



HAND TOOLS VERSUS POWER TOOLS

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"It depends upon the reason I'm woodworking. If I am doing an 'involuntary' project (building a stairway in my new house), it is power tools all the way. When I do woodworking for therapy, I try to go all hand tools. Sometimes, I'll cheat a little, but if the end product is the goal, I use power tools; if therapy is the goal, I use hand tools."

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"For me, the time saved using a machine is lost by the amount of time it takes to set up a machine. In addition, the cuts I make coming off a hand saw are as clean or cleaner than the cuts coming off my machines. I'm sure that there's some point where making repeat cuts would give a machine the advantage, but I haven't hit that point yet."

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News and Views from

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by Ellis Valentine

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"It depends upon the reason I'm woodworking. If I am doing an 'in-voluntary' project (building a stairway in my new house), it is power tools all the way. When I do woodworking for therapy, I try to go all hand tools. Sometimes, I'll cheat a little, but if the end product is the goal, I use power tools; if therapy is the goal, I use hand tools." "One of the important drivers in doing flat work is the look desired at the end. A tabletop sanded to a 400-grit finish would look quite different than one that is hand planed. Those of us who turn can only get the rough effect by putting in a ding or two as we go along." "For me, the time saved using a machine is lost by the amount of time it takes to set up a machine. In addition, the cuts I make coming off a hand saw are as clean or cleaner than the cuts coming off my machines. I'm sure that there's some point where making repeat cuts would give a machine the advantage, but I haven't hit that point yet."

"We think that we are quite clever when we use hand tools to make a box or a drawer. It is an accomplishment to be admired, but let's give the credit to those who recognized the need for a specific tool and actually made that tool for the first time. A person who chooses to build a piece of furniture using only old hand tools is merely projecting an image of his/her choice, making a statement. And so, it is with those who choose to build using a combination of power and hand tools. Most of us like to show off and brag and then apologize for bragging. We are making a personal statement regarding our skills and knowledge."

"I respect and love my hand tools. I respect and fear my power tools. Part of it is about pace. Part is about getting things done. My health and age enter into it, too. I find setting up machines more visually challenging than I used to. As for historical authenticity, I find it amusing, if not fetishistic, wood theater or exhibitionist cosplay, and I'd include tool worshipping Japonisme in this melange. I don't give a gnat's fundament whether a tool's particularly old. I'll leave that to the collectors and will equip myself with so-called user versions. As for hand tools conveying some sort of purity in the work ethic or quality in the final product, it's a load of hooey. Mediocrity comes in every flavor, venue, and price point. Historical authenticity's never an excuse for bad design or shoddy execution, and certainly no excuse for arrogant pricing."

"I suppose if you really want to go basic, one could make a heck of a lot of furniture with a knife and perhaps some form of mallet to force the cutting edge through the stock. After that, it depends on time, budget, enjoyment of the task, and personal preference. If one is making a set of kitchen cabinets on commission, the knife and mallet process may cause client relations issues."

"The economics of machines tend to control and limit a design. While machines shine at repetitive work, that work has to match the capabilities of the machine and/or commercially available tooling. Aesthetics and function are often secondary to machine considerations. I suspect most people who've built projects from the plans of others make changes simply because they're not tooled up the same as the original designer."

"When I embarked on the woodworking journey, I started gathering a basic set of tools, both powered and non, well before I learned to use them, because I listened to a grizzled old man who said, 'Get tools first, then learn to use them, then introduce them to the wood, because you don't want to insult it.' That puts me squarely in the middle gray area, because I can use power tools like a champ, but I try to do the same things with hand tools because of the

history of it all." "I don't do woodworking for therapy. It's mostly about being creative, making some items that I want or need, and I prefer to do it from salvaged materials whenever possible. Using a machine makes you more of a machine operator than a wood crafter. Using machines does require skill and knowledge, but mostly put toward knowing how not to get hurt by the machine."

"It's simple. I use what I have. I decided early on I didn't want to deal with noise, dust collection, three-phase power, upgrading my electrical service, etc. I've got a few hand held power tools, but I actually enjoy preparing stock by hand. It's great exercise and is very relaxing."

"Aside from my chairmaking, which I do all by hand, I make the decision based on what is best for the project and what makes sense. It does not make sense for me to dimension lumber by hand. Way too much time involved, and the work does not add to the project. Cutting dovetails by hand and final surface planing do add to the project." "I like using hand tools. It's challenging, and it's fun. I'm often surprised and disappointed by my fellow woodworkers when I see posts on forums asking 'what's the easiest way to...? Why does it always have to be easy? What is wrong with doing something the fun way, or the interesting way, or the challenging way, or heaven help us. the hard way?"

"I am one of those people who think a 3-HP router is a hand tool." "My math teacher in college laid down an important fundamental idea: don't do any more work that you have to. I would add that it must not impinge on the quality of a product."

"My woodworking mentor said, 'If the wood is bigger than the saw, the saw goes to the wood. If the saw is bigger than the wood, the wood goes to the saw. I must add, some of my work is on islands further out than this island, so a lot of work is done by hand. Have you tried carting around your stationary shop tools in and out of boats and up the hill?"

"Dimensioning lumber should be done with power tools. Carving and other fine work-like marquetry or inlay should be done by hand. Part of the problem is: do you have every tool? I don't, so hand tools come into play until I can afford the power versions. One hand tool that I use a lot before and after the power version is the broom. Pesky sawdust!"

"I don't like using power saws. I will never feel comfortable with them because they go through digits as easily as wood. I am a hobbyist. Very important distinction. My time isn't typically used in the shop in a business sense."

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"That's why I love lathe work. You get the best of both worlds. You get to use a hand tool (gouge) while using a power tool (lathe) all at the same time. How can you ask for more?"

"I think you should learn to use both. I judge how serious someone is

about woodworking by whether he/she took the time to learn how to properly tune and use a hand plane. I can't imagine how to do really good work without them."

"I am an engineer by education and trade, and not an artisan. I find it fascinating to figure out how to best automate a process, building jigs, and developing methods that will get the job done. Personally, I find hand tools a necessary evil."

"I use hand tools exclusively. I let my apprentices and workers in my shop do the surfacing; good practice for them, less work for me. I and a few others out there actually make hand made woodwork and furniture. All other claims to be 'hand made' need an asterisk." "I'm a hobbyist and have little time in the shop, so the fastest way wins, if a hand tool is faster, it gets the nod, but I've become much more power tool-centric as time has passed."

"I'm pretty casual about the method of roughing in projects. As they

get further along I become more cautious. I tend to really slow down as a project nears completion, use a lot more finesse, and hand tools. I'm not happy when I gouge or screw up then."

"My selection of tools to use for any given procedure has changed as I have transitioned from hobby woodworker to professional. I have now established a woodworking business. My clients are unaware of the methods that I use and are generally unconcerned about the hand tool/ power tool equation. My choice is simple: choose the tools that do

the best job in the most efficient way. Experience tends to be the best judge of what tools to use and when."

"I'm a Neanderdabbler. For me, it's a matter of both economics and expediency. So many people have never learned the hand skills that would make a one-off job much cheaper, not to mention better. It doesn't need to be that way."

"Hand tools? What's that? I even mounted forked tails on my hand planes so they wouldn't be lonesome."

"I generally rely on hand tools for fine fit and finish work, which often begins with power tools and ends with hand tools. There doesn't seem to be a crisp formula or set of rules that dictates when I use either; it depends on the work, on how big a hurry I'm in, on how confident I am in my skills with the tools, and sometimes on the look I want. Oh, and sometimes on how recently I sharpened the hand tool I want to use."

"There's an argument out there that if you don't have the equipment to work efficiently, you effectively pay for it anyway in your time and labor and general inefficiency. Is speed always that important? Only the individual woodworker, whether pro or amateur, can answer that question."

"There is a market, especially on the East Coast, for handmade period furniture. There are customers who appreciate furniture made entirely by hand and are willing to pay for it. In my area, if I made furniture entirely by hand with hand tools and charged what I needed for the effort, I would never sell a single piece. Go figure." Participate in future surveys at WoodCentral.com Send suggestions for survey topics to webmaster@woodcentral.com Thanks to our Editorial Assistant Barb Siddiqui for her work on this column,