



Furniture sculptor takes a national sales approach

By Tod Riggio

Staff Writer [Woodshop News](#)

MICHAEL DOERR

Business: Doerr Woodworking in Sturgeon Bay, Wis.

Years pro: 10

Maker of: Sculpted furniture

Training: Boat-building apprentice to Ferdinand Nimphius; attended Sam Maloof's seminars at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colo.

Primary marketing approach: Exhibitor at national and regional shows.

Schedule: Six shows in 2000, including Philadelphia Furniture & Furnishings Show.

Of note: "One of my clients, who I made a dining room set for, said, 'I didn't pay you to have a dining room set. You made it. I just paid you to have it in my home.' That kind of opened my eyes. Maybe I am doing something here that's craftsmanship."

Amongst the dairy farms of Northern Wisconsin, a stone's throw away from the Bay of Green Bay and in the maritime village of Sturgeon Bay, is the one-man shop of Michael Doerr. It's a pleasant, tranquil setting for making piles of sawdust, if a bit off the beaten path. But Doerr, a trained boatbuilder, has found a market for his sculpted furniture by navigating the show scene.

Doerr has exhibited at the national level for about three years, setting up booths at the Philadelphia Furniture & Furnishings Show, Chicago Design Show, and Fine Furnishings - Providence (R.I.). The result is sales of about 25 pieces per year to customers across the country, and beyond.

"The shows are, for the most part, my marketing," said Doerr. "There reached a point where I thought I was building good chairs and slowly, as I got out of the Wisconsin regional shows in St. Louis and St. Paul, Philadelphia was the next step, just because you've got to grow.

"We sell here, to Europe, Connecticut, California, Miami ... all over. I've built a reputation. Now it's repeat customers. Their children and friends are coming to me."

The show exposure has placed Doerr's work in two galleries - the Domont Studio Gallery in Indianapolis and Forecast in the Miami design district. His work was also included in a lecture series on contemporary craft, presented by furniture historian Oscar Fitzgerald of the Parsons School of Design.



His wife, Bobbi, shares the booth duties and the plan is to take orders, rather than sell pieces. And it's just about mandatory for booth visitors to sit in his chairs. "I want people in my booth, so I set it up in such a way that a chair is in front of the booth and they have to walk around it to get in," Doerr said. "That gets people to turn and then I want to talk to them while they sit in my chairs. I want to create a room and a comfort zone.

"I also give the same information to everybody. I explain how this is all done in my shop - it's all handcrafted by me. Every piece is an original, all signed and numbered, and if you were to walk away and return in five minutes, you would hear the same thing. That goes back to learning how to talk to people. I figured out real fast that you don't want to try to customize everything because you'll get called back with 'well, you said this,' and you say, no I didn't. You've talked to 1,000 people and they've talked to one."

Five flavors

Doerr offers five styles of chairs, each with its own variation. He also makes small pedestal tables, stools, an 'occasional desk' and a bed. His chairs are priced between \$1,850 and \$2,300.

Most of his pieces feature gentle curves and rounded-over surfaces, yet maintain a rectilinear feel.

"His pieces fit in well in our Artistry in Wood Show, where we really went for quality from makers across the country," said John Domont, owner of the Domont Studio Gallery, of the show that also featured turners Betty Scarpino and John Skau, and furniture maker Richard Helgeson. "We wanted the pieces to be fairly simple, but not the norm, bringing a human presence and a respect for beauty."

Doerr says his designs focus on the integrity of the architectural line, which gives each piece the ability not only to be part of a set, but to stand alone as an individual piece. Another integral feature is the flow of the unbroken line that continues throughout the majority of his designs, creating a one-dimensional quality to the overall outline.



"That's what makes him different from a lot of other woodworkers - that real crisp line," said his wife, Bobbi. "It's hard to maintain that. It just ends here and then something else starts. There's a rhythm going on."

"I've been told I take a sculptor's approach to it," said Doerr. "A chair takes space so if I think about it as a cube, then I can start taking away in my mind's eye the parts of it and end up with these different chairs. I use the same system that makes all of my chairs."

Doerr works primarily with 8/4 stock, starting with boards that are about 5-1/2" wide and 30" to 36" high to make the back legs for his chairs. The seats are sculpted from 8/4 stock, with Doerr leaving only 1/2" of material in some areas.

"After building boats, this didn't scare me. It took a lot of time to understand chair making, and it took a lot of mistakes, but I let mistakes be my teacher."

Boat beginnings

Doerr had another teacher, serving a three-year apprenticeship with master shipwright Ferdinand "Red" Nimphius, who built hundreds of wooden boats in his 65-year career. From the late 1930s through the '40s, Nimphius built a string of fast racing sailboats that earned him notoriety among Great Lakes racers. He eventually bought a 200-acre farm in Wisconsin, and nearly 100 apprentices - who worked for minimal wages in unheated barns - showed up at his shipyard more than 70 miles from the nearest navigable waters.

"He was quite the guy," said Doerr. "It was basically a real apprenticeship. The first job I ever had was scraping glue off the floor with a shovel. It was a great place to work and [Nimphius] was a fair man. But [when] you made mistakes, you heard about it. You'd be digging outhouses or something."

"I remember building floor timbers going up the stem of a sailboat and it was the first time I was ever going to do it. Red showed me how to make the first one and said to me, 'When I was your age, I could make four an hour.' So there it was: the challenge. So I



started working, doing it the way he taught me and by 3 or 5 o'clock that night I had three of them made and put in. The next morning I made the fourth one and asked Fred, 'How could you ever get four of these installed in an hour?' He said, 'I never said I was installing. I just made them and handed them to another another guy.'"

Doerr planned to build wooden boats by himself, but that didn't really pan out. He caught the furniture bug from Sam Maloof's book (Sam Maloof: Woodworker, 1983) given to him by his father, and from a string of Maloof's two-day seminars at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colo.

"I went to three of them in a row and just started using Maloof's techniques of joinery and building my styles. I tried real hard not to look like him. I didn't want to be a knock-off but I didn't see anything wrong with using the technique. It works well," said Doerr.

Keeping it simple

The Doerrs have lived in Sturgeon Bay for the past three years, which at one time was the largest inland ship building community in the country, according to Doerr. It's still home to Palmer-Johnson, a company that builds 100' yachts.

"There's an appreciation for fine crafts here," said Doerr, who moved north from the Milwaukee area. "When I moved up here I decided to have a first-class shop. You see I don't have a lot of high-tech machinery in here. A lot of it is second-hand. I have a mortiser and a couple drill presses, my spindle sander that is really the workhorse of these curves, and my old band saw that I got out of my father's garage."

The shop is a 30' x 60' stand-alone building which features 9' ceilings, air conditioning and central heat. It has walled-off areas for a showroom, main machine room, bench room, and supplies.

Doerr likes to keep a few different projects going at once in the shop and relies mostly on hand tools - specifically gouges, scrapers, sandpaper and his trusty mallet. He has a drawer full of paint scrapers with different radiuses. "They just pull the wood right out," he said.



"I don't have a worry about hand tools versus power tools. I think I do pretty good with the combination of hand tools and power tools. I'm sure if you showed a guy from the 1700s a modern router, he'd probably use it."

He makes new chairs for variety and to keep it fun. But he tries to discourage customers from asking for variations on a chair.

"Yesterday I got a call from a gentleman who was interested in a dining room table and maybe four chairs," said Doerr. "I told him my prices for chairs and he said he understood but did I do any chairs that are more basic; easier to make so they're more affordable. I said no, but he started me thinking that maybe I should go to a chair that is more affordable, but still using these techniques and we'll see. I'm not going to copy anyone else's chair and I'm not going to go up against these people that have small factories with 13 or 16 employees. I can't compete against them."

The shows must go on

For now, the plan is to continue exhibiting at shows. Doerr also hopes to gain admittance to the American Craft Council shows, but has yet to be juried in. Otherwise, he's quite content to continue operating as a one-man shop with no plans to expand.

"I don't know that I will get over the hump. But I do know that it's something that I don't plan to retire from," he said. "I hope to be doing it when I'm in my 70s. Maybe at that point I'll have an apprentice or two. And as the business grows, who knows? It would be fun to be able to teach this.

"But I'm not going to do that until my business can handle it. I've seen too many of my friends with small businesses take on loads that they can't handle. If you grow too fast, you've got to be careful. All of sudden you're working for the bank. Right now I'm still working for myself."

Contact:

Doerr Woodworking,



4371 County Hwy. M,
Sturgeon Bay, WI 54235

Tel: 920.743.5631.

E-mail: doerrwoodworking@dcwis.com.

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