

Woodworking Libraries *Five craftsmen*

Fresh out of college and working as a carpenter in the Boston area, I was making barely enough money to pay the rent. Still, I'd frequent the Harvard Square bookstores. There, I picked up Ernest Joyce's *Encyclopedia of Furniture Making*, the first of Tage Frid's books on woodworking and many others. After four years of *Phenomenology and Existentialism* and its ilk, it was refreshing to read how to fold a bandsaw blade, cut dovetails and tune a plane.

When I discovered George Nakashima's *The Soul of a Tree*, I was floored by his sketches, the photos of the lumber he used and those tables. Krenov's *The Impractical Cabinetmaker* had a similar effect. It resonated powerfully because he articulated my attraction to the material and process better than I was able to myself at that point. After reading that book, there seemed to me no higher calling than to make beautiful, useful objects of wood. I was moved.

Many woodworkers have been drawn to the craft because of a book. And many a woodworker's education has come largely from the printed page. So I asked five woodworkers to discuss the books that have affected them, the books they rely on still and the books they'd recommend.

—Vincent Laurence, associate editor

■ **Harriet Hodges:** While learning to turn and to make chairs, I always looked to books as teachers, preferring their unobtrusive instruction. Though I realize how helpful it is for someone to say, "No, not that way" and grab my skew, I find that with the right books in my library, I can accept correction humbly at the lathe and sneak to see if Richard Raffan concurs.

One always needs passions bolstered and refined. Mine for the handmade, the old way, were upheld by Eric Sloane. I scorned the electric cord. Sloane's book, *A Museum of Early American Tools*, is a fine introduction to old hand tools. In it, I learned the difference between a scorp and a spokeshave. If you can, also buy Salaman's *Dictionary of Woodworking Tools*, which illustrates all manner of spokeshaves, witchets and floor planes.

Richard Starr's *Woodworking with Your Kids* is an ideal first book for the person drawn to hand tools but without antiquarian obsession. The photos are of children demonstrating various techniques and proudly displaying the fruits of their efforts. A powerful message here, "If that 12-year-old can make that guitar with nothing but those tools, so can I."

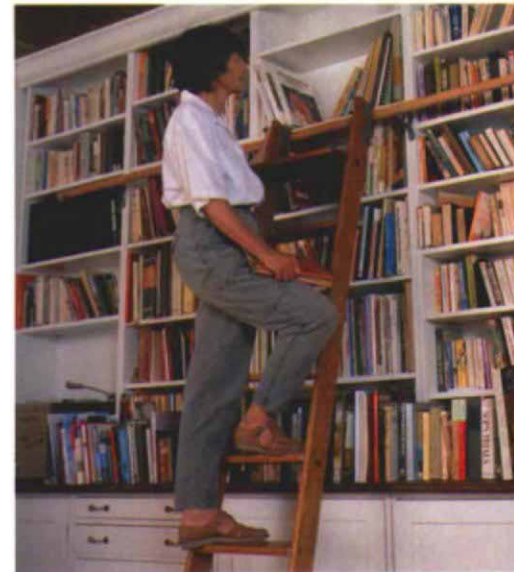
A step up from Starr into a wider range of tools and processes is Herman Hjorth's *Principles of Woodworking*, first published in 1930. It's a shop handbook with many pictures of boys in ties working industriously. I have seen many introductory texts, but none beats Hjorth's for orderly and clear presentation on the complete range of subjects a novice woodworker needs to know, such as hand tools, sharpening, use and care of machines, and finishes. James Krenov's books are inspiring and can be helpful if one wants to explore the subtleties hand tools make possible.

Design is interwoven with technique. Essential for thinking about both are David Pye's *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design* and *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* as well as Soetsu Yanagi's *The Unknown Craftsman*. Pye defines and illustrates the craft of risk and the craft of certainty, effectively defining this continuum along which we all must choose our place.

Yanagi discusses folk art. A section discusses a brushstroke painted thousands

of times by a Korean potter. The book bolstered my determination to repeat a process until I perfected my control. I haven't yet, and the temptation is strong to try new designs, but I persist. All three books will support your desire to perfect skills and gird you against taunts that you are static or uncreative in your beginning years. For firing one's mind to possibilities, treat yourself to Edward Pinto's *Treen and Other Wooden Bygones*, a treasure chest of hundreds of pieces.

Take a look at the first pieces of which you were so proud. You will probably wince—and then wonder about the piece



Harriet Hodges

you're making now. How do you bring the eye along as quickly and rigorously as possible? Browse through old design books and decorative-arts magazines from the 1940s and 1950s. Study what presents itself as absurd, dated, ugly—1950s table legs? Pay attention to those pieces that still appeal to you, that appear timeless. Why? Somewhere in the answer is the key to your own aesthetic.

To learn to see lathe work, try Richard Raffan's *Turned-Bowl Design*. It gives many sensitive illustrations of why one curve works and another one doesn't. For learning to see in general, for learning the components of good design, I still turn to a wonderful chapbook with whimsical

discuss the books that have influenced and inspired them

drawings (alas, it's out of print, but generally available at larger libraries) called *Good and Bad Taste* by Odd Brochmann. The purpose of a design book is not to impose an aesthetic but to help build one.

R. Bruce Hoadley's *Identifying Wood* and *Understanding Wood* belong nearby, unless you want to learn the hard way how sycamore behaves when tightly constrained around a mirror.

For basic facts about wood, John Alexander's *Make a Chair from a Tree* is essential. Billed as a chairmaker's manual, it's really a fine book on green wood and



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the nature of wood movement. Yes, you can make a chair with this book at hand. But you'd do well to keep it open while working on your first table. The illustrations remind you, for instance, in what plane most shrinkage takes place. (If you want to know why, see Hoadley.)

Make a Windsor Chair with Michael Dunbar was also helpful to me. Although I learned a different technique, Dunbar's book gives a good idea of the steps involved and the equipment needed. Other important books for the Windsor chairmaker are the two volumes of Charles Santore's *The Windsor Style in America*. These are exquisite picture books. For the last word in scholarship on

Windsors, save up for Nancy Goyné Evans' *American Windsor Chairs*. It was 30 years in the making and costs \$125. (Neither Santore nor Evans say much about technique.)

Turning Wood with Richard Raffan is required reading for anyone wanting to know how to turn. One could learn to turn well with this book alone, so clear are the instructions and so well-designed the exercises. His emphasis is on repetition for skill and fast production, but good design is inherent in his pieces. He assumes you want to learn to use the skew, but he doesn't neglect the scraper. I also like Michael Darlow's approach in *The Practice of Woodturning*. He examines the lathe and its tuning in great detail. He treats the bewildering array of fitments and chucks offered the turner, an area where one should travel slowly. If I were getting started in turning, I'd buy this book second—or first, if you're already pretty good and want carefully detailed studies of tool angles and bevels and analyses of lathe speeds for specific diameters and processes.

Ultimately, reading is no substitute for experiential understanding. But reading interspersed with effort and failure speed learning.

Harriet Hodges raises sheep and makes Windsor chairs on her farm in Craig County, Va. She is the indexer for Fine Woodworking magazine.

■ **Mario Rodriguez:** As an apprentice in New York City in the 1970s, I attended a training program in which I was taught how to read blueprints, build concrete forms, frame and finish a room, build cabinets, and install and finish drywall. In the final year of my apprenticeship, I had an instructor who was a fifth-generation master woodworker. His class was my introduction to hand-tool woodworking. Here, I learned to sharpen tools, use a plane and lay out and execute exacting joinery entirely by hand. The text was Charles Hayward's *Woodwork Joints*. I loved to browse through this book. It was woodworking from another world. In addition to the basic mortise and tenon, half-lap and breadboard end, there were

unusual variations that would put even an experienced woodworker through some major contortions. I was fascinated as well as challenged.

These days, I teach from the Hayward book. Aside from some unfamiliar English phrases and odd terms, the book is easy to read, filled with great line drawings and is as relevant today as it was in 1970.

The mechanics of a craft are one thing we can get from books, and Hayward's text does that with aplomb. But just as important, a book can help impart the values of craftsmanship and can be a source of motivation and inspiration.



Mario Rodriguez

Novices and experts alike will find a good dose of these in John Brown's *Welsh Stick Chairs*. It addresses the why rather than the how and has the feel of a journal, much like Krenov's *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*. Brown provides no exact patterns, measured drawings or sources of materials for his chairs. Instead, he describes his techniques vaguely, explaining all the while that he's describing how he builds his chairs not how you should build yours. His shop has no electricity. His only heat comes from a small wood stove, and his light is the sun. Without the distractions and intrusions of the 20th century, he works at his full powers. Books like Brown's provide a

little respite in our hectic lives and remind us of why we pursue our craft.

Mario Rodriguez teaches woodworking at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and at Warwick Country Workshops in Warwick, N.Y. He is a contributing editor to Fine Woodworking.

■ **Christian Becksvoort:** Not long out of forestry school, I found myself already disillusioned with the work and wondering where to go and what to do next. I'd taken a government job, and all the bureaucracy and waste left me hungry for something more visceral and meaningful. Along came Eric Sloane's *A Reverence for Wood*. Sloane's practical knowledge of how Early Americans and



Christian Becksvoort

American Indians used different species and his understanding of wood movement and seasoning impressed me.

All of a sudden, things my father, a German-trained cabinetmaker, had been saying for years, took on new meaning. I started to see antiques as something other than just old furniture. I began to develop an understanding and appreciation for fine workmanship. *A Reverence for Wood* has been a source of inspiration that's helped guide my outlook for more than 30 years.

A few years later, as a novice furnituremaker, I was lent a copy of *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* by David Pye. I was told it was a must-read. At the time, it didn't have a major effect on me because it was more of a philosophical

treatise than a technical manual, and I needed hard information. Yet David Pye's words stayed with me, and some 20 years later, I developed a sudden urge to reread it. It was out of print, but a friend in England obtained a used copy for me.

The second reading was like a door opening. Suddenly, all those things I had tried to articulate for years became clear. For instance, although I have no qualms about using a belt sander, I stubbornly insist on cutting dovetails by hand. It is, after all, the workmanship of risk that makes woodworking such a challenge. David Pye defines that better than anyone else. Fortunately for all of us, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* is back in print.

The first technical book I obtained was the classic industrial arts tome *Cabinetmaking and Millwork* by John Feirer. At somewhere close to 1,000 pages, this book usually has the answers I need. A similar book, but with an English point of view, is Ernest Joyce's *Encyclopedia of Furniture Making*. Another English gem is Charles Hayward's *Woodwork Joints*. The book provides illustrations of and recommended uses for almost every conceivable joint, and it explains how to cut them.

Knowing Your Trees by G.H. Collingwood and Warren D. Brush is a must for anyone interested in trees. Robert L. Butler's *Wood for Wood-Carvers and Craftsmen* is an important book that explains the essentials of drying wood.

From a design point of view, John G. Shea's *The American Shakers and Their Furniture* was one of my biggest influences. At the time, it was the only book that had photos and measured drawings of actual Shaker pieces. The aesthetic appealed to me instantly.

Books that I continually consult for reference include the *Wood Handbook: Wood as an Engineering Material* (Agricultural Handbook No. 72), published by the U.S. Forest Products Laboratory, and *Understanding Wood* by R. Bruce Hoadley. And although it's not a book, strictly speaking, there's an information packet that I have found useful in designing and dimensioning furniture. It's called *Humanscale 1/2/3*, and it's published by the MIT Press.

Christian Becksvoort is a professional furnituremaker in New Gloucester, Maine, and a contributing editor to Fine Woodworking magazine.

■ **Ernie Conover:** I'm lucky for I grew up in a house full of books. My parents were craft-oriented, and although it was difficult finding books on crafts in the '50s and '60s, my parents seemed to have a knack for ferreting them out. One of my earliest childhood memories is of visiting Kay's Bookstore in Cleveland. Kay's specialized in used technical books, and regardless of how arcane the discipline, you could almost always find a tome on the subject there.

I never did especially well in school. But I could read, and if a subject interested me, I'd devour texts on it. Most of the woodworking books I read in those days were British. The books of Charles Hayward could always be found on my father's shelves. These books provided

Tage Frid's books are a cornucopia of first-rate illustration and photography. They helped me hone my skills.



much of my general woodworking knowledge. I was particularly taken with another British book called *The Practical Woodturner* by Frank Pain. In his scavenging of old book stalls, my father also gleaned *The Lathe and Its Uses* by J. Luken (published in 1868). These books have provided a great deal of my knowledge about turning.

The first time I read these books, it was with an almost academic interest. Later, after seeing Dick Bailey, a fourth-generation English woodturner, in action, I reread them with a passion. Seeing Bailey was the touchstone I needed to bring those texts to life.

In the 1970s, at the beginning of my professional career, *Fine Woodworking*

magazine burst on the scene. It was like raw meat thrown to sharks. I devoured it, as did thousands of other nascent woodworkers. Suddenly, there was a contemporary woodworking forum. One of the first books published by The Taunton Press, the publisher of *Fine Woodworking*, was *Tage Frid Teaches Woodworking*, which grew into a three-volume set. Even though the Hayward books are rich on text, they're weak on illustration (photos are practically nonexistent). Frid's books, by contrast, are a cornucopia of first-rate illustration and photography. They helped me hone my skills. Another book I picked up at this time was *The Encyclopedia of Furniture Making* by Ernest Joyce. I turn to it still to solve difficult woodworking problems.

Gaudi, Mollino, Chareau, Ruhlmann, the amazing Bugattis and Charlotte Perriand. *Kanban: Shop Signs of Japan* by Levy, Sneider and Gibney is next. I love those stylized literal objects that symbolize the goods or services of the shops they adorn—but the first books to go must be the ones I use as visual references.

I am escaping, rowing to a secluded tropical island: beautiful views, no heating bills and a nicely outfitted studio. All I needed to bring were my favorite hand tools, personal items and the 80 lbs. of inspirational, technical and spiritual books that I couldn't be without. However, water seeping into my launch forces drastic measures—more books must go.

Kersplash! I bid good-bye to *The Art of Furniture* by Ole Wanscher, 5,000 years of furniture history from dynastic Egypt to the 1960s in concise, readable capsules. Albert Sack's *The Fine Points of Furniture*, a good, better, best study of regional styles and John Kirk's *The Impecunious Collector* are next, even though these favorite historical sources are good ways to hone building and seeing skills.

While history is sinking, I'll have to part with another favorite, *Cabinetmakers and Furniture Designers* by Hugh Honour. It's a wonderful study of 50 furniture designers and makers who have had a major role in the evolution of furniture design. And Edward Cooke's *New American Furniture: The Second Generation of Studio Furnituremakers*, the only book that seriously covers the contemporary field since the 1970s.

Still leaking. I'll have to start in on my technical stuff. *The Encyclopedia of Furniture Making* by Ernest Joyce was an important book for me early on and remains valuable. The revised edition by Alan Peters is very good, but I prefer the old edition: I like the way Joyce calls clamps *cramps*. Into the briny depths go the three volumes of *Tage Frid Teaches Woodworking*. George Frank's *Adventures in Wood Finishing* and Charles Hayward's *Woodwork Joints* are next.

Under duress, I must release my copy of *Der Mobil Bau* by Spannagel, hoping, as it slips beneath the surface, that somehow it might swim to shore for someone else's edification. It's an incredible German publication, recently revised, with the most beautifully drawn technical illustrations of every conceivable furniture type, system and detail. Though written in German, the drawings are clear enough

that you can make out the smallest details. Splash! Swim, *Der Mobil Bau*, swim!

I only have my inspirational books left, and the boat is still taking on water. *Ways of Seeing and About Looking* by John Berger and *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* by David Pye are sent to the depths. Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* are next. Carol F. Pearson's *The Hero Within* follows. These books help us discover ourselves and understand our journeys as artists. Robert G. Henricks' translation of Lao-tzu's *Te-Tao Ching* would be the last to go—it's a Bible of sorts. These books go down like the Titanic, slipping silently into the powerful swirling vortex (clockwise, mind you, because I'm south of the equator) created



Ernie Conover

In 1991, I was asked to review *The Essential Woodworker* by Robert Wearing. It proved to be a serendipitous experience. Once again, I was a boy reading British text, but now with decent photos and illustrations. Just as important, though, Wearing's book addressed the struggling neophyte, working alone, without a teacher. It's an excellent primer.

Ernie Conover is the primary instructor at Conover Workshops in Parkman, Ohio. He is the author of The Lathe Book and The Router Table Book (The Taunton Press).

■ **Alphonse Mattia:** Splish, splash, glump! Overboard go my beautiful books on American and European designers:



Alphonse Mattia

by their own weighty significance.

Then I remember that these books are only symbols of knowledge. I've read them (or at least looked at the pictures) and assimilated what I could at the time. I haven't really lost them. And I still have my single most important book. It's the one book every artist should have, the record of my development and the map of my journey. Never complete because it describes an ongoing and nonlinear process that branches out and reconnects. Ultimately, that sketch book is the most valuable book of all. □

Alphonse Mattia teaches woodworking and furniture design at the Rhode Island School of Design.