

Detail of leopard couch. Made of bleached mahogany with burnt decoration, the couch is shown in full on p. 80.

Portfolio: Judy Kensley McKie

An innovative designer talks about making a living

I met Todd, my future husband, while we were both studying art at the Rhode Island School of Design in the mid 1960s. Before we were married, Todd moved to a bleak, unfurnished apartment in Cambridge, Mass. Neither of us liked the usual factory furniture, and we couldn't afford better, so I bought some materials cut to size at the local lumberyard and made him a table as a present.

After we were married, I taught school for a year. Then for about five years Todd and I made appliquéd banners and wall hangings. We even made some giant ones for the Woodstock Festival, where, I'm told, people tore them down when it started to rain and made tents out of them.

All the while, I continued to make furniture for us and for friends. My workshop was the basement, and I never had much in the way of tools. I remember that when I made my first chair, from a leather sling and a bunch of standard-size dowels, I had to buy a spade bit to make the holes. My mortiser was a \$10 electric drill. I eyeballed the mortises, and when I put the pieces together, three legs were fine, but the fourth was twisted up about seven inches from the floor. I plugged and redrilled the bad holes, then slid the dowels back and forth until the chair was comfortable. Then I glued the dowels, cut them off and pinned them.

People seemed to like the chair, so I made a scale model and displayed it in a local bank window along with some sample swatches for the seat. I expected a lot of orders, and I did get two phone calls—one person wanted to know what kind of wood it was, the other one asked me if I was hiring any help.

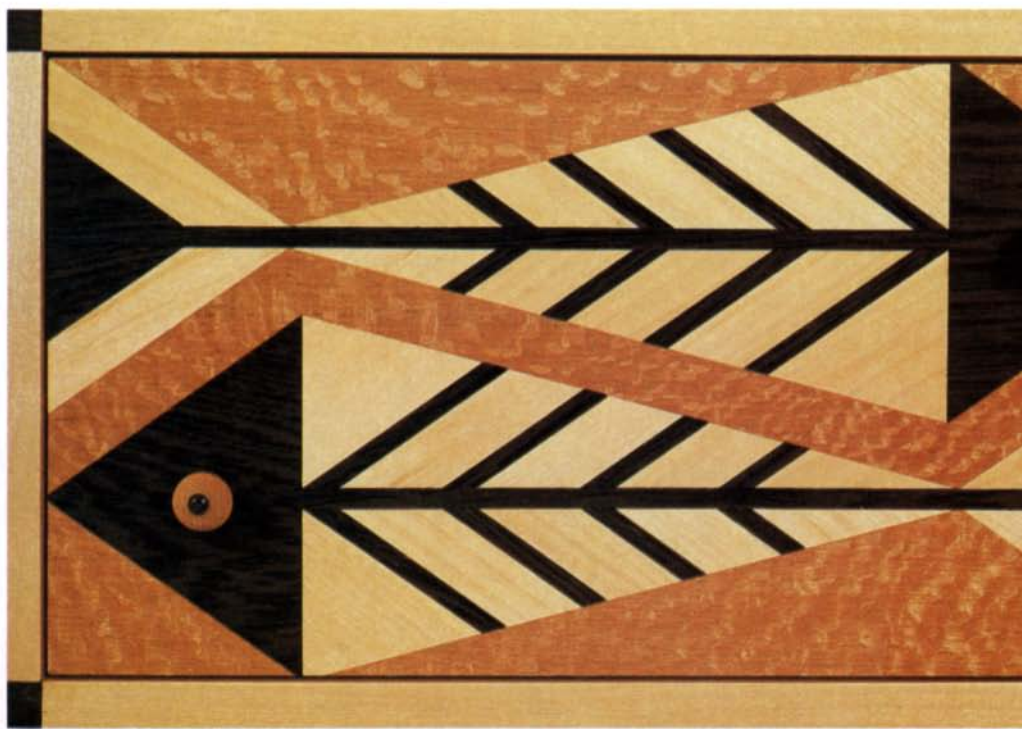
About that time, I discovered the New Hamburger Cabi-

net Works, a co-operative shop whose members were mostly college graduates interested in alternative careers—in making useful things. The co-op allowed outsiders to work there on weekends, and I gradually began working weekdays, too. I was there so much that after a while they all voted that I might as well join.

For about eight years I made very normal furniture and cabinets, but in my spare time I began to make different things for myself. One customer wanted a coatrack, but the sale never materialized, so I turned the piece into a Shaker-style table for my son's room. I decorated the top by cutting a V-groove with a mat knife and filling the groove with dark wood filler, sanded flush so that it looked like inlay. I learned much later that old Pennsylvania-German cabinetmakers had a similar process, with the inlay made of fused sulfur.

I soon made some little boxes with carved, low-relief designs (p. 78). Todd liked them, and for Christmas he gave me a canvas tool roll, empty except for a gift certificate. I asked around about which tools I should buy. Even so, I suppose I still bought a lot of the wrong ones, but it got me started seriously.

My first pieces were not too different from the plywood furniture I'd been making. I'd try to design good proportions into a box, table or chest, then add decoration, using the outline of the furniture like a frame to contain the design. Some early pieces were plainly sculptural, but it has taken me time to learn how to integrate several techniques into the same piece. The leopard couch (above and on p. 80) combines mortise-and-tenon joinery, bent-lamination, carving and sanding to get the shape. It's just basic woodworking, but the



Details from McKie's current work: relief-carved 'frogs' and marquetry fish. Full pieces are shown on p. 80.

bending form was humongous, an adventure. And that was the first time I'd ever bleached mahogany—with lye and peroxide. I had to repeat the process three times before I got good results. What finally worked was doing the job outdoors, in bright sunlight. Then I burned in the spots with a propane torch, another adventure. I'm always feeling my way as I go. I remember making one mahogany table with a deeply carved and pierced apron, a bird and fish design. I'd intended to paint the carving, but when I had the woodworking done, and had gotten a couple of coats of oil on the table, it looked so finished that I stalled for days, afraid I'd ruin all that work. One evening I finally said "this is it," and I colored the apron with artists' oil paint, blending and shading the colors with Watco. The table suddenly lightened up, seemed to rise, and I knew I'd done the right thing. Sometimes it goes the other way: some ideas just don't work, a few pieces never get finished.

The pieces shown on these first two pages are from the show I had last fall at Elements Gallery in New York City, and they were all made in 1983. The frog cabinet shown at left above is a lot like some of my first carved boxes. It's finished in lacquer with a little white pigment in it. My pieces take a long time to make, and I get used to the way they look in raw wood. Sometimes the finish changes the color, yellowing it, and suddenly the piece looks entirely different. A touch of white pigment keeps the wood looking light without hiding its real color. I used the same technique on the leopard couch.

My mother gave me a Shaker-style cabinet a few years ago, and the cabinet at right has similar lines. I had the casework completed before I finally settled on the painted design. I knew I wanted a pattern as strong as the marquetry fish cabinet (above and on p. 80), but I needed something for the show that would take much less time and be less expensive. I made about thirty outline drawings of the cabinet and filled them in with various possibilities before I chose this one.

My designs have always gone through a lot of drawings



Shaker-inspired cabinet is decorated with milk paint.

J.K.M.



J.K.M.



Greg Heins



Marquetry cabinet was built to hold a client's Indian jewelry.



J.K.M.

After seven years of making plywood furniture for clients, McKie began incising designs into the tops of small boxes.

and variations before I've been happy with them. My first boxes (above and at left) began with sketches, almost doodles. I like the dog box because it looks fresh and easy, but it took a lot of drawing before I got the head and the tail right. I made eight or ten boxes, and one of my favorites is the bird box. It was the first one where I tried to activate the surface of the wood instead of just carving a shallow pattern. The frog box was inspired by a weekend Todd and I spent in the country—everywhere you looked there were frogs. The ground was alive, the water was alive, everything was new.

The marquetry fish cabinet reminds me of a job that I did back in 1979. I'd once made a plywood sewing center for a customer, and she came back when she needed a case for her collection of Indian jewelry. I eventually convinced her that she wanted something unusual, with a Navajo quality (left). We agreed on a price of \$250—that tells you how much I wanted to break away from Baltic birch.

Todd used to kid me when the phone rang. He'd announce that some museum was on the line, or a major gallery wanting my work. Then one day the Boston Museum *did* call. Todd left me a note, which I of course ignored, but it turned out that they wanted to commission a bench. I made three drawings for them to choose from. I was disappointed when they chose the horse bench, because the drawing didn't really look very good. At \$2,000, however, it was the least expensive of the three, and it fit their budget. The drawing was mostly straight lines, very plain and stiff, without any character. After I got the job, I worked hard on each part of the bench to try to get it to come to life (facing page). The other two bench drawings went into my stack of designs.

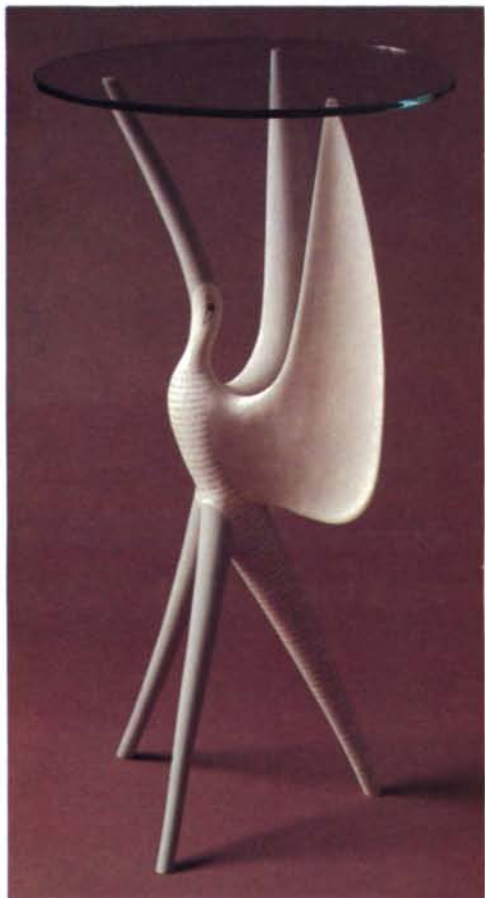
The white table shown on the facing page is a variation of some earlier dog-table designs. I made the first one on speculation, and somebody saw it and bought it for \$800. I showed a second version at the American Craft Museum, and there was a lot of interest in it, so I decided I'd better try a small production run. I've made ten in all. The one at the ACM sold for \$2200, and I kept \$1800 of that. The last one sold in a gallery for \$4500, and I'll get about half. If a good gallery is doing its job, that's a fair commission. I brought one of the earlier tables home to store it between shows, and I've gotten very attached to it—I'd like to keep it.

The bird stand (facing page) was another production run. I used to call these tables my homing pigeons because I'd send them away to shows and they'd fly right back. I originally



J.K.M.

McKie's furniture is often sculptural. The one-of-a-kind table, above, developed from a production table whose glass top rested on two straighter, taller dogs with bones in their mouths. The horse bench, below, was commissioned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The bird stand, below right, was an edition of ten.



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



For a sturdy table, McKie took pains to include long-grain lines running straight from the top to the floor. A thicker-than-usual oval glass top visually counterbalances the massive carvings.



McKie's creatures are abstract and whimsical—she aims to animate her furniture without pinning it down. The organic, unpredictable curves in the pieces shown here were all first fully detailed on paper. The frog cabinet's vines, below, deliberately don't line up, in keeping with the jungle's rampant confusion.



made ten, but now only one is left, in a gallery, priced at \$1800. Drawings weren't a lot of help when it came to planning the production run—the table is a tripod, and there isn't any single front view to draw. So I had to work out the final design at the same time that I made the templates. I haven't found that production runs save much time. Too much hand work has to be done. If you're making a piece that takes a couple of days, then making thirty makes sense. But some of my pieces take me months to make. Making thirty would take me half my life, and I'd feel as if I were standing still. I always want to get on to the next piece.

I've been lucky so far. I've been able to please my customers and still make what I wanted. A few years ago I got a small grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and then last year I applied again and they gave me \$25,000. The money came at exactly the right time—I'd already contracted for the show at Elements, and feared that I'd have to take out a loan to survive the year.

—Judy Kensley McKie

Whether furniture or art, it's hard and dusty work *by Jim Cummins*

Judy McKie jokingly says that when too many of her pieces are seen too close together, they suggest a menagerie. In the back of her mind, she has a vision of the spacious room each piece will someday occupy. In reality, as far as she knows, people eat breakfast at her breakfast tables and the hall tables gather clutter; daily life becomes part of the designs. In spite of this, or maybe because of it, the furniture is cherished even more.

In her own apartment, with its small, high-ceilinged rooms, McKie's furniture is crowded by living and use. Her kitchen cabinet has a carved pattern on its splashboard, but it's completely obscured by canisters and kitchen gear. You can't get far enough away from her kitchen table to appreciate its carved apron, and the "inlaid" round table in her son's room is covered with books, papers and fishing tackle. Nothing could better prove that this furniture is functional, fashioned by someone who needed furniture. A legless, boxy chest, made some years ago by McKie's father in his garage, stands in the hall—absolutely utilitarian, yet it has personality, a pleasing and tolerant character. McKie recalls that when she was a child, her father spent some time winterizing a vacation cabin. Ducking the chore of hanging insulation, 13-year-old Judy spent days sawing out decorative splats for a railing around the sleeping loft.

When she began making furniture 15 years ago, McKie, like many self-taught woodworkers, often did things the hard way. If she had an idea, she had to discover a way to implement it. It seems to me that this is one of her strengths—she could never accept a job as being "right" simply because she had done it the right way. Instead, each piece had to pass on its own merits.

One evening, after maybe seven years of making birch plywood furniture, McKie made an expansive list of everything she could think of that would change the way wood looked. Carving, painting and staining were obvious, but she didn't exclude the outrageous—crushing, piercing, burning. Once, she loaned her kitchen table to a chain-smoking friend and it came back spotted with cigarette burns. The intense black centers, with their hazy outlines, went on her list of techniques, and later became the spots on the leopard couch.

Her designs remind some people of pre-Columbian art, others of Egyptian work. Animal imagery has always had a powerful, totemic impact on furniture-makers. One observer calls her work a



McKie with a breakfast-table template.

generalized "equatorial art," another thinks she touches things that might have haunted a Shaker's subconscious. The designs are, despite reminding everyone of something else, uniquely her own. Her creatures, instead of representing society's domination over nature, are a reaching out to nature, a participation in a wild riot of life.

Sometimes her goals are very basic: in her bedroom, squeezed between radiator and doorway, stands one of the homeliest pieces of furniture I've ever seen—pine, brown, about a foot wide and seven long, featureless except for a saber-sawn curve between the feet on the side. I asked what sort of proportions she'd been thinking about. "Proportions? It has the proportions that give me the biggest laundry hamper between the radiator and the door, that's all. . . no proportions." In contrast, against one kitchen wall, there's an unashamedly elegant dog table, with nothing on it but a pair of brass candlesticks and a fruitbowl. In a home where even the windowsills are crowded, it's something of an enigma. "Well, that's what that kind of table is *for*," McKie says, "that's its function. It belongs to the whole line of fancy hall tables and sideboards, display pieces. You can't eat at it, you can't use it to keep a lot of things on, but there's always been a tradition for pieces like this. You might not guess it, but I think of my work as classical furniture. This is a classical hall table."

McKie's workspace is part of a warehouse-like building that's a full city-block deep, broken up into good-sized individual areas with a communal lum-

ber pile and centrally located heavy machinery. There's a spray room, a room for storing finished pieces, and a general air of work being done. The place is more commercial than arty, with piles of kitchen cabinets growing in one spot, architectural components in another.

In the shop, McKie works steadily and hard. In the month before her show at Elements, she is finishing up four major pieces at once: lacquering, painting, carving, deciding on fabrics and installing hardware all at the same time. Yet every tool is where it should be, there's no litter of scraps on the floor. When she goes to mix paint, McKie scoops up the solvent, dry colors, stir-stick and mixing cup all in one trip, and her mixing cup turns out to be big enough for the job. To show me an old template, she goes straight to a dark corner and pulls it out. All its parts are labeled, and prudently taped together. In everything, she's thrifty with effort—she's been at this for a long time.

Making a living from her work has been, so far, very hard. Entering the big-money art world, becoming an art star, has never been McKie's intention. She wants to make things that affect her the same way as certain things she's seen and remembered: objects made with thought and love, showing the concentration and involvement of the maker, utilitarian things that go beyond mere utility, sculptural things that will last in the mind. Yet she still must make a living. If she is to clear \$10 per hour for her work, the marquetry fish chest will have to sell, including the gallery's share, for maybe \$14,000. That allows nothing for all the time spent on all those pieces, stillborn, that haunt the corners of her shop. She has spent a year of her life, and exhausted a \$25,000 grant, making seven pieces of furniture.

The show at Elements was a success, and will stake her for another year. But McKie is concerned that a gallery's markup will put her work beyond the reach of the clients who have so far been her main support—her friends, people who love her work as furniture rather than as an investment. Yet, with a good gallery behind her, doing its job, she would never again have to bargain for a fair price, never have to scale down an idea to fit a budget. She always comes out on the short end in such transactions, because the furniture she makes is as much hers forever as it is the person's who buys it. Whatever the piece, and whatever the price, Judy McKie digs down deep and makes it work. □