

## ADAPTING TO THE REAL WORLD

*Our survey question this month has to do with real-world, income-producing woodworking. I've long felt that hobbyists aren't burdened with the same constraints—such as time, cost, and other resources—as professionals who must make a living with the fruits of their woodworking labors. I was curious about how the perceptions varied between the two groups, so I asked a two-sided question: **What concessions, if any, do you professional woodworkers make on paying jobs or commissions that you wouldn't make if you had all the time in the world? And, if you hobbyists had to do your woodworking for a living, how do you think your approach would differ?***

"I'd build more jigs to help streamline and simplify procedures, get a bigger shop space, and build in more comfort in the shop. I'd get a lathe and learn how to turn."

"An amateur can take all the time in the world to make something. A professional can't afford that luxury; it's what shows that counts. Many period furniture pieces contain crudely made parts that weren't meant to be seen. Time is money, and centuries haven't changed that."

"I am designing and making high-end furniture. One of the biggest concessions in how I make things is paying attention to non-visible areas. I now finish the backs of case pieces and pay attention to details under a tabletop. My clients will look and will want to see quality. Something new to me is logging my time. It's amazing how much less time I goof around in the shop when I'm on the clock."

"I work as an engineer for a woodworking company, roughly 30 employees. The biggest concession I see is that the 'feel' of the wood is ignored by most people. Grain in the wood is totally ignored. Also, time and materials are money. If you can find hardware that costs 50¢ less, and looks as good, you use it. In my shop at home, it takes me a year or two to build a piece. Here, it is the process that counts."

"If I had to do my woodworking for a living, what I would do different is starve to death."

"My amateur vision shows a dedicated climate controlled finish room, as well as a mountain of paper that tracks every minute and every ounce of material that goes into each piece. I'd need a dedicated design area, and physical samples of the finished woods that I'd propose to use."

"My greatest frustration is not being able to persuade a patron to finance a great piece when I get hold of one in my mind. Given all the time and money I'd like, I would opt for the masterpiece, and although differing in style, each would combine the ornamental complexity of a Chippendale with the mechanical genius of a Sheraton. I crave complexity."

"I do part time work as a maker of specialty woodworking hand tools. Since I sell both retail and wholesale, efficiency is important. I've shifted to processing all of my materials in batches and worked hard at developing templates where practical. I've made special tooling to help reduce manufacturing time. The most difficult decisions are in deciding what is a minimum acceptable amount of figure in the exotic woods that I use. Customers are paying for top quality, so the decision is a hard one to balance waste vs. looks."

"As a hobbyist, I focus on high quality commodities. If I was doing it for a living, I know there would be lots of competition and price point issues to deal with. I would find a niche market with either little competition or repeatability and high margins. Cabinetry and brightwork for large boats, libraries for condos and age-restricted communities, or milling custom profile hardwood trim for high-end homebuilders."

"One thing I'd do differently is find my niche in the industry, focus, refine my dollar consuming processes, and concentrate on building my reputation in that specific area. Another thing that I'd do is learn how to say 'no.' When we build something that we've never built before, the time spent designing, building, scratching our heads, and running to the store for the screws that we forgot results in our making \$1 an hour. As fun as that may be, those jobs would have to stop."

"If I was doing paid work full-time, I'd utilize lots of templates so that I could turn out consistent pieces without reinventing a design each time. I would try to settle on a line of furniture that could be made, stocked in small quantities, and built again as pieces were sold. I would also not underestimate the costs of doing business and price accordingly. I'd try to find a niche market, possibly selling through interior designers or specialty shops."

"Most furniture made by professionals is a compromise between what they are capable of producing, and what is most salable, economic, and reasonable. I tend to build pieces for me. If I was trying to make a living at this, I would have to work steadily, rather than when the spirit moves me."

"I was never really a hobby woodworker. I began with a lathe and few Sears tools and started doing sample turnings for several woodworking factories in the area. I worked in borrowed buildings until I rented a building in town. To bridge the gap, I took evening woodworking classes to gain access to more machinery. My production items have been bookbinding tools for 15 years. I've turned some odd things over the years and got paid for all of it."

"If I had to do woodworking full-time, I'd watch the job of doing something I love be sucked completely out of it. I did kid's shelf units for some friends. The first was fun and came out great. The second was good, because I came up with ways to fine tune the construction. The third was boring, and the fourth is sitting in my shop half done."

"When I'm helping someone out, they pay for the lumber, and I get to play and improve my skills. I want my name associated with quality, not with the notion that I saved some time and turned out some particle board piece of junk. My commissioned pieces are for the fun of it, and it pays accordingly."

"Feast or famine. Last year, I had paying jobs. When January hit, everything dried up for over two months, so I started on something of my own. Sure enough as I am knee deep in personal sawdust, the outside requests started firming up. Now I have enough for a while—I think."

"As I've gotten the family necessities built, I've been able to take time for some of the more extensive heirloom type projects. There's an area of woodworking that fascinates me—luthier, of violins and violas. It looks possible if a guy could establish a good reputation as a master."

"Most concessions that I make are to speed things up: pocket screws, biscuits, cope and stick frames, use of machinery, limiting curves, a limit on design time, and focusing time on where it will make a great first impression. I buy the best materials that I can justify to the client, including top notch hardware. It is often cheaper in the end."

"I am familiar with production work, and if I did turning as a vocation, I would practice my less proficient skills. Practice is repetition, and with repetition comes speed. Second would be to rearrange my shop/studio to better accommodate production line work, such as adding more tables for holding stock in various stages of completion. Next, I'd look at what tools I use most, then buy more of the same, to reduce the break in the flow when having to go to the grinder. I would check the market for the most salable items and look at the collectibles market. I'd stay away from that market which is overflowing with mass produced items from China and India."

"I make sawdust for a living, mostly decks, but also some built-ins. I approach every job as if I was building it for myself, so I don't make any concessions. I charge enough money so I never feel rushed. I'm a one-man operation, so there is no payroll, and it helps that I enjoy what I do."

---

News and Views from

WoodCentral.com

by Ellis Valentine

### **ADAPTING TO THE REAL WORLD**

Our survey question this month has to do with real-world, income producing woodworking. I've long felt that hobbyists aren't burdened with the same constraints—such as time, cost, and other resources—as professionals who must make a living with the fruits of their woodworking labors. I was curious about how the perceptions varied between the two groups, so I asked a two-sided question: What concessions, if any, do you professional woodworkers make on paying jobs or commissions that you wouldn't make if you had all the time in the world? And, if you hobbyists had to do your woodworking for a living, how do you think your approach would differ?

"I'd build more jigs to help streamline and simplify procedures, get a bigger shop space, and build in more comfort in the shop. I'd get a lathe and learn how to turn."

"An amateur can take all the time in the world to make something. A professional can't afford that luxury; it's what shows that counts. Many period furniture pieces contain crudely made parts that weren't meant to be seen. Time is money, and centuries haven't changed that."

"I am designing and making high-end furniture. One of the biggest concessions in how I make things is paying attention to non-visible areas. I now finish the backs of case pieces and pay attention to details under a tabletop. My clients will look and will want to see quality. Something new to me is logging my time. It's amazing how much less time I goof around in the shop when I'm on the clock."

"I work as an engineer for a woodworking company, roughly 30 employees. The biggest concession I see is that the 'feel' of the wood is ignored by most people. Grain in the wood is totally ignored. Also, time and materials are money. If you can find hardware that costs 50¢ less, and looks as good, you use it. In my shop at home, it takes me a year or two to build a piece. Here, it is the process that counts."

"If I had to do my woodworking for a living, what I would do different is starve to death."

"My amateur vision shows a dedicated climate controlled finish room, as well as a mountain of paper that tracks every minute and every ounce of material that goes into each piece. I'd need a dedicated design area, and physical samples of the finished woods that I'd propose to use."

"My greatest frustration is not being able to persuade a patron to finance a great piece when I get hold of one in my mind. Given all the time and money I'd like, I would opt for the masterpiece, and although differing in style, each would combine the ornamental complexity of a Chippendale with the mechanical genius of a Sheraton. I crave complexity."

"I do part time work as a maker of specialty woodworking hand tools. Since I sell both retail and wholesale, efficiency is important. I've shifted to processing all of my materials in batches and worked hard at developing templates where practical. I've made special tooling to help reduce manufacturing time. The most difficult decisions are in deciding what is a minimum acceptable amount of figure in the exotic woods that I use. Customers are paying for top quality, so the decision is a hard one to balance waste vs. looks."

"As a hobbyist, I focus on high quality commodities. If I was doing it for a living, I know there would be lots of competition and price point issues to deal with. I would find a niche market with either little competition or repeatability and high margins. Cabinetry and brightwork for large boats, libraries for condos and age-restricted communities, or milling custom profile hardwood trim for high-end homebuilders."

### **Page 10**

"One thing I'd do differently is find my niche in the industry, focus, refine my dollar consuming processes, and concentrate on building my reputation in that specific area. Another thing that I'd do is learn how to say 'no'. When we build something that we've never built before, the time spent designing, building, scratching our heads, and running to

the store for the screws that we forgot results in our making \$1 an hour. As fun as that may be, those jobs would have to stop."

"If I was doing paid work full-time, I'd utilize lots of templates so that I could turn out consistent pieces without reinventing a design each time. I would try to settle on a line of furniture that could be made, stocked in small quantities, and built again as pieces were sold. I would also not underestimate the costs of doing business and price accordingly. I'd try to find a niche market, possibly selling through interior designers or specialty shops."

"Most furniture made by professionals is a compromise between what they are capable of producing, and what is most salable, economic, and reasonable. I tend to build pieces for me. If I was trying to make a living at this, I would have to work steadily, rather than when the spirit moves me."

"I was never really a hobby woodworker. I began with a lathe and few Sears tools and started doing sample turnings for several woodworking factories in the area. I worked in borrowed buildings until I rented a building in town. To bridge the gap, I took evening woodworking classes to gain access to more machinery. My production items have been bookbinding tools for 15 years. I've turned some odd things over the years and got paid for all of it."

"If I had to do woodworking full-time, I'd watch the job of doing something I love be sucked completely out of it. I did kid's shelf units for some friends. The first was fun and came out great. The second was good, because I came up with ways to fine tune the construction. The third was boring, and the fourth is sitting in my shop half done." "When I'm helping someone out, they pay for the lumber, and I get to play and improve my skills. I want my name associated with quality, not with the notion that I saved some time and turned out some particle board piece of junk. My commissioned pieces are for the fun of it, and it pays accordingly."

"Feast or famine. Last year, I had paying jobs. When January hit, everything dried up for over two months, so I started on something of my own. Sure enough as I am knee deep in personal sawdust, the outside requests started firming up. Now I have enough for a while-I think."

"As I've gotten the family necessities built, I've been able to take time for some of the more extensive heirloom type projects. There's an area of woodworking that fascinates me-luthier, of violins and violas. It looks possible if a guy could establish a good reputation as a master." "Most concessions that I make are to speed things up: pocket screws, biscuits, cope and stick frames, use of machinery, limiting curves, a limit on design time, and focusing time on where it will make a great first impression. I buy the best materials that I can justify to the client, including top notch hardware. It is often cheaper in the end."

"I am familiar with production work, and if I did turning as a vocation, would practice my less proficient skills. Practice is repetition, and with repetition comes speed. Second would be to rearrange my shop/studio to better accommodate production line work, such as adding more tables for holding stock in various stages of completion. Next, I'd look at what tools I use most, then buy more of the same, to reduce the break in the flow when having to go to the grinder. I would check the market for the most salable items and look at the collectibles market. I'd stay away from that market which is overflowing with mass produced items from China and India."

"I make sawdust for a living, mostly decks, but also some built-ins. I approach every job as if I was building it for myself, so I don't make any concessions. I charge enough money so I never feel rushed. I'm a one-man operation, so there is no payroll, and it helps that I enjoy what I do."

### **Woodworker West**

July-August, 2005