
QUALITY PRODUCE

A Workshop Steeped in History

Modern maker of 18th-century furniture offers some tips on working smart

BY EUGENE LANDON

Eighteenth-century shop lives in the 21st century. *Though only antique hand tools are readily visible on the walls of his shop, Landon does employ modern machinery in his reproduction work.*

When someone enters my shop, invariably they feel as if they've stepped back in time. The walls are lined with antique hand tools, the floor is made from wide pine boards, and period furniture pieces are all around in various stages of construction or repair. Visitors who are woodworkers are the first to notice the modern chopsaw, the tablesaw, and, upon closer investigation, a nearly buried heavy-duty thickness planer. Their reaction is sometimes relief: "He's one of us after all—he does use power tools."

I'd be the first to admit that I have a serious tool-collecting habit. Like all collectors, I love the anticipation of attending an auction or tag sale and finding an heirloom tool. My favorite old tools are a rosewood marking gauge and a ½-in. Marples chisel with a boxwood handle. When I discovered a few years ago that this model was being discontinued, I quickly bought several more so that I'd have a lifetime supply. My most valuable tool is probably one of my 19th-century plow planes.

Unlike pure collectors, I still use my old tools; that's how I justify my huge collection. All molding is done with a combination of molding planes and carving tools, so, not surprisingly, I have large collections of both. Most woodworkers are taught to make the carving or molding fit the tool, but when you are making exact reproductions, it has to be the other way around.

There is one kind of hand tool that I believe is better new than old: Modern metal bench planes are infinitely superior to antique wooden ones. Both planes give an identical finish, but unlike wooden planes, metal planes aren't affected by changes in humidity. I don't have to waste time setting up a metal plane each time I use it.

Tools are stored for convenience, not for display

When it comes to tool storage, each tool must be easily recognizable and readily available. If the tools look good lining the walls, so much the better. I don't keep anything locked away in display cases. And I

Hand-tool heaven. *Landon justifies his huge collection of molding planes (above) by using them to cut all of his moldings. He also owns an extensive collection of carving tools for use on work such as this cartouche (right) that will adorn the top of a secretary.*

prefer to store carving tools in drawers on a rolling cart so I can move them to where I need them.

A dozen drawers under my main workbench store tools, but most of the ones I use regularly are stored on a shelf behind the bench, and sometimes even on the bench. I don't believe in wasting time fetching and returning tools just for the sake of keeping the benchtop clear.

Some storage methods simply evolved after many years working in my shop. For example, I store my files in a cross section from a tree branch to keep them close at hand. I don't have to open a door or a drawer to get at them, and despite their numbers, I know the location of each one.

Several benches allow working at an optimal height

When you are young, a comfortable place to work is a luxury; when you get to my age, it is a necessity. Most woodworkers' benches are too low. In the 18th century, all wood was planed from rough to finish by hand. But to plane away machine marks, less downward force is required, so it is more comfortable to work at a higher bench.

For carving, my Emmett patternmaker's vise is ideal. It can grasp odd-shaped workpieces and hold them at whatever angle is best for carving. I prefer to carve in natural light, so my benches are positioned to take advantage of light from the windows. Because my shop is deep in the woods, though, I usually end up using a desk lamp for extra light.

The top of my main workbench bears the scars from well over 30 years of use. I can see little point in having a pristine surface on a bench—the perfect wood surfaces leave the shop. I bought the bench used, added the storage drawers underneath, and raised the height to a more comfortable 36 in., which also matches the height of the carts in my shop.

Making the 18th-century masterpiece

What motivates me to come into this workshop each day? It certainly is not because I want to be remembered by posterity; none of my pieces are signed. In part, I am motivated by my love for this style of furniture. I admire the craftsmanship that went into the original pieces, and if in a century's time an expert can't tell my piece from an original, then I will be well pleased. □

Eugene Landon makes 18th-century furniture near Williamsport, Pa.

Faithful vs. fast

No piece of furniture leaves my shop showing anything but the marks left by hand tools, even the insides of joints that never will see the light of day again. I also know, as any professional does, that time is money and that it pays to use power tools to make a piece as quickly as possible. Solving this contradiction—making reproduction furniture fast, and making it as faithful as possible—dominates the way I work.

A PLAN AND A RECORD OF EACH PIECE

Making faithful reproductions requires dead-accurate plans. I photograph, measure, and trace the carving of an original piece, then create templates for all of the components. When I'm finished, all of these documents are filed away should I ever need to build the same piece again.

I often wonder how an 18th-century woodworker might have tackled a problem. One technique I am particularly proud of is using rawhide as a template for making identical carvings. I haven't found conclusive evidence that this method was followed in the 18th century, but the material was readily available, and I can't think of what else furniture makers back then would have used. Thin, damp rawhide is tightly bound around an existing carving and left for 24 hours. When the material dries, an impression remains. I cut away the surplus rawhide, leaving a perfect template, which I shellac to preserve. Using this method, I can lay out identical carvings on a set of chairs very quickly.

NATURE PREPARES MY LUMBER FOR MACHINING

A piece of furniture begins life behind my shop, where I air-dry thousands of board feet of hard- and softwood. I leave the stacks stickered and exposed year-round, which improves the color of the heartwood, although the sapwood rots. After two or three years, I dry the wood more in my electric kiln.

After I cut the boards to length, I joint and thickness them by machine, leaving about 1/16 in. in thickness to be removed with a handplane. Many 18th-century pieces were made from boards 2 ft. or 3 ft. wide, which I try to use where appropriate. Such magnificent boards, however, don't fit in my 16-in. planer. I take extrawide lumber to a large commercial shop that has a 48-in. planer.

THE BANDSAW AND LATHE TAKE OVER

Every cabriole leg starts out on my 20-in. bandsaw, a wonderful tool made by the American Saw Mill Machinery Co. and dating from goodness knows when. I use this machine far more than the tablesaw for cutting straight-grain sections from a board, multiple chair parts, and cabriole legs. I use only a ¼-in. blade. My 18th-century colleagues would have employed a bowsaw, but mine stays hanging on the wall.

My lathe, made by Hill, Clarke and Co., has babbitt bearings and is at least 100 years old. I commonly turn finials, the feet of cabriole legs, and the quarter columns found on many period case pieces. Many woodworkers try to create these columns from a single piece of wood, which means they can't make through-flutes and must carve the end of each flute by hand. I copy the 18th-century woodworkers, who turned the bases and caps for an entire piece of furniture from one piece of wood, and then plowed the flutes with a No. 2 round molding plane before assembling the whole column.

Photos: Mark Schofield