



WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

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A Great Start to a Perfect Finish

by Art Hofmann

February's meeting will take place on Tuesday, February 4th, 2014 at Rancho Cotate High School on Snyder Lane in Rohnert Park. It will feature Ron Ashby, the owner of Shellac.Net, and an expert woodfinisher and seller of high end supplies.

Ron Ashby has been in and around woodworking since childhood, and comes from a long line of woodworkers whose ancestry goes back to Kent in England. Thus, he grew up in his father's woodworking shop, and though he has made forays into other areas, he always reverted to woodworking and finishing. The other trades that attracted him were photography, where he functioned as a professional, and, for a time, silver-smithing, two other areas that rely on visual effect. After a stint in the Air Force as a photographer, he moved to Mendocino in the late 'sixties where he set up shop, specializing in custom furniture as well as finishing/refinishing and architectural woodwork.

Over time, finishing emerged as a special focus. The finish, he says, is a woodworker's calling card. A supply business began as a sideline, to bring a source



of quality materials to the West Coast. Along the way, Ron also did antique restoration and repair as well, and taught finishing and finish repair classes for over twelve years. Consulting, and setting up finishing operations for small custom shops and factories around the US, Indonesia and England "has been an education in itself" says Ron. Today, his business, Shellac.Net Wood

Finish Supply is a growing enterprise that demands the full attention of himself and his wife, Jackie. Shellac.net is devoted to providing quality traditional materials to woodworkers and finishers. If Ron gets the chance, though, he fires up his shop and gets busy again. Woodworking is in his blood.

Directions

The meeting will begin at 7 P.M. in the Woodshop at Rancho Cotate High School. Bill Hartman, the Woodshop Instructor, is our host for the evening. He has been there for over a dozen years and enjoys his job. Directions: Rancho's campus is close to Sonoma State University. Coming from the north, take Rohnert Park Expressway to Snyder Lane, and turn south. The parking lot is on the north end of the campus. Once parked, look to the east, towards S.S.U. for a flag pole and walk in that direction until you see the plainly designated Woodshop in the northeast corner of the campus. You'll recognize it right away from dust collecting cyclone and dumpster in front of it.

January 14 Meeting with Carver Ian Agrell Sets Bar High

by Art Hofmann and Walter Doll

Our chairman, Bob Moyer, started the meeting just about 7 pm straight up. After wishing us all a Happy New Year, he asked about guests, and indeed, there were several visitors: Barbara from Los Angeles, Jerry Cullen from Novato, and Michael Obolsky, a protégé of Greg Zahl.

Bob then initiated a Q & A period, something he has been wanting to try, a brief time at the beginning of every meeting in which a member can present a problem or an issue that he/she needs help with. Jim Heimbach showed us a lapstrake Viking boat-shaped cradle, one of two he has made. He is happy with the outcome, but it required many hours to produce, and he was looking for a faster method. He explained how he had built it, and there were suggestions and some back and forth relating to the process, though no one had an outright solution. Greg Zahl recommended that Jim contact Ejler Hjorth-Westh, the teacher and chair maker from Elk, who made a chest in a similar style.



Scott Borski

Greg Zahl also had an announcement: he will teach a class on Marquetry in the spring, March 22 and 23, 9:00 am to 5:30 pm. Fee: \$300.00. (762.6106, wood-cookie@earthlink.net). Bill Hartman's announcement that he had gotten married on December 31st received wild and unfettered applause.

Mike Wallace extolled the virtues of a new Popular Woodworking website, Shop Class, which he finds very useful. Bill Taft told us that Woodworker West

magazine has photos of the winners of last year's *Artistry in Wood*. Don Naples told us that Carl Johnson is in the hospital with a foot problem, is doing OK, but has five weeks of rehab before him. Chuck Quibell mentioned the opening of a show at the Petaluma Center for the Arts featuring the sculpture of John de Marchi and Michael Cooper. Bob Moyer introduced Michael Wallace as our new communications director, who will revamp our doddering website and connect us with social media, mainly Facebook. Bob formally thanked Don Ajello and Linda Illsley, though neither were present, for hosting the holiday party in early December. He then introduced Walter Doll, who has volunteered to take notes of the board meetings, and officially confirmed his position with a unanimous voice vote of the present members, who numbered in the range of twenty-five to thirty. Bob then asked for volunteers to augment the secretarial pool that will take and write up notes for the general meetings. This thankfully resulted in two members stepping up to cover the job, Terrie Noll and Michael Burwen. Bob

asked treasurer Bill Taft about our financial situation. Jim Heimbach had just transferred the books to Bill, and he reported that the association has approximately \$5K at this point. Bill reminded us that it is renewal time. There is a steady flow of renewals coming in, and if you haven't re-upped, please do so.

Bob introduced Scott Borski, our host, who welcomed us to his shop, a new venue for us. Scott and his assistant Mark Tindley, a young woodworker from England, have been crafting furniture on spec and having it photographed with the aim of establishing a website that will attract future business. He hopes to attract designers. His target is the luxury, high end market. There were a number of pieces around that he pointed to, one of which was especially eye-catching, an eighteen foot conference table in American elm,

the slab for which had originated from Evan Shively's Arborica.

Art Hofmann then told us about our next meeting, at Rancho Cotate High School, which will feature Ron Ashby from Napa where he owns Shellac.Net. Shellac and traditional finishes will be the topic.



Ian Agrell

Art then introduced the evening's presenter, the carver Ian Agrell, who has built an international business with a shop in Richmond, just down the way in the East Bay, one in the UK, and one in India. Ian told us that he got his start sculpting and carving as a child. His parents took him to church, where he was fascinated by the carvings in the wood panels in screens and pews. He won competitions for his animal figures as a youngster in Somerset and Devon in England's West Country. This was around 1961. He says that he visualizes in three dimensions. He has always loved carving and still does. He will be seventy in several years, and has no intention of retiring. Making a living at carving is very difficult, but Ian has been very lucky. He does not get small commissions, not the fireplace mantels that might bring in five thousand dollars, but rather very large commissions that bring in great sums of money, and involve a team of workman beginning with

designers, then enlisting carvers and installers. Ian feels himself very fortunate to have “drifted up” to this. “It is such refined territory,” he maintains, “if you want to make a living at it.” The small jobs are all but gone, especially since the recession, but if you are prepared, the big stuff is out there. He gets commissions in the hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars: a library for Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos for example, or an organ case for a church in St. Paul, MN that is several stories tall. He recently bid on a job (that he did not get) to decorate the apartment of some Russian billionaires in New York for five million dollars. He was approached recently at Sutro Architects in San Francisco by someone who has work in Boston, where a client is building a 20K sq. ft. house, and who maintains that on this job, “money is no object.” There is a high end Russian market, and a high end Indian market, as well. There are shoals to be navigated, however. Often clients don’t know what they want, but they know they want something refined, and they want it right away. This involves sessions with designers and architects. Frequently the most important factor is to be ready to deliver as soon as possible, a goal that is difficult to reconcile with quality workmanship. The reason carving is expensive is that it takes a long time.



Ian brought a variety of sample boards with him that were decorated with carvings based on historical periods: a “Louis series” based on the succession of French

kings of that name, a copy of a capital based on an Egyptian one circa 250 B.C., an Art Nouveau frieze, and many others. In response to Bill Taft’s enquiry about sources for his designs, Ian responded that he had a large library of old books that he dearly loves. He



had brought one of his favorites, a Dover book entitled *Historic Ornament: A Pictorial Archive* by C. B. Griesbach, which has hundreds of designs that he readily helps himself to as necessary. In response to another question, Ian said that he tries to get about \$65 an hour for his work overall, about half of what a plumber makes. On the basis of one of the sample boards, he estimated that it would take him about two and half weeks considering design, layout, and the carving itself.

The way that he has evolved to deal with all of these problems, i.e. producing large amounts of elaborate carving in a relatively short period, is by designing the work with a small team

here in California and in the UK, and then shipping the job off to India, where he has had a presence since the mid-nineties. It was at that time that he bought some land in the area of Calcutta, bought a house, and constructed a building to house a workshop where he has thirty employees, many of whom he has personally trained, and who have been with him for decades. His “lads” can move through a job very quickly, the most



proficient doing the roughing out, others specializing in the various stages necessary to achieve refinement. Most are Bengalis. Ian has put money aside for slow periods, and keeps them busy doing samples. He emphasizes that he does not exploit his employees for the benefit of the rich who acquire the carving.

World-wide shipping and communications make all this possible. He talks with his manager in India via Skype, telling him as much as possible about the project. Wood is shipped via Fed Ex, with whom, due to the volume of his business, he has a 60% discount. With the carving done, the work is shipped to the job site, where it is installed by Ian and another team. This is the way he has made his business work in the current environment.

When asked about applied finishes, Agrell acknowledged the current popularity of the minimal finish or even no finish at all, but he said there are still occasionally customers who like carvings in white, which was very much the style in the past, as for example in France, where palaces such as Versailles abound

in white carvings. Speaking about a Sheraton panel, Ian emphasized the necessity of layout and drawing. Asked by prospective carvers what they should carve in preparation for a class, Ian suggests not carving at all, but drawing continually. Drawing, he insists is the fundament of it all, and a lack of skill in this area precludes success in carving. His particular specialty is carved motifs on panels in a variety of styles. Sometimes for

work in churches, full size carvings of holy figures are necessary. For these he employs Cody Swanson, an American sculptor based in Florence, who produces a half-size maquette in clay, which will then be carved full size at Ian's workshop in India.

As a rule Ian does not do restoration work, unless the slate has been wiped clean, as for example by fire. This has figured heavily into his career, citing the governor's mansion in Utah, a screen in Newport, Rhode Island, and a church.

Ian sorted through more panels, some derived from ancient sources in Egypt and Greece, all the while speaking about flow, movement, interstices, negative spaces and balance, elements that apply to any art. "How low can you get?" is a constant preoccupation, referring to how the carver cuts down deeper into the board in order to give depth to other elements. Using a mirror is a very useful trick: a reverse look with slightly different light reveals misconceptions, awkward proportions, and other errors. Copying a good model is an excellent teacher. He estimates that it takes about seven years for a carver to reach a skill level to match his company's needs. They must be able to draw and design and carve from start to finish. His newest employee has been with him for 10 years.

Ian described how he works with a fellow carver and artist, Adam Thorpe, who has become highly skilled in designing new work. The assignment was to come up with a library design for the aforementioned Jeff Bezos, who favored a Romanesque revival style. Working with a designer, who generated the original idea, Adam Thorpe worked out the designs, which Ian then carved into a sample cabinet, which gained the approval of their client. The point he was making was that carving is easier than designing. With a design in hand the project can take form.

In response to a question from Joe Amaral concerning the possibility of finishes ruining work, Ian said that if the finishing is done well, he has no objection, but

that he loathes gobs of paint that obscure detail. Gothic work, especially in oak, should not be finished, but left sharp "off the chisel." He despises machine carving, which is dependent on a spinning stylus that is incapable of delivery sharp crisp edges. Using a sharp tool and paying attention to grain direction, "you should be able to burnish as you are cutting."

Asked about sharpening, he does not favor any particular method, but getting back to work sooner leads him to use a motorized sanding wheel in different grades and then proceed straight to the stropping. The stones are actually better for sharpening, but it is much



slower. His shops all use the motorized method. Ian then brought out a small chest of carving tools that he had brought with him. Though somewhat modified over the years, it is essentially the same box that he bought as a student from a retired person, who had bought them, but given up carving. Many of the manufacturers are long since out of business, such as Herring Brothers. Others still exist as small firms, like Ashley Iles. Some of his tools were made by the original owner of the chest. Today he highly recommends Pfeil Swiss tools as they are a reliable source when buying online.

These tools are well made out of high quality steel. He likes a 10 degree bevel on the heel which allows him to get down low and close to the work so he can create the flowing movement in the carving. He also likes and recommends Chinese fishtail chisels. As one becomes experienced one tends to use larger tools and fewer of them. The fishtail-style functions as a normal gouge as well as a skew chisel, for instance.

In shipping wood around the globe, dimensional movement does not seem to be a problem. Once complete, the work is moved out quickly. In India you cannot buy seasoned lumber, so he accepts freshly milled logs, saws them as needed, and stickers them outside for six weeks or so. Then the lumber goes into a solar kiln that he designed: sheds made of corrugated iron painted black, where the lumber stays for about four months until the moisture content is 12%. The planks are 2" or less in thickness. The main woods being used are gama, an Indian wood; and teak, which is available in Calcutta scrap yards in the form of high quality Burmese teak beams that were used in buildings built by the British 150 years ago during the Raj. Besides his reputation in the industry and his websites, Ian does very little by way of advertising. He does put ads about his carving classes in *Woodworker West* magazine, and has several websites in different languages.

Shortly before 9 pm, the assembled members gave Ian a big round of applause to let him catch his breath. Members then looked at slides of his work on his laptop, where he had numerous images of large installations. Others asked questions, or pored over his tools. It is safe to say that the everyone present seemed drawn into the presentation by Ian's informal, expansive, entertaining manner that conveyed a lot of information about the rarified world of architectural carving. The meeting broke up about 9:15 pm.

Photos in this article are by Jose Cuervo

Membership Renewal

We hold our Membership Dues drive during January and February every year. So far, your response to our first request has been great: 44 members paid, which includes five new members. Just in case you missed the first request, we will be sending a second request to all members in early February. A copy of the Membership Renewal Form is included in this issue of the Wood Forum for your use. You can always renew your membership at any meeting. If you have any questions about your membership status, send an e-mail to me at wgtaft@aol.com.

Bill Taft



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What's in your Toolbox?

I don't ordinarily get worked up over a new tool, but this one deserves special mention. I'm speaking about the bar clamps pictured at the right. The first thing you probably notice is that the handle is bent on one of them. Actually, it swivels. And therein lies the true beauty of this tool.

One of the wonderful perks of living a long life is... arthritis. I suspect many of our members are acquainted with the condition, or soon will be. I have long ago given up using screwdrivers for, well, driving screws. The problem, of course, is the pain associated with the twisting motion of the wrist. Likewise, using most woodworking clamps also produces this pain. I have a good-sized collection of Jorgensen clamps which I use, and curse, daily. They're great tools in the right hands. Young hands.

Now someone has recognized the problem and done something about it. First off, the grip is improved - a molded rubber with flutes make gripping easier. But the best part is the swivel. You can tighten the clamp until you reach that pain threshold, then flip it over and you have a great lever, affording greatly increased power and finer sensitivity.

This swiveling capability also makes it easy to gang up a bunch of them in a tight space, as shown below right. You just bend the handles out of your way and add another.

The clamps are well made, forged carbon steel, with a hefty screw and fast thread pitch. Nicely finished, no rough edges, and not heavy like my Bessey clamps. These open just shy of 7", with a 3-1/4" throat. The larger size is 10", with a 4-3/4" throat. A little pricey. I got these at Stew-Mac.

Jose Cuervo



Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

Membership Renewal

Greetings! It is time to renew your membership in the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. You can renew at the various dues levels listed below. Your dues cover your electronic subscription to *Wood Forum* and entitle you and your immediate family to attend our excellent monthly meetings and to participate in our highly respected *Artistry in Wood* show. Please fill in your member information in the Renewal Form below and mail it with your check, made payable to SCWA, to: **SCWA, P.O. Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402**. You may also renew your membership at the next monthly meeting. Renewal forms will be available at the meetings.

There is a subscription fee for the printed version of the *Wood Forum*. This fee just covers the cost of printing and mailing. If you wish to receive the *Wood Forum* through the regular mail, please so indicate in the space provided on the Renewal Form and include the mail subscription fee payment with your dues renewal. We encourage all members to receive the electronic version.

Any suggestions for our association, e.g., subjects for future meetings, may be made in the "additional comments" area and would be greatly appreciated.

2014 Renewal Form

Please circle the level at which you wish to renew:

Sustaining (\$35)

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Wood Forum is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles and photographs for inclusion in the publication. You can send your submissions to the Wood Forum Editor at joejakey@comcast.net or at SCWAMESSAGES@gmail.com. Advertisements are also accepted with a per-entry cost of \$5 per column inch.

Membership Application

I would like to join the SCWA to meet other people interested in the craft, the art and the business of fine wood-working. Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$35 for the annual dues. I understand that this fee entitles me to attend monthly meetings and to receive the Wood Forum newsletter by email or via the SCWA's website.

I am enclosing an additional \$15 to receive the Forum by regular mail.

Name _____ Email _____

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Please send check and completed application to:

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