

Looking Forward

Makers charting the future of the craft

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

As our staff looked ahead to assembling this anniversary issue, I spent a lot of time looking back—paging slowly through *Fine Woodworking's* early issues to take the pulse of the magazine when it was young; skipping around from decade to decade to find furniture that particularly impressed me in the articles where I had discovered it; reading stray bits at random that drew me in a second time. All that looking back eventually impelled me to turn forward again and assemble an

article filled with work by a range of woodworkers whose careers have launched in the last decade or two. I ended up identifying so much superb work that we've had to split the article in two; a second batch of makers will be featured in an issue later this year. It's a delight to share work I so admire—and to know from experience that this is but the tip of the tip of the iceberg and that I'm likely to find more inspiring woodwork right behind the next workshop door.

Álvaro Aramburu

Álvaro Aramburu makes furnishings in a quiet village in central Sweden, but he grew up amid the bustle of Madrid. His grandmother was a painter, and his school notebooks were always full of drawings and paintings. Making them, he says, “would completely transport me elsewhere.” He studied industrial design at the Technical University of Madrid, but the school's engineering mindset felt constraining. “I started wondering if I wanted to do something on a smaller scale, something more focused on moving from material to concept rather than from concept to material.”



Then he discovered the small, craft-based, wood-oriented furniture program at Gothenburg University in Sweden. He had little experience working wood but decided to go anyway. Soon after arriving he

fell in love with wood and began to free himself from the old-school engineering mindset. “I found a more personal and introspective approach to design,” he says. Working these days in a diverse design collective with other Gothenburg graduates, he finds himself integrating engineering and craft.

Color and natural light are primary concerns as Aramburu develops his designs. “Like all woodworkers,” he says, “I can get mesmerized by a piece of wood.” But using color lets him add “a bit of play” to a piece. He defines shapes and details with chiaroscuro, the combination of light and shadow. “I work by a window, because I like focusing on the way natural light falls on a piece,” he says. “I'm always wondering how I can make something that is subtle and simple but still conveys a lot.”



Playful patchwork. The seat of Aramburu's bench features inlaid and stained patches of pine and spruce, randomly placed in a plank of Swedish pine. The legs and stretcher, also solid pine, are coated with milk paint.



Traveling table and stools. The side table in ash, with milk-painted stretcher and tusk tenons, was made to be flat-packed. Tapered sliding dovetails join its thin legs and top. The jaunty stools with staked legs are a mobile take on a traditional milking stool.



Alison Croney Moses



Coopered curves. Working with multiple layers of veneer, Croney Moses deploys coopering and bent lamination to create shell and pod forms. An early breakthrough came when she realized you don't have to close a coopered vessel; she's been exercising that flexibility ever since.

Craft and kids are two constants in Alison Croney Moses's life. When she was a kid herself growing up in North Carolina with her parents, both originally from Guyana, her home life was infused with craft. "I have so many memories from childhood of making things and having constant support," she explains.

At Rhode Island School of Design, where Croney Moses studied furniture making, a class in bent lamination with Don Miller opened the door to an aesthetic exploration of shell-like shapes that she continues nearly 20 years later. Some of her teachers encouraged her to more clearly address function in her pieces, but she resisted, continuing to follow a more sculptural muse. Even so, pure aesthetics weren't her only aim. "I was also thinking about how to use my skills to produce things that have a little larger impact than what happens in the woodshop," she says. For her senior thesis, she developed a project that involved working with high school students to design soft plush furniture for an elementary school.

In 2013, teaching and making came together for Croney Moses when she took a job teaching woodworking to middle schoolers at the Eliot School of Fine and Applied Arts in Boston. She spent 10 years there, teaching, administrating, and making her own work in the school shop.

Several years ago, with her sculptural career taking off, she decided to leave her job at the school; since then she has been working full-time in her studio. But with a six- and an eight-year-old at home, she's still teaching.



Interlaced. In describing her recent wall piece *When We Are Together* (above), made with veneer and a bending iron, Croney Moses says, "Our time is brief, but when we get together, who knows what happens?" The curved staves of her featherlight, bent-laminated *Shell* (left), each composed of multiple layers of Italian beech veneer and one interior layer of walnut veneer, emerged from a very heavy MDF bending form.

Beatriz Zuazo



Like many other woodworkers, Beatriz Zuazo took an indirect path into the field—hers perhaps a bit more indirect than most. Raised in southern Spain, she studied translation in university, specializing in Russian and English. Then she lived for five years in Russia. She worked for part of that time at the Spanish consulate in Moscow, where she did written translation and some simultaneous interpreting. After returning to Spain, she translated for various agencies and for a Russian newspaper, but eventually she realized she had hit a dead end. What to do?

Restoring furniture for her apartment in Barcelona sparked an interest in furniture making. Finding no suitable training available in Spain, she considered traveling to England or elsewhere, but that was too expensive. In the end, she took a local furniture design course, though it didn't provide the building skills she wanted. A three-year stint of computer drafting for a large furniture company followed. She was in the right field, but at a desk instead of a bench. She'd been sharing a shop with friends and using it after work, and then one day she decided to leave the desk and become a full-time woodworker.

To hone her hand skills, Zuazo took classes with Germán Peraire at his workshop in the countryside an hour from Barcelona. Some years later, that connection blossomed into a work partnership. Peraire had seen Zuazo develop her skills in marquetry, and when he decided to build his tall cabinet (facing page, top right), he asked her to do the marquetry for it. Zuazo, who typically works small, had to find a way to create such a large marquetry sheet on her scrollsaw. Luckily, the design provided the solution: She simply divided it into sections by cutting along the branches that run from edge to edge.



Finding an intimate format. Zuazo has built a range of furniture but feels most at home making boxes and embellishing them with marquetry or parquetry. The marquetry designs on these boxes, created with natural and dyed veneers using the double-bevel technique, were inspired by urban photographs taken in Mexico by Guillermo Rodríguez.



A home for one's things. For this jewelry cabinet, Zuazo made the marquetry on the drawers with shop-sawn veneers and left them in their natural tones to harmonize with the olive ash back panel.



Germán Peraire

Germán Peraire became a teacher almost as soon as he became a maker. After taking a stab at photography, he realized at 26 that he needed to reinvent himself. Attracted to fine furniture making but finding no appropriate makers or programs nearby, he began immersing himself in the craft through English-language books, magazines, and videos. When he mastered a skill—dovetails, for example—he began teaching what he knew, first to friends and soon to others in small groups at his shop. Before long he was teaching weekend workshops.

He continued making furniture on commission, although the market was tough and the pieces he really wanted to build were the challenging ones that demanded skills he had yet to acquire. “What really takes my fancy,” he says, “is investing 400 or 500 hours in one piece. I wouldn’t be able to sustain myself just selling furniture, but it turns out I have a knack for teaching.”

Peraire now teaches weekend workshops year-round (except January and July) as well as 10- to 14-day intensive classes three or four times a year. Classes are held in the timber-frame shop he built overlooking a wheat field an hour outside his native Barcelona, and students are provided with meals and sleeping bungalows. It’s a successful business and an enjoyable one. “So in a way,” he says, “life has told me, ‘You should be teaching more than building.’” But he won’t stop building. “At core,” he says, “I am an amateur. I remember very well my beginnings and this amazing sense of freedom that you get when you are alone in the workshop putting all of your attention into only one task. So I’ve been always looking for that experience and trying to deepen it as much as I can.”



Tea times two. Peraire’s slant-front desk and mating wall cabinet in olive ash, white ash, and cherry were built to contain the herbs he likes to collect for tea infusions from the forests near his workshop outside Barcelona. He used modified violin tuning keys as drawer pulls. The bow-front wall cabinet below, also made to house a custom tea set, has a quatrefoil pierced carving in its hard maple door.



File cabinet takes a sublime turn. Peraire’s freestanding cabinet (above), with a locking tambour door that slides down from the top and rolls up in the base, is derived from a utilitarian file cabinet common in Europe in the 19th century. The originals were typically unadorned, but Peraire and Xènia Garrofé adapted a carved design by Spanish furniture maker Gaspar Homar and asked Beatriz Zuazo to render it in marquetry.

Mette Bentzen and Lasse Kristensen

When Mette Bentzen and Lasse Kristensen opened their workshop in Denmark in 2011, their ambition was to make “the best of the best” freestanding furniture. The company’s early work was purely functional and designed in the Danish modern vein, which was only natural, since they had both trained and worked for years at Copenhagen’s P. P. Mobler, the shop renowned for building the most challenging of Hans Wegner’s iconic chairs.

But several years into their new venture, on a visit to Art Basel/Miami, the pair saw a flamboyantly expressive table by Joseph Walsh of Ireland, and the experience shook something loose in them. The next table they designed (top right), with its arched and branching legs, was a turning point for them, a bridge from conventional furniture to something more sculptural.

They soon were building stack-laminated pieces and carving them in shapes depicting or interpreting forms from nature: melting glaciers, icicles, and stalagmites, the face of the moon. “Working this way,” Bentzen says, “set our work free from mid-century Danish design.” The carving, Kristensen says, which is accomplished with angle grinders, files and rasps, and countless hours of hand-sanding with custom sanding blocks, “is inspired by the raw beauty of nature but also lets us express the grain of the wood. We strive for you first to see the shape alone. Then when you get closer, you say, ‘Oh, it’s wood!’ and enjoy that.”



Ideas from above. Long devoted to expressing closely observed melting-ice forms in their sculpted furniture, Danish makers—and avid hikers—Bentzen and Kristensen recently bought a house in far northern Sweden for simpler access to glacial terrain. Another recent purchase, a telescope, keys into their ongoing series of wall sculptures lit from within that depict the moon behind a scrim of clouds.





Dawson Moore

About a decade ago, Dawson Moore was doing some mildly illicit farming in Southern California when he happened to take a woodcarving class. He was soon attempting acanthus leaves and ball-and-claw feet, then learning about flatwork cabinetmaking and acquiring hand tools for it. One day he read a blog about spoon carving. “I carved a spoon and was immediately hooked,” he says. “All my Lie-Nielsen tools started gathering dust.”

Around that time, Moore and his wife moved back to his native Michigan and built a house on a forested farm that has been in his family for six generations. While building the house, they stayed in the family homestead. There he had the prime ingredients for a serious spin into spoon carving: “some free time, a really nice porch, and tons of great wood.” Before long he was devoting himself full-time to woodwork. “It was a very spoon-centric practice for a long time,” he says, “and I certainly was into carving in volume.” Production carving was necessary for Moore to make a living, but it also suited his temperament. “There is a contingent that talks down on production,” he says. “I push back on that. The process bumped up my skills and dexterity in ways that never would have happened otherwise. And, counterintuitively, it boosted my creativity, because there was nothing between me and a new idea—the skills were getting out of the way.”



Cups, turned and carved. At the lathe, Moore turns the foot and a rough profile for three or four of these cups on a single long blank. Then he does the exterior carving with a drawknife at the shave horse. Finally, he separates the cups to hollow their interiors.

Chair study. When Covid hit, Moore set aside spoon carving to pursue an awakening passion: “For a year and a half I pretended I was doing an MFA in chairmaking.” These red oak chairs serve as his thesis. He drew inspiration from Danish modern designs and from a range of specific makers, including Tim Manney, Brian Boggs, Curtis Buchanan, Pete Galbert, and Jennie Alexander.



Justin Nelson



When Justin Nelson started Fernweh Woodworking in Bend, Ore., in 2014, he was coming off four years in the Marine Corps and then a season on a Forest Service Hotshot crew fighting wildfires. Making tobacco pipes was the only woodworking he had done. “I didn’t know what the business would look like,” he says, “but I liked the idea of independence after government jobs.”

He got a quick table-saw lesson from his brother-in-law and started out, as he says, “making knick-knacks, learning on YouTube, and blundering through, working 70 hours a week.” A couple of years in, he was introduced to Sam Maloof’s work. “It boggled my mind,” he says. And it convinced him to turn his business toward furniture.

He came to love designing and building furniture. These days, as he works with four others in a 2,000-sq.-ft. shop, furniture is his primary product. Chairs are a particular fascination. Drawn to the work of master 20th-century chairmakers Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl, Nelson toured shops in Denmark where Wegner’s furniture is still made. He was struck by the craftsmanship and teamwork there and the blending of manual and mechanized approaches to furniture making.

Nelson is keen to foster a similar ethos at Fernweh. “It’s a team of woodworkers,” he says, “and I’m somewhere in the middle.” Asked about the company name, he explains, “*Fernweh* is a German word that means roughly, ‘to be homesick for somewhere you’ve never been.’ To me, it’s the feeling I get when we’re working on a new design.”



Triangular diversification. When Covid ended and sales ebbed, Nelson searched for ways to diversify. His nesting coffee tables and triangular bowls and trays, all products of that moment, were meant to provide an accessible entry point for customers.



Production piece. Nelson’s tripod table, the first piece of furniture he designed with production in mind, was, he says, “heavily inspired by Sam Maloof’s joinery.” When the legs are turned to a taper, a chunk of the blank is left unturned where the joint occurs. After they are joined with slip tenons, the junction is shaped with a grinder and rasps. The tabletop, originally routed with a circle jig, now gets relieved by CNC.

George Sawyer

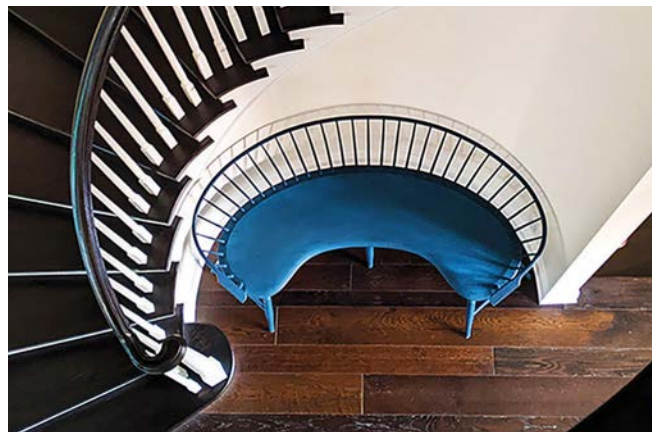


George Sawyer was home-schooled in chairmaking. His father, Dave, a pivotal figure in the renaissance of green-wood and Windsor chairmaking in the United States, was building pared-down Windsors in his one-man home shop in Vermont all throughout George's childhood. Dave, an MIT-trained mechanical engineer who taught himself to build chairs—making hundreds of ladderbacks in the 1970s before switching to Windsors in 1982—was famously generous with his knowledge and became a mentor to scores of aspiring chairmakers. George, however, was not originally among them. He spent “tons of time” in his father's shop as a kid working on all sorts of projects—but none were chairs. After studying product design at Rhode Island School of Design and working for an architect on the West Coast and then for the inventor of a wood-fired steam-powered generator, George circled back home and learned the craft of chairs from his father.

George's company, Sawyer Made, has absorbed his father's example but takes Windsors in a different direction. For George, the appeal of the Windsor is less its craft background than its design parameters and possibilities. “My pieces are transitional—clearly rooted in the traditional but bringing more modern design language into the forms,” he says.

With a team of four in the shop, Sawyer Made is making many more chairs than Dave did, and production efficiency is a key factor in the design process. “We've gone from all hand tools to a blend of hand and power tools,” George says. “But no robots yet!”

He does embrace digital technology in the design process. After sketching ideas by hand, he moves to CAD modeling software. “That really helps me get the geometry right before building,” he explains, “and it cuts out a lot of the frustration.”



Bending tradition. George Sawyer's Windsors embody the DNA of traditional chairs like those made by his father, Dave, but with their unexpected size, shape, and color, they're animated by a dash of modern daring and dazzle. The blue bench, built to fit an elliptical stairwell in California, was made during Covid and sized to a tracing of the space made by the customer.



Windsor gone rogue. After building some Windsor benches of extreme length and others that turned corners, George began to populate his sketchbook with unorthodox ideas, including one for Wayward Bench. “I don't know what the Shakers would think,” he says, “but I like it.”