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Head, Hand And Heart
GENERATIONS WITH PETER KORN

BY PATRICK DOWNES

Peter Korn, founder of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, has helped to define the education of woodworkers for over thirty years. An Ivy League graduate, he moved to Nantucket at age twenty in 1972, following an instinct for a change of lifestyle. He began as a carpenter’s assistant and two years later dove into furniture. Three days in a cold November workroom with a few pine boards yielded a cradle for friends. The maker was born.

But we have to go farther back to find the sources for Korn’s fascination with building and craftsmanship. Two memories he shared with me come out of his childhood in Pennsylvania. As a young boy, Korn set up a mattress at the top of a staircase in his parents’ home and sent it to the bottom. Not surprisingly, the mattress punched a hole through the wall. Suddenly, a revelation. The splintered lathing, crumbled plaster, and, most important, the empty space behind the wall revealed the mystery of construction and introduced the notion of surface appearance versus hidden depth.

Later, when he was about ten or so, carpenters installed a built-in desk in his parent’s house. “I was impressed with what people could do. And with all the sounds and smells.” But, he says, “Did this lead to my becoming a woodworker? I don’t think so. We just construct our story, the myth of who we are, out of bits and pieces, as we remember them.”

We jump forward a decade to that twenty-year-old who made his way from the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in history, to Nantucket looking for a change in lifestyle, making his way in the world. “I worked construction,” Korn
remembers. “It was perfect. Many of the young carpenters with whom I worked were refugees from the mainland. Rhodes scholars to high school dropouts. I learned to build a house from the ground up. My hands became strong and proficient.”

Those two years in construction brought him to the door of a new life as a furniture maker. Three days of figuring out how to make a crib for a carpenter friend and his wife expecting their first child brought him right to the brink. “The effort and process suited me. I wanted to make furniture.”

(As an aside, Korn showed me only two pictures from his time on Nantucket, a total of four years. I asked him why so few. “I remember watching tourists taking pictures but not paying attention to their surroundings, where they stood. I didn’t want to go unaware.”)

Korn quit his construction job and focused his time and energy wholly on making furniture. He began with rocking chairs, which was ambitious enough for a young craftsman. His formal training, if you could call it that, included only Charles H. Hayward’s book, Woodwork Joints, and a friend who had sanded for a woodworker. Unlike many from his generation, Korn didn’t learn, at first, from the pages of Fine Woodworking, since it had yet to be published. “I learned by error, experientially. I designed each new piece to practice the technique I wanted to learn next.”

From his start on Nantucket through a year of isolation, meals of brown rice and little else in Maryland, and further work and making, he made it to the early ’80’s, to the rise of what Korn calls “art furniture.”

“As a result of my own insecurity, I dismissed this as being somehow frivolous or insincere. It asked me to reorganize my thinking, which seemed too much. I wanted only to make useful, beautiful things. Now, however, I admire non-functional work as a powerful form of expression.” Thinking of Yuri Kobayashi’s work, for example, he comments, “It’s incredible.”

I asked Korn if he had an unplugged workroom. “No,” he answered, “I made full use of machinery, although I preferred using hand tools. I was a self-employed furniture maker for twelve years. Every mortise hand cut. I loved a day’s work with mallet and chisel.”
He continues, “I’ve never been a hand tool missionary. Hand tools are good for what they’re good for, and power tools are good for what they’re good for. Machines, used well, bring down the cost of furniture by speeding up the process.” This is a theme Korn returns to often. Furniture shouldn’t be only beautiful and functional, but affordable.

“There’s a design challenge in furniture making. Almost any craftsman can make a complicated and expensive piece of furniture out of beautiful wood. But to use this seductive material elegantly and simply enough to make it both desirable and affordable, that’s the discipline.”

In 1981, Korn was invited to direct the summer woodworking program at Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado. Here, he finally met master makers such as Sam Maloof. “This is where my real education began. I was exposed to other woodworkers, artists in other media and new techniques.” Five years later, he became the year-round director of the woodworking program at Anderson Ranch, and stayed there until 1992.

This job and eleven combined years of teaching at Anderson Ranch and Drexel University nursed new ambitions. Korn scouted Maine for places to live and begin a school of his own. By 1993, he found that home in Rockport, Maine. The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship began in a modest outbuilding behind his house on June 28, 1993. The nonprofit Center, running continuously since then, celebrated its twentieth anniversary this year.

The intimate teaching begun in his house has been continued on what is now a campus, also in Rockport, with three workshops, an international faculty and plans for smaller, more task-specific workshops.


5. Dancing Cranes Reception Desk, designed by Korn for a Miami office building in 1984, 42” H x 11’ dia.

6. The original location of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Rockland, Maine just before it opened in 1993.
for turning and finishing. No more than fifty-four students, spread across a number of classes and programs, are present at any one time. The Center grew beyond Korn’s expectations: “I never imagined something this grand.”

But what is the school’s guiding principal? Korn believes that “the demanding work of bringing something new and meaningful into the world, such as a piece of useful, beautiful furniture, can be a deeply fulfilling process of self-transformation.”

I asked about the greatest challenge to the Center, and Korn thought a moment. “Our incoming students are less and less experienced with their hands. It seems to be a long-term trend. For the new generation coming along, creativity often consists of sitting at a keyboard with design software and then pushing a button to print the ‘product.’ If they don’t know at all what it’s like to work with head, hand and heart, what will draw them to craft?”

Over time, Korn’s focus on writing has become central to his own creative efforts. In 2003, he began work on what would become a book published this past October, Why we Make Things and Why it Matters: The Education of a Craftsman. When I first met Korn in 2007, he admitted he wrote every morning. I asked him when we spoke earlier this year how he would compare and contrast the craft of writing with the craft of furniture making.

“They’re equivalent in some ways,” he begins. “Both are ways of exploring and inventing one’s world. Both are deeply rewarding. But writing lacks physicality, lacks the joy of skillfully engaging with the raw material of the real world. Writing contends with ambiguity. You can’t bullshit a piece of wood.”

Asked about what makes for a good life in his estimation, Korn quickly responds,
"A key ingredient, perhaps the key ingredient for me, is finding a creative practice that engages you. One you can throw yourself into." Pressed a little further on what craft itself is, he became thoughtful: "Craft is an evolving cultural concept so you can't pin it tidily down. I think of it as a conversation that evolves over time. A large room full of people talking at once."

In 2010, Korn took a sabbatical away from the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. "I wanted to know this institution could stand on its own," he said. "I wanted to know I could leave it behind, and that it would be strong." Not only is the school strong, it has taken its place as one of the finest schools of woodworking in the country, if not the world. "I want to keep making the school better and better."

Korn himself does little design work now, and he makes furniture only sporadically. "I make for myself now, for my own pleasure. I'm not showing anymore." He's been writing for two decades now, but isn't sure what comes next. "This book brings to fruition what I've been thinking about for a long time. It feels more like an end point than a beginning."

Peter Korn loves the joy of the idea made manifest. From the boy who contemplated the empty space behind the lathing and plaster, he became the consummate explorer into the depths of craft and the meaning of making.

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10. Continuous-Arm Chair (1988); ebonized ash; 33½" x 23½" x 22½".

11. Antelope chair (1986); ebonized ash; 45" x 20" x 21".

12. Prototype for a production chair (circa 1990); laminated ash, plywood, and upholstery; 30½" x 22½" x 24½".
Dovetails

Woodworkers, or craftspeople of any kind, are often asked, “How did you start? How long have you been at this? What influences your work?” The first two questions are easy to answer. We began however we began, and we can count the months or years. We may have to take a moment, though, to consider the last question. We might say a particular style or era moved us. Maybe certain makers in our own or another area of art and craft have influenced us. We seldom take the time to collect our thoughts relative to the wide experience of our own lives, let alone the even broader realm of cultural history. Peter Korn does both in his direct, honest, and sometimes surprising new book, The Education of a Craftsman: Why We Make Things and Why It Matters (David R. Godine Press, 2013).

Korn writes with some weight behind him. He is the author of Woodworking Basics: Mastering the Essentials of Craftsmanship (Taunton Press, 2003) and other how-to books and articles, a furniture maker whose work has been exhibited nationally in galleries and museums, and founder and Executive Director of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. Here he offers reflections on his own history: “The work I chose turned out to be the work that chose me.” And on the history of American craft: “When I chose to become a furniture maker, I was acting on an unexamined world view that was very much the product of my historical moment.... Subsequent to [the Industrial Revolution], making things by hand became a potentially subversive act—something one did in opposition to prevailing societal norms.” Korn writes with equal parts philosophy and candor.

Korn’s primary concerns, the why of this book, are identity and fulfillment. Craftsmanship, or creativity, he suggests, help complete the picture of oneself. Moreover, the entire process from idea to production, the act of creation, grants access to an improved way of life. There is, by necessity, a process of transformation, from one who has not created to one who has. The maker becomes part of the larger conversation, millennia old, of what craft is, what art is, and what we, as human beings, do with materials, tools and time.

This development is reflected in Korn’s own reckoning with what it took to write The Education of a Craftsman. “My previous efforts as an author,” he notes, “had been in the how-to genre. The writing was relatively straightforward. Not so this book! The slow, focused work of translating elusive perceptions about the why of craft into language, one tentative word at a time, has taken surprising turns .... In short, writing this book has been a remarkable process of discovery.”

As a reader, we don’t need to know what it means to be a maker firsthand. It may neither help nor hinder in this assisted inquiry into craft and personal transformation. We read a book such as this for the most important of reasons: to find some insight into our own work and becoming.

Korn closes his thoughtful meditation with a universal and fundamental reminder for all of us, makers or not:

“Making the internal commitment to bring an idea to fruition can be a scary proposition. There is a moment, sometimes at first light, when a long-germinating idea crystallizes in your mind and rings true in your bones. For me it might be a design for a chair or a vision for a new program at the school. You think: If I commit to this idea, it will consume my life for the next five weeks, or the next five years. It’s like seeing a snowy peak, beautiful in the distance, and deciding to hike there. You know there are likely to be unseen valleys, daunting inclines and treacherous terrain ahead of you. You know that once you’re en route there will be few open vistas such as this one to encourage you. You even know that if you manage to arrive, what you’ll see is not the mountain under your feet, but still another peak in the distance.”

13. Hall Table (1990); cherry, ebonized maple; 32” x 66” x 18”.