

Looking Back on Sam Maloof

Woodworkers react to the loss
of a living legend

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

The news of Sam Maloof's death in May did not come as a complete shock—after all, he was 93 and had been making furniture for 61 years. Yet, for many in the woodworking community, accepting it has been difficult. For more than half a century, Maloof has been a touchstone for the field, providing a powerful example for amateurs and professionals alike. He inspired generations of makers not just with his furniture, but with his lifestyle—the hand-built house and shop in a lemon grove in Alta Loma, Calif., where all were welcomed—and with his extraordinary generosity as a teacher, mentor, and friend.

Philadelphia furniture maker Michael Hurwitz, who was a teenager when he first saw Maloof's furniture in a 1972 exhibition, spoke for many others when he said, "We were in denial about the fact that at some point Sam wasn't going to be making furniture—you just thought he was always going to be there."

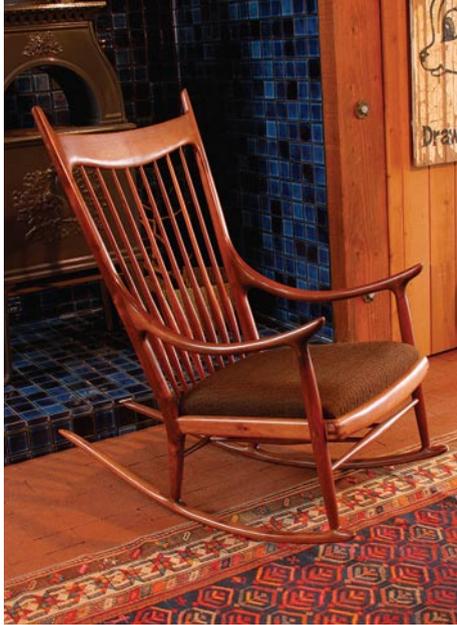
Maloo himself evidently had a similar feeling. According to Larry White, one of his three assistants, Maloof had continued buying whole slabbed logs of claro walnut right up to the end—despite having four woodsheds brimming with some 100,000

board feet of lumber. "I actually think," White said, "that Sam thought buying these beautiful trees was going to keep him going forever; that he was never going to leave us."

Maloo continued to work in his shop until six weeks before he died. In February, after several months' work with the help of Mike Johnson, another longtime employee, Maloo completed three distinctly new designs—a rocking chaise and two chairs. "I don't think I've seen him as happy in years



Forces of nature. Maloo loved this enormous avocado tree. When he saw it in the early 1950s, Maloo bought the property and built his house and shop beneath its branches.



He developed his designs gradually

Rather than jumping from one thing to the next, Maloo stuck with a handful of furniture forms and made them repeatedly. The evolution of his rocking chairs is evident in these three versions. The rocker from the late '60s (top) has turned back spindles, rounded arms, an upholstered seat, and stretchers beneath the seat. By the late 1970s, Maloo was making chairs like the one at center. It is the iconic version he is sitting in on the cover of this magazine. The frame is similar to the '60's version, but the spindles are sawn to shape, the arms have widened into paddles, the seat is solid wood, the stretchers are gone, and the rockers are longer and more dramatic. In the 2000s, when he made the rocker at bottom, he was experimenting with an outcurving arm and a narrower crest rail with back posts that no longer protrude past it.

Online Extra

Go to FineWoodworking.com/extras for a retrospective on Maloo's legendary career:

- An audio slide show of Maloo's furniture, home, and studio, with reflections from fellow woodworkers
- Memories from our online community
- A never-before-published Q&A with Maloo
- An archive of interviews with and stories about Maloo

Not just a chairmaker. Maloof produced a wide range of tables, desks, and case pieces in a rectilinear style softened by rounded edges and turned pulls.



as he was working on those pieces," White said. "He was totally absorbed, and it was a wonderful thing to watch. They were his last push, and he was obsessed to get them done.



"Production in the shop went to hell," White added with a laugh, "but he was having a great time."

A booming business. Success prompted Maloof to hire his first employee, Larry White (left), in 1962. White left to run his own shop in the '70s and '80s, but returned in 1992. He and Maloof's other two assistants, Mike Johnson and David Wade—who total 74 years' experience with Maloof—will continue making Maloof's furniture.

Production slipped, White explained, because right up until this year, Maloof had personally taken virtually all of the chairs produced in his shop from plank to assembled piece—doing almost all of the bandsawing, shaper work, joinery, rough shaping, and glue-up before passing them to his three assistants for final shaping, extensive sanding, and finishing.

Both White and Johnson are accomplished furniture makers well capable of constructing the chairs; letting them do so would have freed Maloof to spend time designing new pieces. But he wouldn't hear of it. "He was so strongly committed to his clients and to having his hands on the pieces that went out the door," White said, "he just couldn't turn loose of that."



Creativity unbound. The handbuilt house and shop Maloof created in a lemon grove west of Los Angeles were designed on the fly, built without permits, and expanded and altered year by year. In 2000, the whole compound, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was relocated to make way for a highway. Maloof's touches are everywhere in the house. Along with the furniture that fills the rooms, there are unique pieces on every side, from whimsical door latches to this spiral staircase (right).



Maloof's customers were just as committed to him, and they, too, have acted as though he would go on making furniture forever. At his death, the shop, which makes 40 to 50 pieces per year (most of them chairs), had a six-year waiting list, which included orders for some 100 of his classic rocking chairs. And though many customers no doubt were well aware that Maloof had celebrated his 93rd birthday in January, the orders kept rolling in.

Exactly how the Maloof shop will operate without Sam is unclear. He talked for years about planning for the day when his assistants would take over the business, and in the 1990s he incorporated to facilitate the transition, but the details of ownership and leadership in the shop are not yet known. Maloof's assistants clearly are all dedicated to carrying on his designs and his philosophy. "We're in a transitional state right now," White said, "but I can guarantee that Mike Johnson and David Wade and I will be here making his work."

The legal and logistical changes will no doubt soon be resolved, but for Maloof's three assistants, who together represent more than 70 years' experience in his shop, the emotional changes may come more slowly. "Looking out the shop window in the afternoon," Larry White said two weeks after Maloof's death, "we expect to see Sam come walking up with his stick and with the sun in his hair. Then realizing today that's not going to happen anymore, that was a tough moment." □

Jonathan Binzen, a woodworker and freelance writer in New Milford, Conn., is a consulting editor for Fine Woodworking.

Personal reflections on **Sam Maloof**

To take stock of Maloof's influence as a man and as a woodworker, we interviewed a range of furniture makers and a furniture scholar.

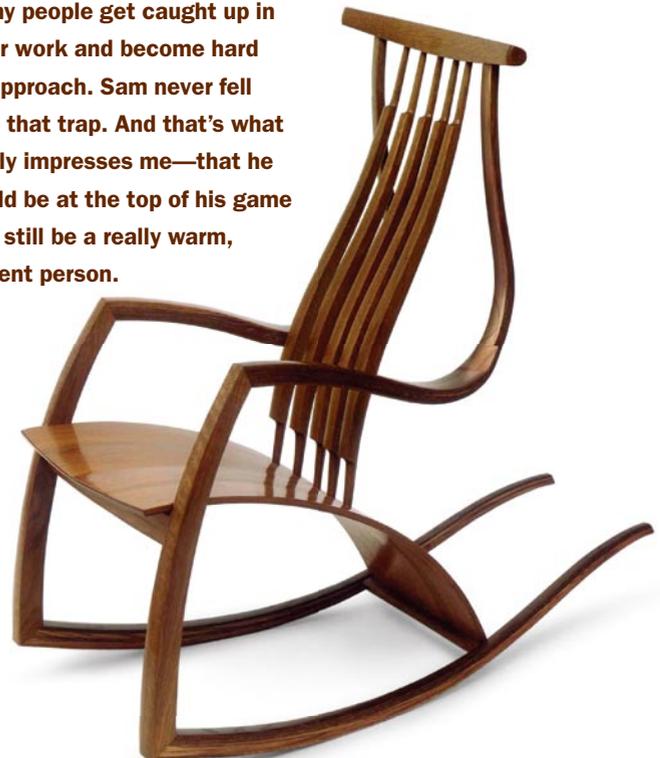
THE WARMTH OF THE MAN



Tom Hucker, who took a memorable class with Sam Maloof at the Penland School in 1973, was teaching there himself in June when this photo was taken. Hucker makes custom furniture in Hoboken, N.J.

I first met Sam when he was teaching a two-week class at Penland [in North Carolina] in the summer of '73. I was 17 and just beginning as a woodworker. Afterward I wrote letters to him and he would always write back, handwritten letters that were very supportive and sweet. Ever since then he's been a design influence for me, but he's also somebody in some ways that you have to fight against. My new rocker [below] is heavily influenced by Sam in the spindles and the basic proportions, so he keeps coming back. But for me, the underlying thing about Sam

is just how genuine and warm a person he was. So many people get caught up in their work and become hard to approach. Sam never fell into that trap. And that's what really impresses me—that he could be at the top of his game and still be a really warm, decent person.



An eye for art and craft is indispensable to the furniture designer, Maloof often said. His house brims with collections of Native American pottery and rugs and crafts by his many friends.

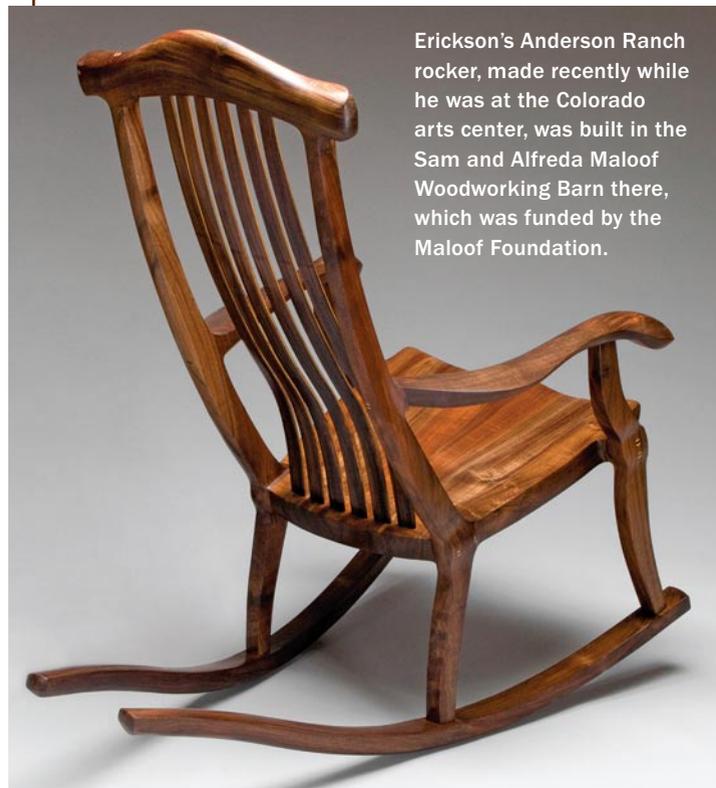
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CREATING A NICHE FOR CHAIRMAKERS



Robert Erickson, of Nevada City, Calif., who was encouraged early on by Maloof's example, has been making chairs and rockers for 40 years.

Sam Maloof developed a chairmaking style based on hand shaping, an approach that the big furniture companies couldn't follow, and that created a niche for me and for many other chairmakers. When people had seen Maloof's work, a handmade rocker made sense to them. They saw that a rocker could be a very personal piece—both for the maker and the customer—and they saw it as a chair they would spend a lot of time in. Those two things made them willing to spend more for it. And with Maloof's prices establishing the high end of the range, there was room for other makers to charge enough to make a profit but still give their customers the feeling they were getting a good deal. He showed me it was possible to be a chairmaker in a world of furniture makers.



Erickson's Anderson Ranch rocker, made recently while he was at the Colorado arts center, was built in the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Woodworking Barn there, which was funded by the Maloof Foundation.

HIS PRACTICAL SIDE



Edward S. Cooke Jr., a professor of decorative arts at Yale University and a former curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has written extensively on contemporary and period furniture.

Sam Maloof always had his feet squarely on the ground as a businessman. He stayed focused on a range of forms that he could expand slowly, incrementally, rather than trying to reinvent himself constantly. He figured out a way to take a version of soft Modernism—whether the source is Hans Wegner or Finn Juhl or some other Scandinavian—and do a particular American twist on it, which located that same sensibility in a small shop. He used walnut instead of teak, and then he started to really accentuate the shaping.

Sam wasn't an instant success. Even his rocker didn't catch on right away. He decided to make one in '62 after seeing JFK in a rocker. But he couldn't sell them at first. Then in 1976 the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston asked a number of people to make gallery seating. They gave each maker a few thousand dollars. Most of them made one or two objects. Sam delivered around 12. His instinct was, I'll take a loss on this, but it's ultimately worth it. And that's when the rocking chair took off. To me, that's the pragmatics of it. He was quite astute at marketing his stuff.



Maloof had his influences, too. This chair from 1949 by Danish designer Hans Wegner represents the Scandinavian style that influenced Maloof's own soft Modernism.

FURNITURE THAT FEELS FAMILIAR



Michael Hurwitz makes furniture in Philadelphia, where he formerly taught furniture design at the University of the Arts.

The first Sam Maloof piece I ever saw was in a show I went to in high school. Wendell Castle also had work in that show, and there was a period after that when I was watching both Sam and Wendell—two titans—having very different careers.

I loved the fact that Wendell's work kept changing and I loved that Sam kept doing what he always did. They were both inspirations. I never felt like Sam was making a similar chair because he was out of ideas; I just thought that's the way his mind worked. His chairs are something you can count on. They feel like home. Just today I sat in one of his rockers, and they're as wonderful to sit in as they are to look at. Part of the experience is stroking the armrests and the seat as you're sitting there. I like going home for Thanksgiving, and Sam's work feels like that.



Full circle. Decades after his own work inspired Hurwitz, Maloof saw the younger man's striking rocker (shown) on the cover of a book, and was inspired to design a rocking chaise of his own. Maloof finished it earlier this year.

SAM'S LOVE OF LIFE



Brian Boggs, who made chairs for 25 years in Berea, Ky., now lives and works in Asheville, N.C.

Sam connected so well with virtually everybody he encountered because he loved people and loved life. And that bubbled up in whatever he did, whether it was speaking at a conference or talking

to an individual or working with wood or collecting art and craft. And it was infectious. It was hard not to be impacted by that and inspired by that. As much as I admire his chairs and other furniture from a design standpoint, I really think that it's just the love of life that's infused in everything he did that made him and his work so magnetically attractive.



Similar evolution. With their roots in Appalachia, Brian Boggs's chairs look quite different from a Maloof rocker. But Boggs's slow evolution of a single form is parallel to Maloof's approach.