An Enchanted Realm

BY MONICA RAYMOND

PHOTO BY STEVE ANDERSON

It is a rainy June day and after a long drive I arrive at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockport, ME, filled with anticipation. Thanks to a generous Guild scholarship, I have come to the school to take *Intermediate Woodworking* with Kevin Rodel, whose work profoundly inspires me. The campus is quiet this Sunday afternoon. In the workshop the floors are swept clean, the tools are neatly arranged on their shelves, and thirteen workbenches silently await twelve eager students and an instructor.

The next morning I awaken early, too excited to sleep. In the workshop I claim a bench and start unpacking my tools. I recall the first class I took here and the delight I felt in learning new skills and in communing with many talented woodworkers. And by some stroke of magic, for two weeks I was transformed from an impatient, somewhat melancholy person into a happy and serene being, fully present in every moment with no desire to be anywhere else. Now, two years later, as the shop begins to fill with students, carefully unwrapping and setting tools out on their benches, the rest of my life fades away and I feel as if I have stepped through a magic door into an *Enchanted Realm*.

This realm — the campus — consists of three workshop buildings, each with two bench rooms and a machine room outfitted with the finest equipment, a fine furniture gallery, library and computer room, horseshoe pit, camping area, and offices. Students from diverse backgrounds — young and old, hobbyists and professionals — are here for courses ranging from one week to nine months. In addition, several accomplished woodworkers are engaged in one-year fellowships.

If I had not seen Kevin Rodel's photograph many times in *Fine Woodworking Magazine*, I would not have known he was the instructor when he quietly entered the shop. He is an unassuming man, despite being one of the greats in modern Arts and Crafts furniture. He gathers us around the instructor's bench and introduces himself. Peter Korn, the school's founder, Executive Director, and Fairy Godmother of this Enchanted Realm, comes to welcome and orient us to the school. From now until 5:00 pm on the last day, we are allowed to use the shop around the clock. However, we can only use the machines from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm and only with someone else in the building, and never under the influence of drugs or alcohol. There is a slide show and ice cream social every Tuesday evening and a picnic and croquet game every Thursday. We are encouraged to visit the other workshops on campus.

After Kevin describes the plan for the course, which is focused on case

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ARTS AND CRAFTS DESIGN WITH AN ASIAN INFLUENCE

construction, we move to our benches and begin designing our projects. Kevin and co-instructor Pete Schlebecker visit each student in turn, helping with the aesthetic of each piece, offering suggestions and discussing joinery options. I am going to make a small cabinet with a drawer and a door. Having had the design in my head for some time, I am eager to put pencil to paper. It will be Arts and Crafts with an Asian influence. A few years ago I spent time in Tibet and fell in love with the architecture there. The rammed earth buildings are wider at their bases than at their tops — an element I want to incorporate into my cabinet. Using a curved stick, I draw a gentle flare on the two outer faces of each leg.

Since the anatomy of case pieces is a mystery to me, I spend a good deal of time examining a sample case piece in the classroom, which one can pull apart to examine the joints. I draw the joinery for my piece, consulting frequently with Kevin and Pete. Both are kind and patient teachers. I am particularly interested in Kevin's design sensibility. As he examines students' nascent plans, he suggests adding a slight curve here or widening an element there. Suddenly the drawings come alive.

The next day we visit the lumber room. Cherry, quartersawn white oak, maple, sycamore, walnut, and ash are neatly stacked on ceiling-high racks. There are very wide boards and several sets of book-matched boards. Pete Schlebecker tells us that four times a year he travels around New England in search of the best hardwood lumber he can find. Each board has been carefully hand-picked for grain, figure, and clarity. I feel as if I'm attending a magical ball and a great feast has been laid out in front of me.

I've decided upon white oak for my project. The class assistant, Kendrick, helps me pull several 8/4 and 4/4 boards off the rack. I select three and start to mark out which parts of my piece will come from each board — straight grain pieces for the legs, rails, and stiles, and figured pieces for the panels. This jigsaw puzzle process leaves me scratching my head and soon I cannot distinguish the many marks I have drawn and redrawn on the boards. I decide to sleep on it and hope for more clarity in the morning.

Most of the other students have already chosen their lumber and begun milling. The two planers in the machine room have been running non-stop all day. By late afternoon, most people have a small pile of stickered lumber on their benches.

In the evening I walk around the shop viewing other students' drawings. Liffy is going to make a cherry toy chest. Rick is making a lawyer's bookcase. Brett brought with him white oak lumber that he and his father cut on his father's land in Virginia. He lays a dozen boards on the floor and spends hours carefully examining them, eventually picking two long book-matched boards for the top and sides of his case.

Each day begins with a brief lecture. We spend the bulk of our time working on our projects, breaking occasionally for demonstrations. We learn how to make a jig for creating shaped legs, how to cut mortises with a router, and how to fume white oak, among other things.

I feel like part of a big happy royal family where everyone is interesting, interested and valued. One evening I visit the Jackson building where one of the Fellows is working on an abstract art piece. She is from the Rhode Island

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School of Design. Although she is an expert woodworker and I am nearly a beginner, she seems genuinely interested in talking with me and does not scoff at my excitement over learning things which must be very basic to her.

Having finally laid out all the parts of my project, I mill boards for the case and start in on the joinery. The white oak is revealing its eclectic personality; the legs are chocolate brown and the panels — cut from a different tree — are lighter with lovely fleck. Despite the frustration of having made a few mistakes requiring do-overs,

I am enjoying myself immensely and am in the shop every day from 7 am to about 10 pm. On the weekend we don't have class but almost everyone shows up Saturday morning to continue working. Several of us undertake a field trip to the tiny village of Liberty, Maine to visit the renowned Liberty Tool Company — an antique store specializing in hand tools. Walking through the aisles, it's hard to take it all in. The shelves are jam-packed with chisels and hammers and spokeshaves and drawknives and saws and hand planes and rules and calipers. We rummage through the bins looking for treasure. Liffy and Steve both find Stanley Bailey #7 jointer planes in good condition. I find a replacement bolt for my #5 plane that I've been searching for for a year, as well as some chisel blanks. By 4:00 pm. after a quick stop for a scoop of hand-made ice cream, we are back in the workshop, dancing with our projects.

At 11:00 pm the lights in all three workshop buildings burn brightly. A few people are still at their benches, tapping away at chisels or hunched over drafting paper. I delight in knowing that there are young people who would rather build furniture than party on a Saturday night.

For a week I've been running on adrenaline rather than sleep. Brett is

MONICA & KENDRICK AT THE JOINTER

PHOTOS BY STEVE ANDERSON

MONICA WITH KEVIN RODEL

PHOTO BY STEVE ANDERSON

the only person who regularly arrives at the shop earlier than I and stays as late at night. We are both captivated by Arts and Crafts style and, in particular, Kevin Rodel's work, so we often consult each other on design elements, finding synergy in collaboration. Having taken several courses here, he shares my sense of wonder at the magic of the place.

Everyone knows I am here on a scholarship and they are curious about the Guild. I tell them about the subgroups, the small meetings, *The Journal* and *The Old Saw*. I talk about the camaraderie and how welcoming everyone is to beginning woodworkers. No one is aware of a similar organization in their home state and they are impressed and envious. They describe feeling somewhat alone as woodworkers, either unaware of or excluded from groups that are geared toward professionals. I feel both proud and incredibly fortunate to be a part of the Guild.

At the beginning of the second week everyone's projects are taking shape. Most people have glued up their cases and are now working on doors or drawers. Kevin, who is very humble, finally yields to our repeated requests and gives a lecture on his personal design strategies. He advises us to assemble a "toolbox" of design elements that we like by studying the work of furniture makers who inspire us, which we can pull out and incorporate into our own designs.

I have assembled and glued up my case and am ready to start the drawer. The dovetails come out pretty well and with Kevin's help, I fit the drawer to the opening fairly easily leaving a little room for wood expansion. I have already fashioned a gently curved drawer pull from white oak. Sliding the drawer — the first I've ever made — in and out of its pocket effortlessly, I am so excited at my accomplishment that I can hardly contain myself and I do a little dance around my bench. Part of the magic of this place is that everything I make here comes out so much better than it does at home! Of course, having the best tools and instructors near at hand might explain this, but it is enchanting nevertheless.

By the last day of class the only thing left to make, other than the top of my piece, is the door. I cut the rails and stiles to length, forgetting about the tenons, and am startled to realize the rails are now too short! Wood is running low but I am able to squeeze out two more rails from my supply. I am pressuring myself to finish the piece for the school's annual open house tonight. Of course, rushing is always a recipe for trouble. The joints are not going well. None of my mortises are straight. I slump down on my stool in frustration and stare at the unfinished piece. I love how it looks and suddenly realize that it doesn't need a door. In fact it most certainly should not have a door, which would hide the shelf and might de-emphasize the flared legs, which are the piece's most important design element! I ask Kevin for his opinion. He agrees and I am thrilled to have discovered this before it was too late. I cut the bevel on the top, which I had previously glued up, clean it up with a shoulder plane, and start sanding the piece. Everyone is furiously working on their projects — some are nearly done, others partly so. I feel like Cinderella just before her coach turns back into a pumpkin. At 5:00 pm not only will everyone have to stop working but, more importantly, we will have to return to the relative drudgery of the "real world," where we never get enough time in our shops and our hand planes, which cut flawless shavings here at school, chatter inexplicably.

As we pack up our tools and clean the shop I feel the magic ebbing away. Soon the room looks much as it did when I arrived — benches free of the clutter that graced them these past weeks, floor swept clean, scraps piled in bins, and tools neatly arranged on their racks. The only evidence of our presence is a glorious new piece of furniture on each bench. I walk around the room amazed at the work that has been accomplished. Even the students who at first seemed so unsure of themselves have created beautiful pieces. An hour later, well-dressed people holding glasses of wine are moving slowly from building to building, talking with blue jean-clad students and Fellows. We have the chance to see our work through their eyes and we try to impart some of the enthusiasm and magic we feel here to them. Many of the visitors are benefactors who appreciate the mission of the school so much that they are willing to support it with donations. Once again I find my respect for the Center and my amazement at my own luck in being here grow deeper.

With both joy and sadness, I leave the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, hoping that someday I will again have the chance to pass through that magic door into the Enchanted Realm.

POSTSCRIPT: At home in my shop I finished my project and donated it to the Guild raffle at Sunapee. I am happy to give back to the Guild and to know that someone has a little bit of magic — my sparkling glass slipper — in their home.

I wish to thank John Whiteside and Brett Harris for both inspiration and editing assistance for this article, and all of my classmates for all the fun we had. ■

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