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# WOODWORK

A MAGAZINE FOR ALL WOODWORKERS

Furnituremaker  
Ross Day

Building a Stickley  
Dining Chair

Two Variations on a  
Turned Bowl

The Furniture of  
Walker Weed

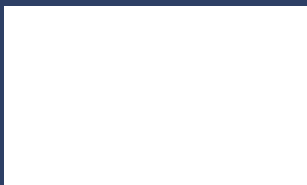
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DECEMBER 2008  
\$4.99 (Canada \$6.99)



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# ROSS DAY GETS RIPE

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Ross Day grew up in a scattering of towns out West in the '50s and '60s and early '70s. From Denver, where he was born in 1954, his family moved to Pueblo, Colorado, then to Boise, Idaho, and, when Ross was ten, on to Seattle, where they stayed. One year he attended three different schools. None of those three or any of the others that followed held much interest for him.

His father sold adding machines for the Monroe Calculator company—at a time when a portable calculator was best moved with a hand truck. His mother, prior to raising Ross and his four younger siblings, had been a hairdresser and had also worked for the Denver highway department, where she met her future husband.

Ross's father was the first in his family to go to college, but there was no pressure for Ross to follow suit. No expectations, really, to do anything in particular. Day drifted unhappily through high school without a clue what he wanted to do with his life. His closest sibling, by contrast, a brother who is now an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, decided in elementary school that he wanted to do something in the field of dentistry.

Ross could have used some guidance, but it was not forthcoming. "My dad grew up without a father," Ross says, "so I think it was an experiment for him to be a father."

For the kids, Ross says, "It was a figure-it-out-for-yourself kind of thing. If you asked him a question he would answer it. But if you didn't know what questions to ask, you weren't going to get any answers. So I had to figure out the questions first. And that took a long time."

Day had no early mentors in craft or woodworking, either, though he enjoyed shop class in middle school and remembers tinkering with some hand tools his father won in a contest. He always excelled in drawing, but never envisioned a career in that direction. By the end of high school Day couldn't wait to get out and just go to work. Any work.

There followed a five or six year stretch of what Day describes as "kicking around in dead-end jobs, paycheck jobs." Dishwasher, warehouse worker, marine-parts buyer. At one point he enlisted in the Navy and had thoughts of entering the submarine service. But after Day got into a scrape or two, the Navy thought better of the arrangement and cut him loose. He tried rough carpentry, but wasn't comfortable working at heights and hated working outside in Seattle's chilling, wet winters. One signal event occurred, though, while he was working as a carpenter. While his crew was installing some interior walls in an architect's office, a husband-and-wife cabinet-making team appeared and installed some

custom cabinets they had built. Day was fascinated by the pair and the work they had done, which seemed so much finer than anything he was capable of.

Assorted other jobs followed Day's carpentry stint. Then he had an idea: he should learn a trade. He went to his father and said he was thinking he would go to school to learn autobody repair; he would be a body-and-fender man. For the only time he can recall, Day says, his father gave him a specific piece of advice: "No, you're not," he said. "You don't want to be in an environment like that with paint fumes and Bondo and dust." So much for that idea.

The first glimmer of the future for Day appeared in the newspaper one Sunday morning about six years after he'd left high school. It was a profile of James Washington, a Seattle stone sculptor. Washington's realist sculptures immediately drew Day's eye, but what Washington had to say went even deeper. Every person, Washington believed, had at least one major talent waiting to be discovered. It was up to the individual and his teachers to discover and nurture the talent and then gain proficiency in it. It wouldn't matter if you were sculpting stone or laying bricks—if you became proficient in your chosen talent you could then imbue your work with what Washington called "the creative force," and your work would be elevated to the realm of art.





Day builds from full-scale drawings and rarely makes mockups—except when it comes to chairs.

the bridge between art and craft. Right then I knew I was going to make the shift from cabinetmaking to furnituremaking.”

In his excitement he began building a bed at the cabinetmaking school and immediately ran into resistance. “They thought I was kind of nuts,” he says. “They told me, ‘When you finally decide you’re going to go broke making furniture, we’ll show you how to pick up the belt sander and the router and really get busy making a living.’” But Day was undeterred. He had found his polestar and he was headed for it. The journey, though, would not be brief.

Instead of getting a job in cabinetmaking like his classmates, Day joined the Teamsters’ Union and got a job on the bottling line at the Ranier Brewery. At the same time he rented bench space in a group shop and set out to teach himself to make furniture. With no seniority at the brewery he had an uncertain schedule, working mostly swing shift and graveyard. But he would get to the shop several times a week.

Having been reading what he could find on contemporary furniture he set out a simple curriculum for himself. He decided the best way to explore the field firsthand would

“Shainin Sofa” [two views]; European pear, sail-cloth fabric; 31" x 78" x 25".

“Musician’s Suite”; cabinet in figured cherry, maple, East Indian rosewood; 40" x 26" x 17"; music stand in figured cherry, East Indian rosewood, bronze; 44"-60" x 20" x 20".

The article impelled Day to take a sculpture class at a local community college. He enjoyed the class, but couldn’t imagine himself in an artistic career. When he learned that the same school had a certificate program in cabinetmaking, he recalled the husband and wife cabinetmaking team he’d seen and decided to enroll. It was a one-year program, and it gave Day a thorough grounding in machine and power tool use and in utilitarian cabinet construction.

In the spring of that year, 1979, while he was in the cabinetmaking program, two events occurred in the span of a week that brought Day’s inchoate career plans suddenly into bright focus. One day he overheard two fellow students discussing *A Cabinetmaker’s Notebook*, by James Krenov. “They were saying, ‘this guy makes his own hand planes and doesn’t use any sandpaper.’” Day bought the

book and began to read. He was surprised to discover there was nothing in the book about the specifics of how to make anything: “It was all about the ‘why’ of it. The magic of working alone in a small shop—doing your own work with finely tuned tools and nice materials. That really resonated with me.” And it reminded Day of Washington, who seemed to be saying the same thing in a different way. Day had been moved by a spiritual—not to say religious—quality in Washington’s work, and he had the same strong feeling when he looked at Krenov’s furniture.

Several days after buying the book, Day had another shock. He saw his first copy of *Fine Woodworking*, with a cover story on the English Arts and Crafts furnituremaker Edward Barnsley. “Those two things just decked me,” Day says. “I never knew anything like that existed. I felt like I had found



“Wishbone Arm Chairs”; cherry, cane;  
34" x 18" x 19".

“Lounge Chair”; cherry, silk fabric;  
33½" x 27" x 39½".

be to copy pieces by four prominent makers. He chose a Sam Maloof desk, a George Nakashima coffee table, some Wharton Esherick stools, and a James Krenov cabinet. Over the course of many months he built them all. What he found in the process, he explains, “was that I could plow my way through nearly all the pieces with machines and power tools with the rudimentary skills I had. But when it came to the Krenov cabinet I ran into a roadblock. I discovered all of a sudden that you needed some hand skills to do this that I did not possess.”

Year after year, as Day worked on his self-education, it became clear that he would need training to obtain the hand skills he wanted. He heard that Krenov was teaching in California, but going away for a year seemed impossible. How could he take the time? How could he pay for it? He stayed on at the brewery and the group shop for four years, five years, six—and then one day he heard that someone named Bill Walker had moved into the cabinet shop down the hall. “I went over there to visit,” Day says, “because I heard he’d gone to Krenov’s school. I stuck my head in the door and saw the desk he was working on. And I just saw the leap in quality from what I was trying to do on my own to what you could do with that sort of training. There was nothing in Seattle to compare with Bill’s work. Right then I realized I had to find a way to go to the school.”

Day discovered that the admissions packet for Krenov’s school—the Fine Woodworking Program at the College of the Redwoods in Ft. Bragg, California—contained the usual forms and requests for transcripts and recommendations. But the most important element in it was the essay students were asked to write explaining why they wanted to study at the school. With space for just 23 students, the school received many more applications than it could accept. Prior experience in the field didn’t necessarily ensure admission. The school often accepted applicants with no background in furnituremaking at all if they detected in the essay some unusual spirit or spark.

Day decided to write his essay on the concepts of “raw” and “ripe” he had read about



PHOTO BY TERRY REED

in Soetsu Yanagi’s book *The Unknown Craftsman*, which he knew was a special text at the school. Day wrote that he considered George Nakashima’s work, with its free edges, its informality and its simple construction, to represent the concept of raw. And he said Krenov’s approach, with its focus on dialed-in craftsmanship, fine joinery and its emphasis on the process of making, represented the concept of ripe. Day wrote that he liked both sorts of work and didn’t feel that one was

superior to the other. But he said he was drawn to the ripe. Day closed the essay, he remembers, “by saying that I wanted to come to the school because I was raw at that time, and I wanted to get ripe.”

In September, 1986, Day found himself at one of the school’s 23 benches embarking on what he describes now as the best year of his life. The building, filled with natural light and sequestered from the main campus, struck Day as a sort of monastery. And he



**“Matrix” dining suite in claro walnut and European pear, including dining table, side and arm chairs, hutch, and serving table.**

was an informal cross-pollination of ideas from Krenov and Osgood. Walker and Day, for instance, learned to rely on the shaper for many tasks that would have been performed by hand at CR. And Wurtz adopted the practice of hand-sawing veneers from solid stock that Day and Walker had learned at school.

Today, Day works by himself in a shop he built beside his house in Poulsbo, Washington, a short ferry ride across Elliott Bay from downtown Seattle. The shop’s equipment reflects his hybrid training, with hand tools lining the walls of the bench area and an abundance of shaper jigs stored in the machine room.

The blend is a matter of business, Day says. At CR he was taught to produce shaped parts with a bandsaw and fair up the curves with hand planes and spokeshaves. That method works well if you’re making one piece at a time, but Day says he realized pretty quickly that “if you’re doing a set of dining chairs, for example, you have to have repeatability—and the shaper gives it to you.” Even if he’s not building in multiples, Day labels and files away all his shaper jigs so that when he does decide to remake a piece it will be a quick, smooth process.

**“Dining Table and Hi-Back Chairs”; figured Oregon walnut, European pear, Thai silk; table: 29½" x 82" x 39"; chairs: 46" x 17" x 18".**

devoted himself to the experience as unre-servedly as any novice. Along with the hand-tool skills he had dreamed of mastering, Day learned much more about machines and materials and absorbed Krenov’s intimate and intuitive approach to design. His year studying under Krenov, Day says, “opened all the doors—technically, creatively, even spiritually. In the course of nine months my furniture went from the equivalent of the stone age to modern times.”

Day’s education didn’t end when he left the school. On returning to Seattle at the end of the year he went full-time into furnituremaking and set up shop in a space

shared with Bill Walker and another furniture-maker, Stewart Wurtz. Working alongside Walker helped reinforce all that Day had learned at the College of the Redwoods (CR). But Wurtz’s training had been quite different. He studied under Jere Osgood at Boston University’s Program in Artisanry. Where Krenov built unique pieces one at a time and taught a deep reliance on hand work, Osgood, who often built in batches, taught his students to rely on shaper and bending jigs for quickly making duplicate parts and rationalizing the process of producing furniture in numbers.

Over the next few years in the shop there





**“Impala Console Tables”**; Honduras mahogany, bird’s-eye maple, ebony; Eastern maple, bubinga, ebony; 29½" x 54" x 12½".

**“Impala End Table” detail**; Eastern maple, bubinga, ebony, patinated bronze; 21" x 21½" x 18½".

Like many Krenov students, who immerse themselves at the school in an extended reverie, pursuing a deeply personal and, as Krenov acknowledges, an impractical form of cabinetmaking, Day was faced at graduation with reconciling that experience with the demands of the marketplace. Doing furnituremaking professionally, Day says, “I find efficiency where I can, and then I focus my energy on the handwork that matters most to me, like hand planing and scraping fin-

ished surfaces and hand cutting dovetails.”

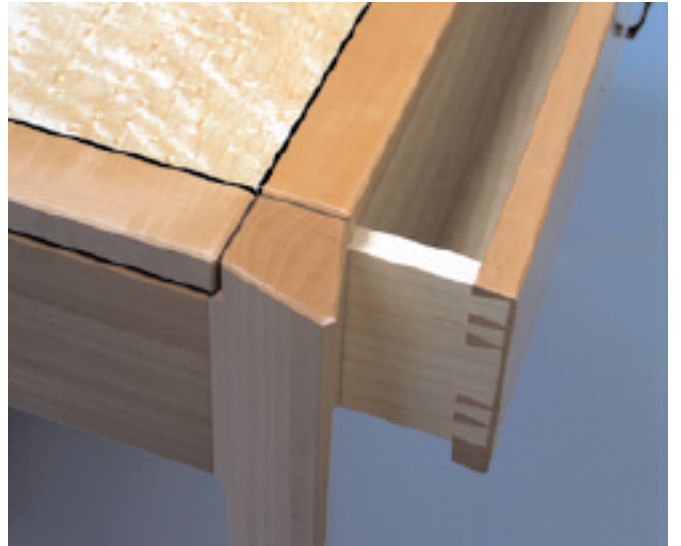
Day veneers most of his work and almost always uses shop-sawn veneers. But he has altered his method to meet the demands of business. At CR he learned to bandsaw veneers from solid stock and then scrape them flat before gluing them to the substrate. After the glue up they would be scraped out again and sanded by hand before the joinery was cut. For someone making furniture for their own enjoyment, Day says, that method is perfectly fine. But he has long since turned to cutting his veneers with more aggressive carbide bandsaw blades and smoothing them in a thickness sander. “As you know,” he says, “the profit margins aren’t the greatest to begin with in furnituremaking, so you’ve got to

find ways to expedite things.” With chairs, he now makes the parts completely by machine, but, he says, “I don’t think I sacrifice the soul of the work in the process.”

Over the years Day has had a number of assistants and apprentices, but these days he works alone. “What I like about this career,” he says, “is the making, the doing. I can run a business with other employees, but I don’t really want to.”

Day admits that the skeptics in his community college cabinetmaking school were onto something when they said that doing kitchen cabinets made a lot more financial sense than making furniture. But as he looks

**“Anthem Console Table” [and detail]**; Oregon white oak, figured maple; 29½" x 53" x 12½".



PHOTOS BY CHRIS EDEN





back on that fork in the road he knows he wouldn't make a different choice. He mentions a friend from those days who is a kitchen cabinetmaker and architectural woodworker. "He loves it," Day says, "because at the end of the workday he wants to see a mountain of boxes. That means

**"Buddhist Altar Cabinet";** bird's-eye maple, Australian pepperwood; 59" x 44" x 18".

**"Hauberg Entertainment Cabinet";** Japanese oak, partridgewood, maple, aluminum; 37" x 72" x 23".



PHOTO BY CHRIS EDEN

progress. He realized very quickly that he didn't have the patience for hand joinery and fine detail. Whereas I was at the complete other end of the spectrum. I'd rather drive a bus than make cabinets eight hours a day."

Since the early 1990s, Day has been teaching furnituremaking several nights a week at Seattle community colleges—one of them his alma mater, Seattle Central. The steady pay from teaching helps offset the unpredictability of furnituremaking income, and he also finds the teaching beneficial for getting him out of his own head



**Page residence bedroom suite in French oak, white oak, maple, patinated bronze, and Thai silk.**

twice a week. He teaches a much-condensed version of the curriculum at CR, and a number of his students have gone on to attend the full program there.

Some studio furnituremakers avoid commissions, preferring to design on a blank slate without input or expectations from anyone. Day does the opposite—he gravitates to commission work, enjoying the structure of a set of requirements and flourishing in the





give and take with an engaged client. Some of his strongest designs—including his Shainin sofa and his Wishbone dining chairs—were the fruit of multiple meetings on site and in the shop and months-long exchanges of clippings, sketches and written descriptions outlining what the client wanted and what Day thought might work.

Similarly, where another designer might sacrifice some degree of functionality or structural integrity for self-expression in a piece of furniture, Day relishes the challenge of satisfying all three together. And he says that he particularly likes the fact that furniture is not as conceptual as sculpture or painting. “You’ve got to have one foot firmly in the engineering and construction world—but then you can put the other foot in the art world. I was always attracted to blending the practical, nuts-and-bolts stuff with more aesthetic concerns.”

A complaint often lodged against the program at the College of the Redwoods is that the students all build furniture that looks just like Krenov’s. And it’s true that the furniture made in the school is typically very close aesthetically to Krenov’s. The test comes once students leave the school. Some have continued working in the Krenovian vein for years, reiterating what Krenov has done without making their own mark on it. Others have branched off radically, using their newfound skills to create forms Krenov would never have dreamed of.

Ross Day has done something in between. The style he developed has clear connections to Krenov’s work, with its characteristic hand-fashioned pulls and dovetail spacing, its jewel-like detailing and its air of quiet authority. Day’s work differs from Krenov’s, though, in being sleeker and less tactile, with smoother planes and more rigid geometry. Perhaps because he nearly always works to commission, Day’s work covers a far wider range of functionality than Krenov’s that allows more exploration of forms. And Day’s furniture is more formal, less personal and quirky than his mentor’s.

Looking back to that Sunday morning thirty years ago, it seems that James Krenov was just the teacher Day was seeking who could help him uncover and refine his talent, freeing him to imbue the work with his own creative force.

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## Ross Day Chooses His Hand Tools

I’VE ALWAYS BEEN attracted to the Eastern aesthetic, and when I first saw Japanese saws I just felt an intuitive attraction. I liked the fact that the dozuki saw’s kerf was so thin—it seemed almost surgical to me. I started using one and haven’t looked back. I’m a great believer in Japanese saws over Western saws, because I feel you have much greater control on the pull stroke than the push. The kerf is much finer and they’re much easier to control. And I feel I can do a much better job of cutting joints. The blades on Western saws are so much thicker—they have to be because if you’re pushing through something you have to have mass to go through it. The analogy is that if you were to put a blade of grass between your two fingers and pull, it would easily slide through. But if you were to push it, it wouldn’t go anywhere. That’s why the Japanese saws can have work so well with such thin blades and fine teeth.

Once you get in practice with a Japanese saw, if you start down the line the saw forms its own groove and, if you’re not deflecting your arm or making the saw do something it doesn’t want to do, it will just follow the kerf straight down the line. It takes a bit of practice, but it works.

I had a set of Japanese chisels long before I went to the College of the Redwoods. I even ground some down to get into tight spots the way Krenov did in his books. Probably no respectable Japanese carpenter would do such a thing. But I always liked that to Krenov tools weren’t sacred—they’re simply tools, and you adapt them to make them do what you need them to do. I got a goose-neck flattening chisel that came with an 18”-long handle. From job to job it keeps shrinking when I need to get into a tight space; now the handle is about 8” long.

As far as handplanes go, I cover the waterfront. I use some Japanese planes, some Krenov-style planes and some metal Western planes. I’d hate to have to choose, but if I could only have one hand plane and couldn’t have anything else, it would be Lie-Nielsen’s copy of the Stanley 60 ½ low-angle block plane. It is just an awesome tool. For years I had an old Stanley 60 ½,

which I refitted with a Hock iron, and I was perfectly happy with it. But about ten years ago I got a Lie-Nielsen 60 ½, and it’s so far superior to the original Stanley that it’s a completely different tool. It’s beautifully manufactured. The adjustments are tighter and finer, it’s got great heft and a great iron. Now I just use the old Stanley for rough work and use the Lie-Nielsen for the money cuts, so to speak.

I have several Japanese planes, and I think they are potentially the best hand planes. I say potentially because although I think they’re capable of producing the best results, they’re also the most difficult to learn how to use properly and the most

difficult to tune up and keep in tune. After using a Western plane, with its mechanical adjusters, a person might pick up one of these and think, “Oh, it’s a block of wood with an iron stuck in it.” But like so many things Japanese, its simplicity is deceptive. If you look at

it harder, it’s quite complex. It takes time to learn how to use them well. I use them all the time but I’m not going to say I’ve mastered them. I think I’m very much a student. I’m adequate with them, but I’ve seen other people using them, and they’re way above me.

Then there are the Krenov-style handmade wooden planes. I’ve made a number of them, but over the years I’ve gravitated to the metal block planes and the Japanese planes, and now there is only one Krenov-style plane that I use frequently. But this one I’m in love with. I use it exclusively for shooting veneers. I always use it on its side, which plays to its advantage, because like all the Krenov planes it’s so easy to flatten the sole and to keep one or both sides at 90° to the sole.

It’s difficult to shoot veneer with a metal plane because the blade is placed so far toward the front of the sole. And being metal, it’s difficult to square it up. But when you’re making your own wooden plane you can place the iron wherever you want. I both push and pull with this plane, so I’ve placed the iron just forward of the center. It really sings when it trims veneer, whether hand-sawn or commercial, and because I use so much veneer, I don’t know what I would do without this guy.

—RD



PHOTO BY JONATHAN BINZEN

Day’s array of hand planes, including Japanese, Krenov style, and a Lie-Nielsen.

