



Furniture on display at the Messler Gallery on the Rockport campus of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship.

QUALITY is the Sum and SUBSTANCE

**The Center
for Furniture
Craftsmanship
encourages
the development of
the skills and aesthetics
of fine woodworking.**

BY LYNDA CLANCY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM DUGAN

LIBBY SCHRUM AND AKIKO YOKOYAMA are perched on wooden stools in a spacious drafting studio; large windows behind them give way to a quiet view of fields and woods.

The two mull over their furniture models and sketches, surrounded by works in progress—an elegant cherry bookshelf, a pine cabinet, and a small stool/chair crafted from multiple layers of bent-laminated birch veneer. The latter defies convention; it is graceful as origami, yet strong enough to rest on.

“It’s a physics thing,” says Yokoyama.

She and Schrum are two of six talented woodworkers enrolled in the Studio Fellowship program at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, in West Rockport, Maine. Following months of producing innovative work and finessing their skills, they are poised to take what they’ve learned into the professional world as emerging furniture-makers.

Their work tables are a creative mess of paper, wood samples, and tools, as Schrum and Yokoyama reflect on how and

why they found themselves in a corner of Maine, at this particular turn in life, intent on the art of woodworking. It's not a simple trajectory for any number of students who come to the center; yet it is the right place to be, whether one is an emergency room physician on sabbatical, a technology consultant, an antiques restorer, a postgraduate intent on building a furniture-making career, or a seasoned woodworker polishing talents and skills.

But attract students, the school does. Since 1993, the center has experienced robust growth, having started with one instructor teaching six students at a time and now counting close to 50 instructors teaching more than 320 students annually. Located just three miles inland from Penobscot Bay, the campus includes a gallery, library, offices, and three large purpose-built shop buildings, each equipped with enough tools and machinery to populate a woodworker's paradise: benches, table



inset photograph by Lynda Clancy

Student Akiko Yokoyama and her seat of bent-laminated birch veneer. Design is stressed as much as construction at the center.

saws, jointers, planers, band saws, drill presses, lathes, grinders, sanders, chop saws, scroll saws, and assorted hand tools.

Assisted by teachers well known in

the furniture-making world, students enroll in one of four programs—week-long summer workshops, twelve-week intensives, a nine-month comprehen-



Peter Korn, founder of the center, discusses a work in progress with Libby Schrum, a Fellow.



The Messler Gallery

The Messler Gallery at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship holds exhibits year-round, with works by CFC students, as well as regional and international furniture makers, turners, and carvers. In June 2006, the gallery hosted its Annual Faculty Show—"luminous work from a cast of dubious characters who happen to be some of the finest furniture makers in the world"—according to center publicity. The show "Getting Personal: Maine Architects Design Furniture," features Maine architects who have been invited to "distill their personal aesthetics into pure furniture." It will run from September 15-November 20, 2006. Curators are architects Richard Bernhard and Phil Kaplan.

The Messler Gallery is open to the public Monday through Friday 9 a.m.-5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Visit www.woodschooll.org for information on upcoming shows and for archived photographs from shows gone by.

—L.C.

sive, and studio fellowships—for the novice, intermediate, and advanced woodworker. At a ratio of six students to one teacher, they learn how to select lumber, operate machinery and tools, and draw and design. They learn how to make curved furniture, build dovetailed drawers, carve details and decorative panels, turn spindles, flute, finish, and otherwise

The center is the right place to be, whether one is an emergency room physician on sabbatical, a technology consultant, an antiques restorer, a postgraduate intent on building a furniture-making career, or a seasoned woodworker polishing talents and skills.

create art from that which was once a tree.

The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship attracts students from across the United States and abroad. They filter into the community, unassuming and curious, grabbing coffee at the Market Basket, attending yoga

classes, and picking up staples at the local supermarket. Lauded by the government as denizens of Maine's "creative economy," the Center's alumni and faculty are swelling Maine's artisan population. But ask any of them to describe their socioeconomic impact on midcoast Maine, and it's more likely they'd rather just talk about how to craft beautiful furniture. That is exactly the artistic passion that Executive Director Peter Korn wants to encourage.

Twenty years ago, while in Colorado at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Korn was sparked by the idea of founding a school that would be, "a place, an institution, that taught fine furniture-making as a meaningful expression of the human spirit," he says. Synchronicity, or in his words, a "fortuitous combination of planning and chance," brought Korn to midcoast Maine to establish such a school. In June 1993, he welcomed his first students.

"I've lived a lot of places," Korn says, "but this is by far the place that suits me best." Now he has teachers flying in from all over the country, and the world—from Australia, England, New Zealand—each with their own specialized knowledge. "Sometimes it's the person who is running a quality business in a quiet way who makes the best teacher," Korn says.

Korn holds a degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania, but he veered almost immediately to making furniture after college in the early 1970s. "Being a history major has not had a strong influence on what happened to my life subsequently," he says.



Chair by David Frechette.

Perhaps. But Korn is an intellectually curious man, one who is just as comfortable straying into philosophical discussions as he is describing how he founded the school. The center is an amalgam of what he's learned over time, from his twelve years as a self-employed furniture-maker and six as program director at Anderson Ranch, to his four years as an associate pro-



A pair of dining chairs by James Cohen.

fessor at Drexel University. At its base also lie values imparted to him as a boy attending the Quaker Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia—that what matters in life are one’s spiritual well-being and service to the community, and that fulfillment is not to be measured by worldly success and fame.

While the center has become a leader for the increasing number of furniture-making schools popping up in the United States and Canada, Korn remains intent on the artistic nature of its mission. It’s not a trade school, he says.

That emphasis on artistic expression may be why Yokoyama

and Schrum both admit they are prone these days to dreaming about furniture design.

“I wake up in the middle of the night,” Yokoyama says, laughing at how her life is consumed by design, “and think about the joint, and wouldn’t it be cool to do it this way.”

Yokoyama left a high-paying corporate position in Atlanta to pursue her affinity with wood, propelled by a desire to work with her hands. She grew up in Japan, earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Williams College in Massachusetts, and then found herself working for Coca-Cola, earning a sizable salary. Now, she is happily afflicted by “creative stress.”

But will Schrum and Yokoyama make a living designing and crafting furniture?

Schrum hopes so, and is considering opening her own workshop in Maine. A growing number of former students are also working in Maine, quietly opening studios, or joining the staffs of already established furniture-makers.

Originally from Texas, Schrum now owns a house in Camden. Drawn not



All students in the center’s nine-month course begin by building a personal tool case.

once, but three times, to the center, she has completed the school’s twelve-week intensive and a summer assistantship; currently, she is a studio fellow. Plus she has completed a masters degree at the Rhode Island School of Design.

“You have to have a really good idea,” Schrum said, “and determine what your

“Invert,” a cherry and maple table by T.J. Mifflin.



market niche will be.” She is understandably tentative in deciding when, where, and how she will proceed to the next business phase. Maine’s economy itself is tentative. On the other hand, Maine is populated by art patrons willing to support many facets of creative expression.

Maine also appreciates residents such as Schrum, who create value-added products for the economy, especially using wood, the state’s biggest natural resource. And the midcoast economy finds gold in the center’s growth, for an enrollment of 320 means more apartment, house, and room rentals, as well as more people eating at restaurants and shopping locally.

Korn is savvy to the effect his school has on the immediate midcoast. “There is,” he says, “a growing woodworking community here, for which the school is a catalyst and an anchor. At some point down the road, midcoast Maine may well earn a national reputation as a center for fine woodworking.”

Despite the center’s recent and intense growth, fueled by a successful \$2.4 million capital campaign that concluded in 2004, Korn is not planning another such spurt. His immediate goals are to make the programs he has better and better. “I just want to run an incredibly good school,” he says. ✨

Lynda Clancy is a freelance writer. She lives with her family in Rockport, Maine.

For More Information:

Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, 25 Mill Street, Rockport, ME 04856. 207-594-5611; www.woodschooll.org.