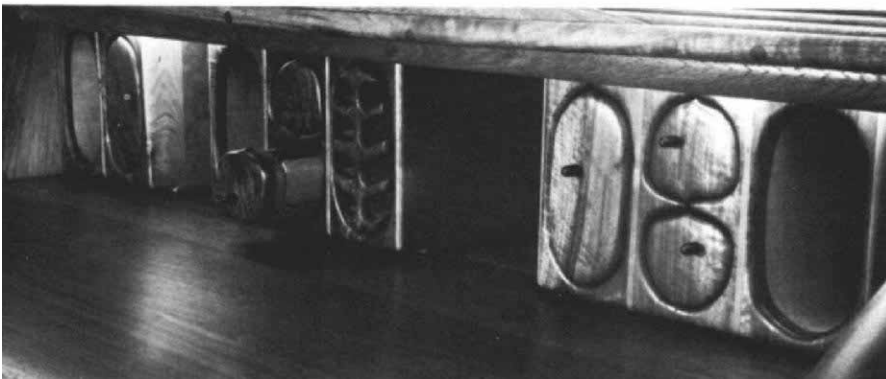


process of design, where you find your own way.

When Carpenter does talk about design, he evokes a radical relationship between craft and art. He asks that furniture do what it's supposed to, with joy. He speaks of singing utility. He points to glumpfs, which want to be gotten rid of for curves to be fair. He has no use for gratuitous curlicues. He wants edges to be hospitable, and to wear and age well. He wants furniture to last. He points to those objects we respond to most profoundly as those that, through clarity of conception and purpose, transcend their time and place. He calls for craft that is not distinguished from art, and for art that is not relegated to frames hung on walls.

In contemporary woodworking, there are two tendencies which Carpenter's work stands in opposition to. One is the notion that wood is beautiful enough merely to display. The other is that the machined surface is attractive in its precision and can be left as is. Seemingly opposite tenets, they have in common the relinquishing of design responsibility. There are a lot of redwood burls on the West Coast, and there is a lot of furniture that is just sliced from them and placed out to sit on. Carpenter confesses to seeing no point to it: "It's like the splash-and-dab school of painting, where everything done is the way God intended it." The same with the machine-shaped edge, left the way the router would have it: "Machined surfaces are deadening," he says. "They're like notes sounded without harmonics or vibrato." And so he shapes his wood, often using machines, and then he hand-tools the surfaces. A master of the California roundover style, he never leaves his edges machined.

Carpenter's work is inspired by natural forms and shaped by practical means, yet he is not seduced by the materials or wed to the machines. He finds in trees not only wood but design ideas. Their lines, their stance, their tonal balance can be seen abstracted in his tables. He makes pedestal tables mostly. And he darkens the base (for walnut, dousing the wood with rusty water) to give it more visual weight, just as the trunk of a tree is naturally darker than the top. He's made desks in the shape of seashells, drawer pulls that look like mushrooms, and benches that borrow the shapes of



The clam-shell curve and bandsawn pigeon-holes of Carpenter's roll-top desk, above, are often imitated by other California woodworkers, who make a lot of desks. Here it's paired with the most recent, armless version of the wishbone chair.

horses. His favorite joinery ideas come from bone structures, where two parts fit strongly into one another, while retaining their individual shapes. There is the advantage that wood joined this way can expand and contract without affecting the appearance or soundness of the joint, and you can finish the parts before assembly.

Sometimes his pieces look rustic, sometimes elfin, sometimes like playful imitations of the grand schemes of nature. But the more you see of Carpenter's designs, the less naive they look. There are echoes here of modern artists: Joan Miro (his amoeboid, linear forms), Paul Klee and Salvador Dali (their shapes from the subconscious), Piet Mondrian (his regular rectangles of primary color) and Alexander Calder (his sweeping planes of steel). But in Carpenter's work you will find little reiteration of traditional furniture styles. "When I sit down with my clipboard in my lap, fiddling over a design," he says, "I shut out all references to furniture previously seen—I've done my seeing—I concentrate on the givens. The givens are the requirements of the utilitarian function of the piece, and I make these points or lines first on the paper. Then I attempt to arrange the form and joinery in a relatively uncléché and aesthetically pleasing manner.... I find it hard

and exciting work." Carpenter describes his sense of good design by referring to George Orwell, who identified good writing as being like a pane of glass. "When you see a chair," says Carpenter, "you should say *sit*; when you see a table, *put things on*. You shouldn't say chair, you shouldn't say table. If you make something that says *sleep*, by God you've made a bed."

But most of Carpenter's own furniture has too much character to be that ideal pane of glass. "I see my furniture as a series of experiments," he says, "trials and mostly errors. I haven't been happy with any of them." After 34 years of surviving as an independent woodworker, that may seem a hard view to take. But by the time you're 62, says Carpenter, you disentangle yourself from your work. You stop worrying about making mistakes. You achieve another sort of independence. "Design can become compulsive," he says. "I find I have to consciously stop. There's more to life than placing one object next to another. . . . When you design what you make, it's not the object that's necessarily better, though it can be. It's the life of the maker." □

Rick Mastelli is associate editor of Fine Woodworking.

A word from the Baulines Guild

The Baulines Craftsman's Guild is primarily committed to teaching crafts, through both apprenticeships and seminars. In its early days the Guild pursued various marketing projects. These days we concentrate on education, and have obtained non-profit status. We hope that in the long run, education will have positive economic effects, making more people aware of crafts. Also, having an apprentice regularizes your work and helps with expenses, especially in the later stages of the apprenticeship.

All of the current 25 teaching members of the Guild, 12 of whom are woodworkers, have worked at least 5 years in their craft, and all take on apprentices. These programs vary in length and cost, according to the master craftsman, but apprentices must pay a \$100 fee to join the Guild, plus \$10 annual dues. A group health insurance plan is available.

If you want to know more about the Baulines Guild's programs, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to PO Box 305, Bolinas, Calif. 94924.

—Grif Okie, President