The Roman workbench

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHWARZ

When woodworkers decide what type of workbench to build, few consider the oldest and simplest form: the low Roman workbench. This humble and ancient bench has many advantages that are usually overlooked. I spent years researching this type of bench, traveling to see them, building them, and using them. I've written a book about these benches, *Ingenious Mechanicks: Early Workbenches & Workholding* (2018, Lost Art Press). The book goes into the history, building, and using of the benches, a poem about wood species selection, and a ton more. This article will give you the highlights.

Roman origins. *We call these benches "Roman" because they show up in frescoes in Pompeii and Herculaneum, two Roman cities buried by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D.*

Even today, the low bench survives in many woodworking cultures. I've seen luthiers in Brazil and coopers in Estonia who still prefer a low workbench. In fact, once you know what they look like, you'll start seeing them in barns and old garages, especially in rural areas.

You see, the low Roman workbench never really went away. We simply forgot about them here in the West (Chinese woodworkers still use low benches today). After almost a decade of working on them, I think the early workbench is a form worth reviving.

Preserved in a well. *The oldest surviving workbench was found at the bottom of a well at a Roman fort in Saalburg, Germany. This bench may look like the one Schwarz works on (right), but it's almost 2,000 years old.*

Photos, this page and opposite: Narayan Nayar

Why a low bench

First, you get to sit down when you work and use your body as leverage when shaping pieces. I've heard from many woodworkers with mobility problems who switched to a Roman workbench, allowing them to continue building furniture, even if they have trouble standing. If you don't have a mobility problem, consider that sitting while you work conserves energy, allowing you to work longer.

The low bench can also do double-duty as a sitting bench or coffee table in an apartment workshop. I've heard from dozens of woodworkers who say the Roman bench allows them to work in places where a full-size stand-up workbench won't fit.

Finally, you can take it with you on trips. Knock the legs out of their mortises and throw it in the car when you head to the lake. Wedge up the legs (no glue) when you get to your destination.

Using a low bench

Even though I own several standard workbenches, I use a low Roman workbench for many operations,

Traversing the board. *It's easy to plane a board—especially a short one–on a low bench. Straddle the bench, with the front end of the piece against the bench pegs, and plane away.*

Working down low

A low bench allows you to sit while working and use your body as leverage when planing, sawing, and shaping.

Ripping off. *With the workpiece resting on the bench, the front end butted against pegs, Schwarz secures the work with his knee, putting his weight into the sawcuts.*

Bench as a brace. *To keep an assembled chair from sliding as he planes the arm, Schwarz braces it against his low bench.*

Workholding

From body weight and body parts to pegs, blocks, notched stops, and vises, there's a holding method for every situation.

Edge planing. *Andy Brownell uses a combination of his leg, a stop block at the front, and staggered pegs on either side to stabilize the board as he works.*

A notched block. *North Carolina furniture maker Will Myers stabilizes various parts by adding this notched block, known as a doe's foot. Work that fits inside the 90° notch will be securely trapped in place. For wider boards that don't fit in the notch, the points of the doe's foot provide a more balanced resting place for the workpiece.*

V stop. *Similar to the doe's foot, these two narrow boards, also known as the palm, are fixed to the bench at about 90° to each other. Boards of different widths can be immobilized by the V stop so they don't shift left and right during planing.*

Photos, this page and p. 30: Christopher Schwarz

Creative clamping

A twin-screw vise or even a simple stepped block can add utility to this versatile bench style.

Screw vise. *Brendan Bernhardt Gaffney uses a face vise, added to the side of the bench, to secure this chair seat while shaping.*

including shaving spindles, planing the faces of boards, sawing boards to length, and even applying a finish to pieces such as chairs and small pieces of casework.

I typically build these benches out of construction lumber, though I have also used red oak for a few. The tops are made from 8/4 lumber—11 in. wide by 6 ft. long is typical. The benchtop is usually about 18 in. off the ground, which makes it ideal for sitting and handsawing.

The workholding is simple. I have a square mortise at one end that can receive a couple different blocks: one that works as a planing stop, the other that is great for shaving spindles and accurate crosscuts. Plus, the top has some holes for holdfasts or pegs.

If you have a threadbox, you can even make a simple face vise (like the one in the photo, top) which is ideal for holding chair seats as you shape their edges. □

Christopher Schwarz is a furniture maker and writer in Covington, Ky.

A head and a belly. *Myers uses a "belly and head" to hold a spindle while he shapes it. With the circular plate resting against your belly, a chair leg or spindle can be wedged between it and a tiered block secured to the bench. Your body weight stabilizes the work while you shave it to shape.*