

News and Views from
WoodCentral.com
by Ellis Walentine

In a recent and spirited debate, one of WoodCentral's regular visitors suggested that "price is something of a badge authenticating the piece." Red flags went up for Barbara Siddiqui, WoodCentral's book reviewer and editorial assistant. "What about intrinsic art value?" she asked. Over the next few days or so, our messageboard racked up 56 replies on this seemingly innocuous topic. Many of them, from both professionals and amateurs, were thoughtful and impassioned. Here is a sampling of the conversation ...

"How does the saying go? 'Some people know only the cost of everything, and the value of nothing!'"

"It's the subjective side of 'You get what they pay for.'"

"I've heard it said about a well-known mainframe computer manufacturer that 'You can buy better, but you can't pay more!' I think this might be the same syndrome."

"Many folks equate quality with price. If you don't ask enough they will assume it's not of high quality. Also to a lot of people, it's a status symbol, and I, for sure, never would want to change that idea. It's what keeps a lot of folks in business."

"*Intrinsic value* supposes there is an innate value that is built into every piece of work. This is an idealist notion, for example, that there is an ideal table, an ideal chair, etc., which we all try to build—there is an idea of tableness toward which we all strive. This also presupposes a highly structured society in which market values have no place."

"While it is true that you can pay a lot for junk, I think that it is also true that quality is going to cost money. This is a good case for knowing what you are buying and what makes it valuable. For some, the price paid has 'snob appeal' regardless of the actual quality. For others, they are willing to pay the price to get craftsmanship and quality."

"You have to pay enough for a person to do good quality work. You have to trust they can do a good job, that you're not going to have problems with the piece in the future, and that you got what you paid for. There's also the 'vision' thing, your ability to see in your mind's eye the final result and know the customer will be happy."

"I don't think art has a measurable, absolute value that determines what it's worth. Art affects people differently. If we're talking qualitatively, I think it is an individual thing that derives from each

individual's interpretation and appreciation of the piece. If we're talking quantitatively (i.e., monetary value), it depends on a lot of factors, including, as some have said here, the reputation of the maker and what the market will bear."

"Obviously some art works, such as furniture, ideas and books, last because we value them as beautiful and useful. We like to use the term *intrinsic* when dealing with things we truly value, because the term 'market value' seems crass and shallow."

"I think this discussion turns on the difference between monetary value, which is a function of market forces, and artistic value, which is a fairly subjective assessment. Work by legendary furniture makers has a certain grace, style, and level of workmanship that most of us would like, regardless of who made it. But, to me, they don't constitute intrinsic value, or, if they do, it has little to do with monetary value."

"Value isn't a concrete concept. The concept has just reverted to price equates to value; and price is just what consumers are willing to pay for an item, at a price that is greater or equal to the amount a producer is willing to sell it for."

"Another factor here is innovation. An imitator's workmanship may exceed that of the master, but every attempted copy is viewed forever after as being in the 'style' of the originator. This is why imitators work will never fetch the kind of money an original will. It may also be why there are so few real stars in the world of furniture making, even when there are evidently many master craftsmen."

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"I just got a Williams-Sonoma catalog in the mail and glanced through it. You can buy 12 marshmallows for \$20, or a toaster for \$499. Who buys these things? And what do they want that's made out of wood?"

"Regarding a yardstick for artistic value, verbal praise is always wonderful, but it's not enough if you're trying to make a living at studio furniture. When you're struggling to pay the bills and keep gas in the truck, it's damn nice to get some monetary validation for the work. A perfect validation is someone who coughs, falls over, comes to, then sputters after hearing the price, but who then agrees to the price, pays the deposit, forks over the final payment, and then gushes over the piece when it's delivered. Without price, there is little or no notoriety; and without notoriety, there is no fame; and without fame, there is little price; and without price, just how much value is there?"

"The whole 'price > notoriety > fame > price' thing is too circuitous a generality. Nowhere in that equation have you accounted for a quality of work. And if you say that is a 'given,' well, then, there is my Value...a quality that can meteorically launch a piece to the top of the heap and survive its maker by many generations, regardless whether it's sold at a yard sale by the unknowing or at Christie's. I guess we need critics, but they are supposed to be knowledgeable individuals that the rest of us can follow, or see the reasons for in terms of selection."

"We are looking for some means of defining the quality of a particular piece. The economic yardstick doesn't work, because it is not an accurate reflection of the quality of a particular piece of furniture. If price and quality were related, then the pressboard furniture at Wal-Mart would sell for \$1.95 instead of the price they get for it."

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"The word *value* carries with it a lot of intangibles that can vary greatly. Sometimes the dollars involved are the only, albeit imperfect, way to keep score. Notoriety, fame, and reputation most definitely are integral factors in the generation of that score."

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"Well respected artists/craftspeople have to develop a reputation to gain both recognition and a following. This develops into income, more work, and greater recognition, and the wheel continues to turn. How effectively one gains this recognition thru doing shows, having an open studio, being featured in any of the media, teaching at recognized schools of either arts or the crafts, all impact on how well and how quickly this happens. Critics and other types of

recognized authorities (real or charlatan) also have a part to play in this recognition. I suspect that many truly talented artists in wood (and other fields) never will gain recognition because either they fail to market or do it poorly. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?"

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But, even if the vast majority of people feel strongly positive about a piece or a style, I don't think we can attribute intrinsic value to it. It's all relative." "Price is always subjective. Is a Sam Maloof rocking chair really worth \$20K? Was Michael Jordan really worth \$80 million per year? I suspect that Sam Maloof is very satisfied to get \$20K per rocking chair, and his clients are very satisfied to pay it. The Chicago Bulls were very happy to pay Michael Jordan the millions he received, as were the companies for which Jordan was spokesman, and I am pretty sure Michael was happy to put those millions into his pocket."

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"If the only value that art and craft had were monetary, there would be no museums. We are all affected by certain things much more deeply than our pocketbook."

"When my kids make a picture or object, the object becomes valuable to me because of them! They made it, so I value it. It reminds me of them. I made a pen/pencil set for my youngest daughter. She values them because Daddy made them for her!"

Participate in future surveys at www.woodcentral.com