



Rosanna Coyne: Carving out a life in woodworking

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

Master wood carver and wood turner Rosanna Coyne was introduced to the hands-on life at an early age. Her mother and father both emigrated to the United States from Sicily, Italy, and did things the old way. Her mom canned the produce from her father's big garden. He worked as a general contractor, and Rosanna followed him around job sites from the time she was 9 or 10 years old, filling nail holes in trim or whatever she could do to be useful.

On a recent visit to her grade school, Coyne saw her awards from 7th and 8th grade industrial arts classes, still on display. "I started reading *Fine Woodworking* at 12 years old, and I wanted to make my own stuff," she said. "My dad had a shop in the basement, with a radial arm saw, tablesaw, and bandsaw, and I made bookshelves and a desk for my bedroom. I used them, and I was proud of them."

After graduating from the University of Hartford in Connecticut with a business degree, she went to work in the city's main industry, insurance. "My heart wasn't in it," she



said. "But I was able to save money, and I started buying woodworking tools."

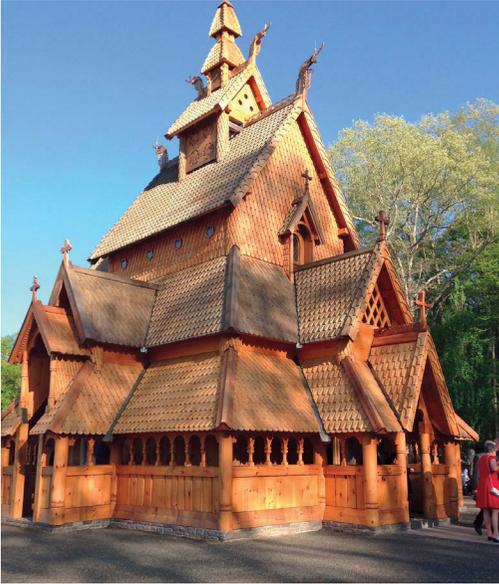
Through college and her corporate career, Coyne continued to work with her father. "It was fun," she said. "Finish carpentry was the highest level he got to, so I would do the built-in cabinets, mantels, closets, and higher-end stuff."

To build her knowledge of fine woodworking, Coyne took a series of weekend classes with Steve Brown at Boston's North Bennet Street School.

Carving, turning, and whatever it takes

While still at the insurance company, Coyne took another class at NBSS, a carving course with Dan Faia, which launched the main direction of her woodworking career.

Noting her passion and aptitude for the work, Faia told Coyne about renowned wood carver Dimitrios Klitsas, who offered classes at his shop in central Massachusetts. She took classes with Klitsas from 1994 to 1999, and left her corporate job in 1997 to work full-time in his studio. A European immigrant



Project of a lifetime. Coyne was recruited to carve the main door and a smaller side door on a full-scale replica of Norway's Borgund Stave Church built on private property in rural Lyme, Conn. The two massive doors took her a year and a half to complete, and mark one of her proudest achievements.



like her dad (who shared a similar upbringing and traditional values), Klitsas was a little hesitant to hire a woman. "He was old-school, from Greece," she said. "Having a woman work for him was huge." Just as she had with her father, Coyne focused on the work, and earned a respected place in the workshop. In 2002 she moved on with Klitsas's blessing to work for herself.

The plan was to work on carving jobs while building a house for herself and her husband in Hampden, Mass. Acting as the general contractor, Coyne subcontracted the foundation, framing, roofing, electrical, plumbing, and drywall, and then built everything else, from floors to trim, doors, cabinets, kitchen, baths, and more. "It saved us quite a bit of money," she said.

When the house was done, Coyne refined her wood-turning skills in a class with famed turner David Ellsworth, and began

taking on turning jobs soon after. The house was finished in 2006, and Coyne has been a full-time woodworker since, focusing on carving and turning when possible, but taking on a wide variety of work to fill the gaps. "My work is spread out," she said. "I'll do a kitchen island, or cabinetry, or a small shed," Coyne said. "Last year, I built a pig shelter!"

"I like the variety, and new challenges keep things interesting, but I want to really focus on carving now," she said. "It's my strongest skill, and I want to keep developing it."

Notable commissions along the way

One of Coyne's favorite commissions was for two massive doors she carved in 2014 and 2015 for a Connecticut replica of the Borgund Stave Church in Norway, which dates to 1180. The



Turning is a nice complement. After establishing herself as a professional carver, Coyne took classes to add turning to her skill set. The advantage of the lathe is speed, allowing her to make an object in a few hours. “I put it on Instagram when it’s completed, and people ask if it’s for sale.”



sinuous, deep-relief carving, on both the main entrance and a smaller secondary door, took 1½ years to complete.

Most of Coyne’s work comes from word-of-mouth, but social media has also been helpful. “I can mount a log on the lathe and in a matter of a few hours make an object,” she said. “I’ll post it on Instagram when it’s completed, and people ask if it’s for sale.”

Instagram also gave Coyne a huge break, when her feed (@rosannacoyne) was featured by @Instagram, exploding her followers from 800 to 40,000 in a day or two. Instagram also landed Coyne the opportunity to turn a series of bowls for designer Kelly Wearstler, which sold in Wearstler’s Los Angeles store. Coyne also turned a range of vessels for a house in San Francisco, which were featured in *Architectural Digest*.

Other commissions from interior designers have included carved, veneered, and ebonized furniture and pedestals used in show homes.

Good advice for professionals and hobbyists alike

Woodworking classes have been a theme for Coyne. Despite having a wide array of skills and producing impeccable work in so many areas, she still takes advantage of classes today in new areas of exploration. “Whether you are a hobbyist or a pro, you should find the masters and study with them,” she said. “You’ll save a lot of time and money, learning which tools to buy and avoiding mistakes.”

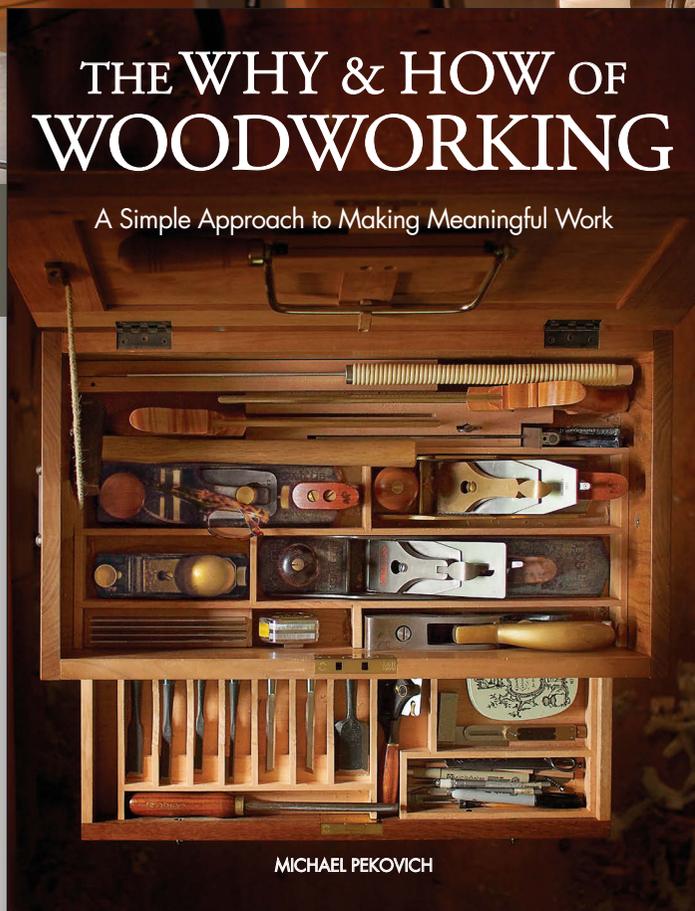
In the case of carving tools, Coyne says you can’t have enough. “I have 200 carving gouges and chisels,” she said. “I use most of them when I do high-relief carving.”

Low-relief, shallowly incised carving—such as Scandinavian chip carving—requires fewer tools and is a great place to start learning the craft, she said. In a recent class with Peter Follansbee, she took on the flat 17th-century style of carving,



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Sweat equity. After leaving the shop of carver Dimitrios Kliitsas to establish her own woodworking business, Coyne built this house for herself and her husband in Hampden, Mass. After hiring out the foundation, framing, roof, electrical, plumbing, and drywall, she built everything else. “It saved us quite a bit of money,” she said.

in which he used just 12 tools to execute ornate traditional patterns. “It’s a very freeing approach,” she said. “He uses a compass and gouges to do the layout, and then the gouges match the pattern.” As for carving skills, Coyne rates sharpening above all else.

Tools can be a rabbit hole for wood turners also, she says, but you don’t need near as many. “Take classes or talk to someone who has done it a while to find out which ones to buy,” she said.

The veteran turner’s go-to tools are traditional gouges and skewers, which cut wood, as opposed to new carbide-tipped tools that scrape it. “Learn to sharpen high-speed-steel (HSS) tools that slice wood,” she said. “You’ll get a better finish, with less sanding and a lot less work. You’ll also get better forms because you’re using your body to move the tool through the wood. Scrapers stay in one position and don’t help you with the form of the piece.”

As for lathes, Coyne recommends buying the best you can afford, citing machines from Oneway, Robust, and Powermatic that offer extra mass and rigidity.

Coyne is just as straightforward and candid about woodworking as a career path. “It’s really hard to make a living at it on your own,” she said. “It works if you have a supportive partner, but I don’t know if I could have done it otherwise.”

“If you can make it work, though, you’re your own boss, and you’re doing what you love. I can’t imagine doing anything else, and with wood carving, I’ll never have to retire.” □

Asa Christiana is a woodworker and freelance writer/editor in Portland, Ore.

