

Doerr Woodworking (pages 112-116)

From "Craft Furniture The Legacy of the Human Hand" by Dennis Blankemeyer

ISBN: 0-7643-1787-3

Copyright 2003

"Sailing is just the bottom line, like adding up the score in bridge. My real interest is in the tremendous game of life."

Dennis Conner, yachtsman

Michael Doerr of Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, considers himself a functional artist, one who has received great guidance and inspiration from those who have walked the path of craft before him. He began his solo business in 1989, crafting his original design of tables and chairs.

Michael's first introduction to woodworking was many years ago when he was in this mid-twenties. He began as a wooden shipwright the famed boat builder, Fred Nimphius, a man Michael considers to be one of the most influential figures in shaping him into the furniture maker he is today. Fred was not only Michael's boss but also his mentor, who often said, "It is not what you accomplish in a day but what you learn from a day's work." Michael describes the master/apprentice relationship as a dance where knowledge is passed on from generation to generation.

Some other seminal figures in Michael's interesting life are modern master Sam Maloof and architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Their contributions are easily seen in Michael's No. 1 chair. Viewing it in profile, one can easily detect the stacked planes running out into space, which is Wright's influence, while the sculptural lines of Maloof's influence cause the eye to flow throughout the piece.

Another life lesson Michael learned from both Maloof and Nimphius, he says, is to work to the best of his ability and with integrity. With the love and good advice of his wife Bobbi, Michael tries to do just that with every piece he makes. His passion and desire is to create objects of beauty. He describes his style of work as an "outgrowth of my lifestyle and previous influences." He goes on to say that, "Gathering information and accepting or rejecting it is a great part of life." He maintains that even in rejection you can find influence.

Michael is a one-man operation. Never starting with a drawing, he goes straight to the wood for his muse. The process begins with hand selecting each board. Then the boards are fitted together like a puzzle to create an outline of a cube. Next, he says, he "takes away everything that doesn't look like a chair." With every object he makes he is sure to create a flowing, unbroken line that draws the eye around the chair or table. These details can be time-consuming. Each chair takes between 20-25 hours to build, before several more hours of sanding and buffing. When finished, every chair is signed and numbered.