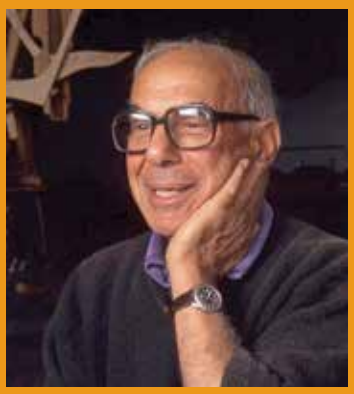
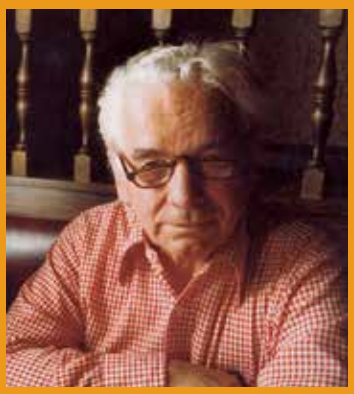
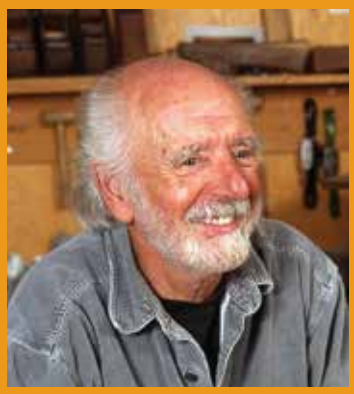
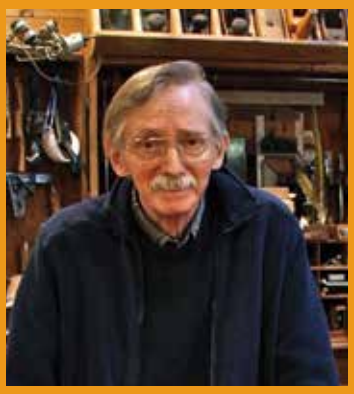
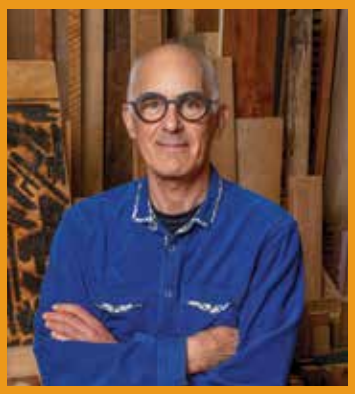
Remarkable Mentors

Masters who have inspired generations

BY JONATHAN BINZEN



The last five decades have been momentous ones for the craft of working wood. When *Fine Woodworking* was founded, in 1975, an incipient revival of the craft had been underway for some years, but its adherents were atomized. Largely isolated from each other, or at best clustered in small groups, they had limited opportunities to share their excitement, frustrations, and innovations and to learn from others.

The first half of the 20th century had seen a rapid erosion of skill and knowledge in the field. In furniture making, the shift from manual to machine production and from small shops to large factories, which began in the mid-19th century, had only accelerated, and the centuries-old store of craftsmanship and knowledge had all but evaporated, poured out on the ground like so many vessels of well-aged wine. The back-to-the-land and avoid-working-for-the-man ethos of the 1960s created a great thirst for this all-but-lost knowledge among young people wanting to pursue woodworking as a way of life. But an equal desire—and frustration—arose from others who pursued woodworking as a hobby.

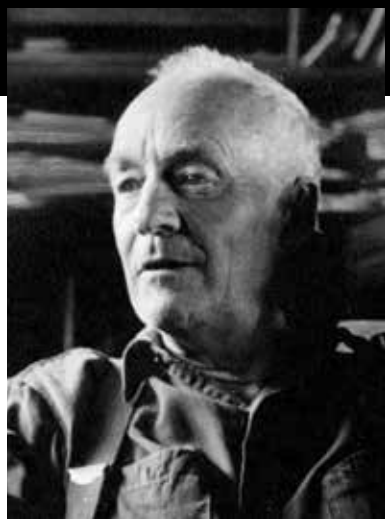
One of the latter group was Paul Roman, who, before launching *Fine Woodworking*, had worked at GE as a speechwriter and done woodworking on the side, becoming frustrated with the lack of woodworking information available. The arrival of the magazine hit like an armful of tinder on glowing coals, and its pages quickly filled with profiles of prominent makers of the past and present, articles on ancient techniques and recent innovations, and information about tools old and new. As it charted the field the magazine became a meeting place, a marketplace, and a clearinghouse for information on the craft.

In this 50th anniversary year, we on the staff want to celebrate the makers whose presence has been most prominent in our pages—either directly through their own writing or their own making, or as registered through their impact as teachers. This article examines a cluster of people whose work—as makers, teachers, writers, or all three—places them among the most powerful mentors and most pivotal forces in restoring the craft and reshaping the field.

In coming issues we will look at another set of makers—those whose designs we deem to have been among the most daring, innovative, and influential of the past 50 years. And in a third article we will discuss makers whose contributions as authors in *Fine Woodworking* have made the deepest mark.

All photos, except where noted: Jonathan Binzen. Photos facing page: Susan Sherman (top left) and Charles Uniatowski (top center), both courtesy of the Wharton Esherick Museum.

Wharton Esherick



A craftsman's aerie. *Wharton Esherick built his home and studio in Pennsylvania over a five-decade span, infusing its every detail with his creative esprit.*

Wharton Esherick, who trained as a fine art painter in Philadelphia, began building a stone studio for himself on a wooded hilltop in suburban Paoli, Pa., in 1926. He had been frustrated as a painter, feeling he could paint like others but not like himself. When he tried carving a few frames for his artwork, however, he saw right away that they were more distinctively his own.

Esherick was steeped in the arts—his friends were prominent writers, poets, artists, architects—and he produced wonderful woodcuts and carved wooden sculptures. But his genius was perhaps best expressed in functional objects. His furniture is an amalgam of attractions. Its forms are fresh and fascinating, sometimes taking cues from the wood, as in the seats of his signature stools, and sometimes from repurposed parts, as in the chairs he made after buying a barrel of wagon wheels. Its surfaces, detailing, and materials make touching it irresistible. And in every piece its thoughtfulness about the user is unmistakable.

The best place to see his furniture is that stone studio, which became his residence and grew over the decades with the addition of living areas in a board-and-batten section and a stuccoed silo. The building has been a museum accepting small group tours since shortly after Esherick's death in 1970, and many visitors have found entering it to be a life-altering experience.

The house itself is Esherick's masterwork. In addition to containing many stunning pieces of his furniture and sculpture, the building bears the mark of its maker in every detail. From the floor of the dining area, made of scraps of wood of various species cut to organic shapes and fitted delightfully together; to the curve-fronted cabinets, lipped shelving, carved serving spoons in the kitchen; to the wooden coat pegs carved in the likeness of those who helped him build the studio, it is a holistic work of art and craft. Esherick's great accomplishment was to fuse art and craft in his furniture, to fold an artist's elan of originality into the ambit of the maker of utilitarian things. In the process, he provided a template for the life and work of a designer-maker that has had a profound impact on the field, one person at a time.

Eye, hand, heart. *Esherick's furniture is visually powerful, and its materials and contours always attract the touch, but its special power may rest in its open invitation to use.*

George Nakashima

George Nakashima did no teaching to speak of, yet his influence has been as pervasive as that of any American furniture maker of the 20th century. Blending aesthetic inspirations from Japanese, Danish modern, and American Shaker and Windsor traditions, he produced furniture with a commanding presence that was at once elegant, invitingly tactile, and a bit mysterious. His use of live-edge boards in fine furniture prompted a wave of such work by others that shows no sign of receding, and his pairing of raw-edged and highly figured wood with simplified geometric shapes in table and cabinet bases feels so profoundly, satisfyingly right it's hard to imagine another option.

Nakashima's aesthetic and philosophical vision is most fully expressed in his home, a collection of buildings he designed and built in New Hope, Pa., over the course of four decades. Trained at MIT in architecture, he worked in that field in the 1930s in Japan and India. During World War II, when he was interned with his family for his Japanese heritage, he met a Japanese woodworker in the internment camp and learned some rudiments of the craft. Later, when he settled in Pennsylvania, he made some furniture himself and produced designs for companies such as Knoll. Soon he began hiring craftsmen to build furniture for private commissions, and his business grew.

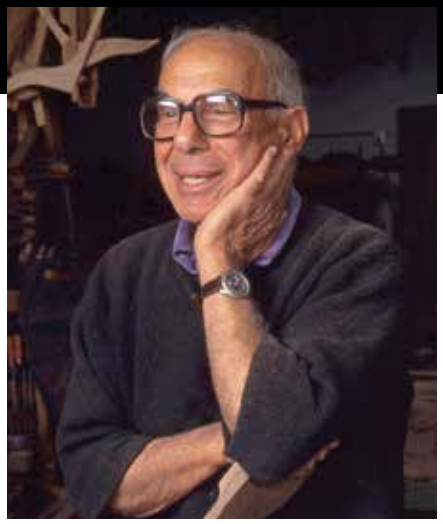
Nakashima's furniture business is still producing his designs and those of his daughter, Mira, who has run the company since his death in 1990.

His book *The Soul of a Tree* (1984) spelled out his conviction that through his work he gave trees a new incarnation. It was the farthest thing from a how-to book, but it became essential reading for many aspiring furniture makers.

Into the trees. *Throughout his career, George Nakashima cultivated a close tie with his material. He was always on hand at the sawmill when special logs were cut, and he took customers to his lumber sheds to select specific slabs for work they were ordering. His daughter, Mira, continues the practice today.*

Cross-cultural craft. *An architect by training, Nakashima blended a modernist sensibility with inspirations from Japan, Windsors, and his favored material. The collection of buildings he designed as his residence and workspace is filled with his furniture. All these photos were taken there.*

Sam Maloof



When Sam Maloof died in 2009, at 93, he left behind an enormous stash of lumber. Even in his last years, with more wood on hand than he could ever possibly use, he kept on buying. He loved wood and loved working it. He also left behind the captivating house he had built, room by room, over the decades an hour east of Los Angeles (without ever pulling a permit, he once confided with a smile).

In 2000, when a highway came through, the house, by then on the National Register of Historic Places, was moved to a property several miles away, where it is now open as a museum and where you'll also find the workshop of Sam Maloof Woodworker, now run by Mike Johnson, who spent 30 years working directly with Sam.

Maloof learned the basics of furniture making working for the industrial designer Harold Graham; otherwise he was self-taught, and bootstrapped himself into a rarified place as the designer and maker of one of the most iconic chairs of the 20th century. The Maloof rocker, which has made its way into museums, the White House, and private homes worldwide, is catnip for aspiring chairmakers, who are drawn to its style and technical challenges.

Maloof's skill as a craftsman was best appreciated at the bandsaw, which he played like a violin as he free-handed S-curved slats, arms, and rockers, breaking every rule of standard bandsawing. "Don't do it like I do," he said. "I only do it this way because I didn't know any better."

Maloof's furniture has inspired woodworkers of all stripes. But as anyone who met him even briefly discovered, his personality might have been his most compelling trait. It combined charisma and charm with thoughtfulness, a listener's ear, a gift for friendship, and an inexhaustible appetite for engaging with others.

Onward and upward. *Like Esherick and Nakashima, Maloof spent years building his own house and filling it with furniture. And like them, he worked indefatigably, right to the end of his life. The photos on this page were all taken at his home, which included his workshop.*

The austere Maloof. *Though famous for the flowing curves of his rockers, Maloof had a more restrained side that emerged when he designed case pieces, which tended toward rectilinear simplicity.*

Tage Frid

Born in Denmark in 1915 and trained there in cabinetmaking through a traditional apprenticeship that began when he was 13, Tage Frid was recruited to teach woodworking in the United States in 1948 in a fledgling program, the School for American Craftsmen, which was then based at Alfred University in upstate New York. Arriving at the program, Frid was astonished by the lack of understanding among students and even teachers of the basics—not to mention the finer points—of working wood. He soon discovered that the skill and knowledge deficit was widespread in the U.S. Over the following 50 years Frid would do more than anyone else to remedy that situation.

He followed the School for American Craftsmen to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) when it moved there in 1950, and he proceeded to infuse the fundamentals of furniture making into one student after another. In 1962 Frid left RIT for Rhode Island School of Design, where he taught for another 23 years.

Brimming with confidence and charisma, Frid had an infectious passion for his subject, an encyclopedic knowledge of it, and a jocular, needling teaching style. Together these qualities were an elixir for students, and his classes produced hundreds of full-time makers and scores of prominent woodworking teachers.

Frid's mantra was "Design around the construction," meaning that the dictates of structure and joinery should be the starting point for a piece; its style could flow from there. His own furniture embodied the maxim, but many of his students, while absorbing the fundamentals, gave aesthetics far less restrained expression while producing furniture of the highest caliber.

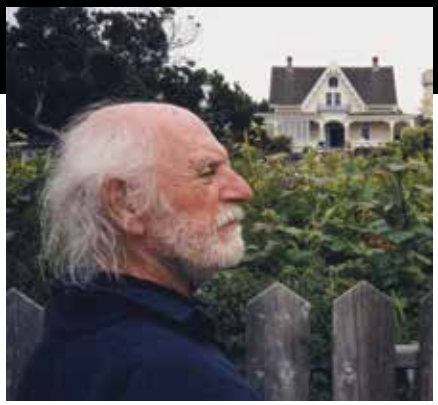
The legacy of Frid's teaching in person would have been enormous in any case, but in the summer of 1975, persuaded by his wife, Emma, he agreed to lend his name and talents to an entirely untested idea brought to him by a reluctant executive and hobbyist woodworker, Paul Roman: *Fine Woodworking* magazine.

Frid was the tent pole for the project. He was a contributing editor from the first issue, and his own articles were crucial, as were the contributions of his talented students. His trilogy of books on the craft, published by Taunton Press in the early 1980s and still in print, were instant classics, and they remain a vital resource.

Frid's kitchen. *In addition to plenty of furniture, Frid designed and built many kitchens and other interiors. He designed this kitchen (which was built for him by his former student Hank Gilpin) for* Fine Woodworking*'s publishers, Paul and Jan Roman. Frid provided it with barstools he designed after sitting on a split-rail fence and finding it surprisingly comfortable.*

Photos this page: *FWW* staff (top left); Susan Kahn (top right and bottom right)

James Krenov



James Krenov's journey took him from Siberia, where he was born, to northern Alaska, where his parents—aristocrats who fled after the Russian Revolution—worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs during his boyhood, to Seattle, where he spent his teens. He then went to Sweden, where he studied furniture making under Carl Malmsten and began making his characteristic cabinets in his basement. His work attracted notice in Sweden and abroad, and he was invited to teach at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 1968 and twice later. As he often did, he rubbed some people at RIT the wrong way, but others were captivated by his furniture and his ability to identify with impromptu eloquence the springs and satisfactions of creativity in a manual craft.

When Craig McArt, an American craftsman and friend, urged Krenov to write a book, he did. And in 1976, when *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*—a contemplation of the contours of a maker's life—was published, Krenov found himself receiving hundreds of letters from people around the world who recognized themselves and their aspirations in his words. The book was an enormous success, and he followed it up with two more in the next few years, which also struck a chord with readers.

Krenov's cabinets and books would have secured him a place in the pantheon of 20th-century furniture makers. But in 1981 some devotees of his books arranged a teaching position for him in Northern California that evolved into a full-time program where students spent one or two years studying the craft with Krenov. The exceptionally high quality of the work produced by students there and the depth of Krenov's passion made the school a destination for makers from around the world, and it has produced scores of prominent furniture makers. The Krenov School, in Fort Bragg, Calif., is now led by one of Krenov's students, Laura Mays.

Fingertips. *Krenov said about opening a cabinet that it should be "a fingertip adventure," and he fitted each of his pieces with carved pulls and other details meant to inspire tender handling and close inspection. In the late 1950s (above), Krenov trained under Swedish furniture designer Carl Malmsten.*

Jere Osgood

Jere Osgood began making furniture as a young boy in his father's basement workshop in Staten Island, N.Y., having learned woodworking from his uncles and grandfather. Soon he was selling pieces to his neighbors. By the time he became a student of Tage Frid's at RIT in 1958 at age 22, Osgood had been selling pieces of his own design at craft galleries in Manhattan and had even invented some new joinery. Unimpressed, Frid told him to forget everything he knew and start over.

Osgood's affect—gentle, very soft-spoken, and extremely reserved—was the opposite of Frid's. But his steel and his self-confidence were just as strong. While absorbing much from Frid's instruction, Osgood remained true to his own vision, and over the years his furniture came to embody more and more audacious experiments with form, structure, and joinery.

In early issues of *Fine Woodworking*, Osgood wrote landmark articles on bent lamination and tapered bent lamination, techniques he perfected and used to make sinuous legs and tapered, curving case sides in a range of tables, chairs, desks, and case pieces that form one of the most impressive bodies of work of the century. Design around the construction, indeed.

Surprisingly, though possessing none of his mentor's bravado or verbal force, Osgood became one of the most influential teachers of the era. At Boston University's Program in Artisanry, he and his co-teacher, another extravagantly talented former Frid student, Alphonse Mattia, led classes that produced an astonishing array of brilliant furniture makers and teachers whose work ran the gamut from the most traditional to the most heterodox.

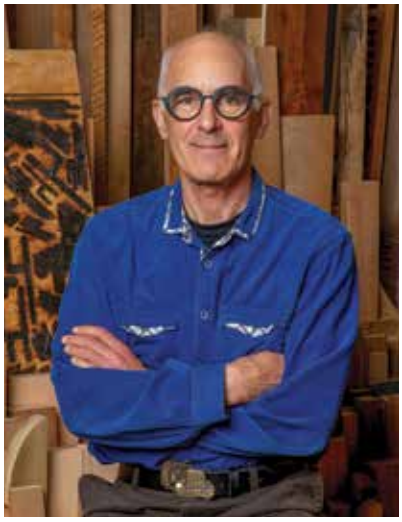
Quite a program. *At Boston University's Program in Artisanry, Osgood (lower right) and Alphonse Mattia (in profile, back right) presided over classes bursting with talent. This photo from 1976 also includes Wendy Maruyama, Michael Hurwitz, James Schriber, Tim Philbrick, and Bruce Beeken, among other standouts.*

Around the bend. *It can be a task to find a straight line in Osgood's furniture. Curves were oxygen for his designs, and he developed methods of bending and tapering curved parts that have become standard practices.*

Photos this page: courtesy of Michael Hurwitz (top right); Dean Powell (center left and bottom). Photos facing page: courtesy of Wendy Maruyama (top left); David Harrison (top right); Jim Escalante (bottom left); Bill Fritsch (bottom right). Photos p. 29: courtesy of the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship (top right); courtesy of Aled Lewis (center right); Daniel Allen (bottom left); Timothy Rousseau (bottom right).

Wendy Maruyama and Tom Loeser

When Wendy Maruyama arrived at Boston University's Program in Artisanry (PIA) in 1976, she was one of its first female students. She stood out in other ways as well. In a class full of white kids from the East Coast, she was a third-generation Japanese-American from California. Her teachers, Jere Osgood and Alphonse Mattia, both former students of Tage Frid, were virtuosos at the workbench; her earlier training at San Diego State University (SDSU), an art-school program, hadn't progressed beyond dowels and stack lamination. And Maruyama has a hearing impediment, which made it difficult to catch everything her teachers said—especially Osgood, who spoke in a soft mumble. Yet she made her way through PIA and went on to get a master's degree from Rochester Institute of Technology, Frid's old program. Maruyama's impulse was to treat furniture as a form of sculpture, but RIT "was extremely conservative," she said. "You didn't see a lot of innovation coming out of there."



Often unhappy but never undaunted, Maruyama persisted—and blossomed. "For me, furniture was always intended to be a vehicle of creative expression and experimentation." She went on to lead the furniture program at SDSU herself from 1989 to 2015, and it redressed many of the issues she had struggled against. In a field that was often exclusively male, it welcomed women. In place of brown furniture in traditional forms, it welcomed color, mixed media, and sculptural expressiveness. And it challenged students to build furniture with a message, a personal narrative. It has had a deep impact on the field, producing a long list of impressive makers and teachers who have helped bend furniture in Maruyama's direction.

Color theory. *Like Maruyama, Tom Loeser attended BU's Program in Artisanry, and he too led a landmark graduate-level furniture-making program (his at the University of Wisconsin, Madison) that encouraged students to take furniture in unexpected directions. His own inventive, playful work is distinguished by vibrant colors and emphatic textures.*

North Bennet Street School

The North Bennet Street School had been in business for over 80 years when Phil Lowe enrolled as a student in 1967. Founded in part on the principles of the sloyd system of manual arts instruction, it was housed in a quirky collection of interconnected buildings in Boston's North End. In addition to woodworking, the school embraced programs in restoration carpentry, book binding, violin making, piano tuning and repair, and locksmithing. The Cabinet and Furniture Making program, founded in the early 1950s by George Fullerton, was somewhat sleepy when Lowe arrived, but the rising interest in craftsmanship brought in other inspired students. Lowe became a teacher at NBSS in 1975 and stayed until 1985. By all accounts, his leadership—along with that of Lance Patterson and others—revitalized the program and locked in a rigorous and comprehensive curriculum.

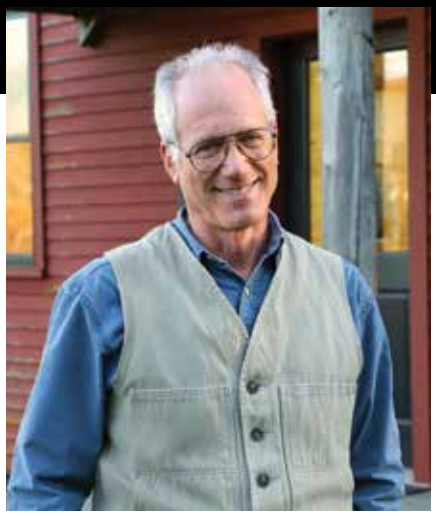
The two-year course of study taught traditional drafting and hand and machine skills, along with the joinery and structure embodied in classic American period furniture. It began turning out students whose skills were superior and whose period-influenced pieces were impeccable. A roster of outstanding teachers in the ensuing decades ensured that the school's standards stayed extremely high. If there was a caveat about NBSS, it was that there was no original design component in the curriculum, and deviating from tradition was dissuaded. But in recent years more and more makers who trained at NBSS have been producing furniture that, while hewing to high levels of craftsmanship, exhibits far more stylistic freedom and originality.

NBSS teachers and graduates have contributed mightily to *Fine Woodworking*. Phil Lowe, who ran his own school after leaving NBSS, led the way with some 30 articles. Lance Patterson anatomized a Boston bombay chest in *FWW* #45. The most recent? Ellen Kaspern's article on building a lantern on pp. 54–63 of this very issue.

Teaching tradition. *Phil Lowe (near left) and Lance Patterson (far left) were two key forces in the invigoration of the furniture program at North Bennet Street School in the 1970s. Lowe taught at NBSS for 10 years, and later 20 years at his own school, the Furniture Institute of Massachusetts. Patterson, spoken about with reverence by former students, still teaches at NBSS.*

Stellar stuff. *The level of work achieved by NBSS students and graduates is a calling card for the school. These people know how to make. The chest above is by John McCormack; the table is by William Thomas; and the cabinet is by Miguel Gomez-Ibanez, who attended and then directed the school.*

Center for Furniture Craftsmanship



If you were an aspiring furniture maker in 1995 and you found yourself in Rockport, Maine, where Mill Street meets Route 90, you would have arrived at a nice place for a walk, with some fields, some forest, and the Oyster River nearby. Visit the spot 30 years later and you find, in a companionable cluster of red buildings, one of the best places on the planet to learn the craft.

The Center for Furniture Craftsmanship (CFC), founded in 1993 by Peter Korn in a small backyard barn in nearby Rockland and launched with a handful of weeklong workshops taught by him, now offers a nine-month comprehensive course designed for the professional or aspiring professional maker; 12-week intensive courses in woodworking and turning; and a wide range of one- and two-week workshops taught by some of the world's most distinguished woodworkers.

Fine teaching is the backbone of CFC. Its teachers are highly accomplished designers and makers themselves, but even the best among them aren't hired back if they don't teach well. The pedagogical bar set at the nine-month comprehensive course is exceptionally high; it has been led for six years by Australian David Upfill-Brown, for 12 by Welshman Aled Lewis, and for four by Tim Rousseau, exceptional teachers all.

CFC also supports a program of fellowships offering free shop space to emerging makers and a residency program for established makers, who are encouraged to do work that explores new directions and techniques.

Students who are in the nine-month program can also look forward to seeing their work exhibited in CFC's Messler Gallery, which mounts half a dozen shows each year.

Coastal craft. *Nestled on a wooded property in Midcoast Maine, the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship has become a magnet for outstanding makers and teachers, and a robust community has developed around it.*

A high bar. *The experience at CFC embraces techniques from the most fundamental to the most challenging. Clockwise from right, work here by a few CFC teachers: Aled Lewis with his settle, Tim Rousseau's writing desk, David Haig's signature rocker, and Yuri Kobayashi's sculpture* Believing.