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Out of the Wood

Maine craftsmen display their mastery of traditional forms and also flash a wildly inventive side at an exhibition in Rockport.

By BOB KEYES, Staff Writer

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Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
The whimsical "Mattress Man" by Chloris Lowe of Philadelphia, from the center's upcoming exhibition "Celebrating the Studio Fellowship."

ROCKPORT — Design is a mystery.

How do artists, craftsmen and woodworkers come up with their ideas?

That question surfaced last week during a walk-through at the Messler Gallery of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, which is hosting the wildly eclectic exhibition "Maine Wood 2010: Biennial Exhibition" through Feb. 12.

The juried show includes the work of 16 furniture makers and sculptors from around Maine, and succeeds in illustrating the breadth, creativity and excellence of wood craftsmanship across the state. The pieces range from traditional furniture forms – elegant tables and chairs, expertly made – to unusual and unlikely sculptural works that push the capacity of wood as an art form to new boundaries.

That's precisely what Peter Korn, executive director of the center, was aiming for when he launched the biennial two years ago.

"I have this idea that people in Maine are somewhat disconnected enough from the broad trends and styles of the larger world that their work is idiosyncratic in odd ways," said Korn. "I think artists in Maine come up with things that they wouldn't if they lived in New York, Los Angeles or somewhere else. I think in Maine, we are less bound by the conventions of the day."



Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
"Home from the Sea" was fashioned from hornbeam, walnut, poplar, lilac and maple by David Boyle of Bath.

Korn hopes the show will encourage creative woodworking in Maine by bringing together a representation of the best furniture makers and traditional craftspeople with those who may have had fewer opportunities to show their work, either because they are new on the scene and not well known, or because they have simply been shut out of the exhibition process for whatever reason.

By putting the work of disparate makers together, the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship offers audiences the chance to witness an unusual confluence of ideas and execution.



Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
"If You Want Something Done Right Do It Yourself" by Philippe Guillem of Rockland.

The beauty of an exhibition like the wood biennial is that anyone working in Maine can apply. And because a three-person jury panel from outside Maine selected pieces that made the final cut, there is little chance of favoritism.

This year's jurors were Anissa Kapsales, an editor at Fine Woodworking magazine; Gretchen Keyworth, director emeritus of the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Mass.; and Silas Kopf, a furniture maker from Northampton, Mass.

They made their selections based on digital images supplied by the artists. It's an imperfect process, because the jurors didn't enjoy the benefit of seeing the work in person. But in this case, it seemed to work well.

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

The best example of an artist pushing the boundaries of design may well be David Boyle of Bath. He is a retired naval architect who has long been interested in woodworking. Boyle has made a lot of furniture over the years, mostly conventional pieces based on Shaker forms. But he's always wanted to "cut loose" and try something different.

The biennial gave him the opportunity he craved.

Boyle's creative process for the piece aptly illustrates the mystery of design. He made something called "Home from the Sea," and it's a combination of a stout table and elegant chest of drawers, accented with knobs made from and inspired by sea glass.

But's it's so much more.

The jurors apparently agreed. They awarded Boyle their Best in Show award, as well as an award for Outstanding Craftsmanship.

There are at least four distinct elements in Boyle's piece – the rustic table aspect, the casework and its traditional joinery, a nest of "flaming twigs"



Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
"Spirits" by Lou Landry of East Boothbay Harbor, in purple heart sycamore.



Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
"Bogie Bench" by Jack Rodie of York, in cherry.



Courtesy of Center for Furniture Craftsmanship
"Jewelry Box" by Libby Schrum of Camden, in walnut, maple and leather.

that supports the casework, and the unlikely and unconventional use of glass drawer pulls.

Boyle had been thinking about this piece for several years – since he acquired some hornbeam logs, which had been sitting in his garage awaiting useful utilization.

When he finally mustered the courage to saw the logs in half, he had the framework. He wasn't sure what he wanted to make, but he knew that he did not want to create simply a piece of rustic furniture. He made a lot of false starts before finally setting down his eventual path.

His mind led him to the idea that he needed a spectacular slab of wood to match that beauty and grace of the hornbeam logs. He ordered an eight-foot slab of walnut, a good 2 to 3 inches thick, to form the top of what would become the table.

"I wanted to let the material speak for itself," said Boyle. "I decided that if I wanted to keep the nice S-curves of hornbeam logs as the top members, then I would have to put that slab of walnut underneath them rather than on top of them. That was very unconventional, but it was necessary to show off the beauty of the wood. It took me a long time to figure out the joinery."

With those decisions in place, Boyle had the design for a table fixed in his mind. Next, he had to figure out how to fill the volume below the top, and he pondered that problem for a long time. He liked the idea of filling the space with a chest of drawers.

He just had to figure out the shape and form.

"That's when I thought about a sea chest that I have in my bedroom," he said. "It's a pine sea chest, tapered toward the top, in a pewter green color. So I decided I would make a chest of drawers in the shape of a sea chest."

That decision brought another problem to be solved: How to support the chest.

He went back to his garage, where he rustled up some old lilac branches he had peeled when they were still green and fresh. "I had them for a long time, and they were taking up space. They were old and gnarled and wonderful."

With the lilac, he made a nest of branches to support the chest. Once that decision was made, he had to figure out how to support the nest between the table legs.

Throughout the process, each solution led to another problem. Boyle had the luxury of time. He spent three years on the piece, working off and on. At one point, he set it aside for an extended period and came back to it after a long winter vacation. His time away changed his perspective, and led him in a different direction.

The lesson here is the reward of imagination and risk, Boyle said. He remembers being frustrated at times, but never feeling defeated. Each time he hit a roadblock, he found a way around it.

"I started with this table form and had a revelation when I thought of the sea chest and the lilac branches in the garage, and I realized I could combine all of that," he said. "It wasn't until all those elements came together that I realized I had a vision for what the piece would look like. I remember thinking, 'That would be really cool if I could pull it off.' I decided I would really try to not compromise."

Through the process, Boyle had the guts to follow his intuition.

"That's the nature of the whole piece, and I guess that's the difference from other woodworkers in this show, in that a lot of them start with a plan or a design that's all set the moment they start to build it," Boyle said. "This piece was evolutionary in that I kept revising things as I went. I kind of wanted to make it combine everything I like."

'OUTSIDE THE BOX'

Near the other end of the spectrum is 31-year-old Libby Schrum of Camden. She created a watch box, and won the People's Choice Award in the show, based on popular vote.

Schrum came to Maine via Texas with a college degree in sports management. When she found herself at the wrong end of a dead-end road in her field of choice, her mom encouraged her to try something different.

"If you could do anything, what would you do?" her mom asked.

"Something in art," her daughter replied.

Schrum took an art class, and part of her assignment was designing a piece of furniture. Inspired, she began researching wood schools. Her investigation led her to the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. Before making the commitment of coming to Rockport, she took a one-week wood class in Texas.

"I needed to see if I would like holding a chisel," she said.

She did.

Schrum came to Rockport in fall 2001 and enrolled in a 12-week class. She excelled, and quickly found her way with wood.

She now works in the cabinet shop of a high-end boat builder in the midcoast, and moonlights making custom furniture for clients. She also teaches classes at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship as her schedule allows.

For the biennial, she submitted a watch box. It's not like any jewelry box you've seen. She made a box that is elevated off the surface by a built-in stand, using a cantilevered design.

"The concept arose from a prior commission that I had for a watch box," she said. "I didn't really know. You say 'watch box,' but what does that mean? What is it supposed to be? I looked at a bunch of things that were supposed to be watch boxes, and they were all boring and sort of the same."

"I tried to get outside the box, no pun intended. I liked the idea of elevating the box up off the surface, and figured out a way to keep it up there."

Enlivened with her concept, she had fun figuring out the drawers, the color scheme and other details.

She couldn't be happier with the finished piece, and to win the People's Choice Award confirmed her decisions along the way.

"You don't have a whole lot of pieces where you feel they just sing," Schrum said. "This one feels right."

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