

Woodworking Thoughts

Some musings of a designer-craftsman-teacher

by Tage Frid

I have chosen to be a designer-craftsman. Most of my life I have concentrated on designing and working with wood only, and having spent more than 40 years with that one material, I am still learning through experimentation and looking for new techniques in forms.

The only trouble with designing and working in wood is that it has the advantage or disadvantage, however you look at it, of being beautiful in itself. It is not like metal; a piece of metal by itself is very cold and has to be hammered, shaped and polished before people will even look at it. A piece of clay, which is really dirt, must be shaped, fired, and glazed. But take a piece of wood; plane, sand and oil it, and you will find it is a beautiful thing. So actually, the more you do it from then on, the worse it is going to get. Therefore, working with a material of such natural beauty, I feel that we have to design very quietly and use a simple form.

On being an apprentice

I was born in Denmark, so therefore my background for furniture design is a little different from that of most American furniture designers. That may be the reason that I view design from a slightly different angle, and feel strongly about the background that a furniture designer should have. I started as an apprentice in a cabinet maker's shop in Copenhagen when I was very young. Because I was not what you would call an outstanding student in school, I decided that the best thing for me to do was to serve an apprenticeship.

When you become an apprentice in Denmark, you sign a contract for five years, which is binding on both parties. Those were five of the longest years that I have ever spent! The working hours were from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., six days a week. At night from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m., I was required to attend technical school, where drawing and a knowledge of the materials were taught. Salary for the five years was \$1 a week and the guarantee that I would be a journeyman at the end of five years. I did not learn very much about design, but I did learn a good deal about wood as a material—its strength, its limitations, and how it is put together.

Vocational education

Today people look down on vocational education because it has not inherited the prestige of the past generation in America. In Europe, the craftsman enjoys the recognition he deserves. There should be an effort made to put more respect into vocational training. A student taking vocational training

is just as intelligent as a student enrolled in a college program, the only difference is that the student does not want to be an academician. I think it is better to be a good craftsman and happy than to be a doctor or lawyer and unhappy just to satisfy mom and dad.

I think we have to start with the teachers of vocational subjects in high schools by giving them a better background. Instead of teaching them a little of each craft and having them become jack-of-all-trades, they should be taught one craft so that it is mastered and they can teach students in that particular field. I think also that they should be furnished with a better design background themselves in order to be able to guide the student in making his own design. Now if a student wants to make a coffee table, he is told to go to Drawer 3 and pick a design, usually from some popular magazine, which certainly does not help the student to understand good design. The student in a vocational school should be instructed in mechanical drawing, materials and processes, design and art history.

In schools today we like to expose students to a little bit of everything. I think it is a good thing for them to be exposed to various media, but it should be for a limited time only until they make up their minds about which field they desire to enter. Educators today like to talk about the spiral where the students know a little bit about everything before finally reaching perfection. I think it would be much better to turn the spiral up-side-down and learn one thing well, and as you go on and improve, spread yourself out to other fields. However, I believe a student should make up his mind at an early point what will be his major and spend much more time in it. I'm afraid the teaching today where the student spends a few hours in one field and the next few hours in another only leads to confusion and he is unable to decide what he really wants to do.

Knowledge of materials

In 1948 I got off the banana boat and started teaching in the Crafts School. When I arrived at the school, the students and some of the teachers kept talking about the "freedom of the material." This sounded interesting and exciting to me, and I could hardly wait to find out what it was all about. It didn't take me very long to find out when I started teaching. They did not have control of the material; so many of the things made were actually accidents.

I do not think that all furniture designers should be craftsmen first, but I certainly am convinced that the designer should know the material in which he is going to design. I

really do not see how a designer can go in cold and design something in a material about which he has no knowledge, as it is extremely difficult even for a professional to switch from one material to another and do a good job.

Design and construction

If you combine technique and knowledge of the material, you certainly should be able to make some interesting and beautiful furniture—because if you have this background, you will automatically design around the construction, and not construct around the design. You will combine the two of them, as construction becomes second nature when you are designing. I am sorry to say that many times a different approach is used, and that is to construct around the design. Many students and designers are so worried about the looks and the sculpture of the piece, they first think about the beauty of the piece and later worry about how it is to be put together. I strongly believe that this is definitely the wrong approach to take when you are designing furniture. When people buy furniture, they are very particular, and want a chair they can sit in and a bed that they can sleep in. A customer may, for example, buy a sterling silver coffee pot that will tarnish and not be safe to operate—to show that he can afford expensive items, or for whatever personal reason. He may buy a vase for its beauty even though it may have a crack in it. But when he is buying furniture, he wants something he can use. It is very hard to design furniture because somehow it has to fit the contours of the body which haven't changed much since time began.

Furniture

I feel that furniture should be in proportion to the size of the buyer and reflect his own personality. I don't think that anything can make a small person look more ridiculous—and perhaps make him feel smaller—than disappearing into an oversized, upholstered chair; or the reverse of a large person sitting in a delicate chair in which the chair disappears, and the person seems to be sitting on four legs. Furniture should be proportioned to the person who uses it. There are certain requirements a chair must have when you design it. It should be designed so that it looks inviting to sit on, and when you do sit on it, the chair legs should not spread. You should be able to sit in it in various positions, and it should be able to take the weight of a person under stress circumstances.

I feel that the arms are too low in most arm chairs, and your arms are forced into your body—not very comfortable on a warm, sticky day. The arms on a chair should be high enough so that when you are reading, your arms can be at rest, holding the reading material at the proper distance. In this position, you will be more comfortable and the air can flow around the body as necessary.

The furniture I have been talking about is the more functional type, but there are others: for instance, the type that you are supposed to "discover." A few designers and craftsmen could make this type, but you could not start an industry based on it. A designer-craftsman would design this type of furniture because it would be so personalized that it would be impossible to make a working drawing, or to get anyone else to make it; but it would be very refreshing to have a few pieces of this furniture in your home. A limited

number would be fine, because I don't want to spend half of my time trying to discover where I am going to sit in my own home. I am in favor of individualized furniture, do them quite often myself and encourage my students to do so. It is fun to make a piece of sculpture which you may also sit on.

When I talk about chairs, there is something that has always puzzled me. What happened was that in the beginning, we were all sitting on the ground. Later on some people who were more important were offered stones to rest upon. These were found to be too hard, and a piece of wood was substituted. Usually the important people in those days were the elderly, so then backs were added and armrests. Then, in order to make it movable, it had to be lightened, and this process has gradually become a chair. So now, of course, we are all important, and therefore all sitting on chairs! What happened to the rest of the world, like China and Japan? They are still sitting on the floor, and I'm sure they are just as important as we are. I don't want to go deeper into the history of the chair, but it is strange that half of the world is sitting on chairs and the other half is still sitting on the floor.

Designer-Craftsmen

If you study the older furniture designers, you will find that they were craftsmen and they all designed around the construction. For that reason we still enjoy their furniture today, and it mixes very well with well-designed contemporary furniture. The good furniture designer of today uses the same techniques, and those pieces will later become the classical furniture. But, in many cases, the designs are copies, and in cutting costs, shortcuts are made, and this is how we have some of the miscarries we have today. Of course, I am fully aware of the high cost of material and labor, and the shortage of skilled labor which has a big influence on today's designs. But I still don't believe an inexpensive piece of furniture has to look cheap. The disappearance of the designer-craftsman was one of the prices we had to pay here in America for having mass-production. In Europe, they are specializing also, and a decline in the crafts field is noticeable. But it does not mean that it is dying. We don't need the large numbers we once had because of the machines.

Many people think that the craftsman makes everything by hand. Of course, he does not. He is taking advantage of all the machines and techniques that are available. Some people think it is "wonderful" that something is made "by hand". I don't care how it is made—he can make it with his feet or a machine—it is still the final product that counts. A craftsman is very flexible and it does not cost much to switch from one design to another; therefore he is able to combine the machine and hand work to get more individual pieces. Even in a small production line, each piece can still have its own individuality. Pricewise, I think a designer-craftsman can compete with factory-made furniture for the reason that people usually go directly to him, and the dealer's in-between costs are cut. Without the tremendous overhead the factory carries, the price will be pretty close to what a factory-made piece of the same quality would cost.

So I believe that there is a great opportunity and a great need for designer-craftsmen today, and that most clients are looking for something with a more personal touch and of better quality than is available.