Reflections on wood

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REFLECTIONS ON WOOD
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Acknowledgement
First and most of all, I thank God for all the achievements and His unconditional love. This thesis work would not have been possible without Him.

I own an inestimable thanks to my parents and sister for their continuous supports to endure all my hard days. They were my strength to overcome all the barriers.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my advisers, professors and friends here at Rochester Institute of Technology for sharing their experiences and knowledge. Especially I want to thank William Keyser, Doulas Sigler, Richard Tannen and my dear friend Hee-man who believed in me and did not give up on me.
Introduction
Exploring many different materials was something I enjoyed throughout my undergraduate years. My ultimate goal was to use mixed-media for everything I designed, not only because of my eagerness to learn new things but partly because of my Industrial Design background, which emphasized cost factors for inexpensive production. My first products combined materials like glass, metal, wood, paper, ceramics, photography, computer images and fabrics in my designs. They were nothing more than simply materials. However in my graduate work the media became more than issues of utilizing basic materials.

I never knew how much my concepts would change when I began my major, woodworking and furniture design. My first year, I was curious about materials and eager to explore their potentials. Although I no longer had to focus upon cheap production and costs, the materials I used were just tools for building things. The media was no longer a vehicle for producing things cheaply, but rather to actualize my designs. I regarded wood as both technical and functional. When making a model with wood, the wood was easily shaped and absorbed paints and dyes well. A very realistic model, assimilating plastic and not wood, could be produced. In this process the wood was not used expressively but instead, it was incorporated for the purpose of construction. This utilization of wood I adopted, not attempting to go beyond the boundaries of model making.

I did not utilize wood as a design media until my second year. I was using paper, metal, and photography on the wood surface for a
chest of drawers (Figure 1) that I built in the previous Spring. Although these materials, separately, were not strong enough to exist without the wood, they started to become important aspects of my design concept. By this I mean that the photography could be substituted with a painting and the media exchange would not have made a significant difference in my concept. However, the photograph was no longer a construction element; it became my vehicle for expressive sculpture. I really enjoyed the whole process of choosing appropriate materials for specific designs (Figure 2). I was certain that this was something that I wanted to pursue in my future work. Then I discovered something important; I found myself approaching mixed-media differently than in my previous work. I was no longer solely a designer but I assumed the role of an artist, expressing my inner feelings and personality through my mixed-media furniture pieces.

I had worked with wood for some time, but it was not until my second year that I started to concentrate on using wood as my primary material. I was aware of numerous influential woodworkers and appreciated the work of Sam Maloof, George Nakashima, and Wendell Castle. I thought that I was highly aware of the field of woodworking although I lacked a lot of experience in creating traditional furniture. I was rather comfortable dematerializing\(^1\) wood and I enjoyed the process. My thesis work caused me to think about things that I did, and allowed me to question why I did them.

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\(^1\) Dematerialization, Webster is 1988 Edition by Lexicon Publications, Inc.: (di:\metier\i:elaiz) \textit{pres. part.} dematerializing past and \textit{past part.} dematerialized \textit{v.t.} to deprive of material form or qualities II \textit{v.t.} to lose material form or qualities.
Figure 1: The Chest of Drawers - Self-Portrait
(Background: The Chest of Drawers Final Form Sketches)
Figure 2: The Chest of Drawers - Detail
(Background: The Drawer Knobs Sketches)
I met Sam Maloof about four years ago. I was impressed with his work, but his design style (Figure 3) was not one that I wanted to emulate. However, in some ways, his approaches to wood were the most helpful in interpreting my own directions in wood. I was dematerializing my furniture without having a fundamental knowledge of wood itself. I realized that it was my responsibility to understand the characteristics of wood and its intrinsic beauty before I could embellish wood with another medium. I began to identify artists who were working with wood as their singular medium. Artist woodworkers George Nakashima, James Krenov, Wharton Esherick, and Arthur Espenet Carpenter were critical influences, helping me to comprehend the potentials and limitations of wood.

I have seen a lot of surface embellished furniture and I assumed that most contemporary furniture today was painted. I had no personal opinions or feelings about painted furniture, since I was concentrating on designing ready-to-assemble, knock-down furniture. The summer before I changed my major to woodworking and furniture design, I met artists Randy Shull and Brent Skidmore who were using acrylic paint on their furniture pieces (Figure 4). I found the approach radical for my taste at that time. Still my curiosity for surface painting prompted me to explore mixed-media surface embellishment possibilities (Figure 5). However, it was not long before I realized my limited appreciation for the beauty and techniques in designing with natural woods. I had jumped from creating factory, knock-down furniture to hand-crafted fur-
Figure 3: Sam Maloof's Chair Arm Rest Shaping Examples - Rough and Smooth
(Background: Sam Maloof’s Shaping Examples 2)
Figure 4: The Works of Randy Shull and Brent Skidmore
(Background: The First Thesis Work Plan Sketches)
niture. I realized that I had skipped the process of learning and knowing the one material I chose to study in depth. I found myself *demateri-alizing* wood even before I developed an appreciation for wood's natural beauty. I needed to go back to the fundamentals of woodworking.

I wanted to create tactile furniture which addressed the relationship between materials and forms, the forms related to wood. I intended to find my own style for creating tactile furniture that could be beautiful without any surface embellishments. I felt that I could then move beyond the primary issues of form after first gaining a comprehensive appreciation for wood as the medium. I would then be prepared to explore the parameters of *dematerialization* as it would then begin to define my future work and directions.
Reflection on Wood
“How much more meaningful it becomes if one wears a bit of humility that allows him to acknowledge that it is truly God who is the Master Craftsman. He uses us. Our hands are His instruments.”

Within the School for American Crafts Woodworking and Furniture Design program at Rochester Institute of Technology, my three first year projects were experiments with surface embellishments. Technically, painting was very forgiving. I was sure that I wanted to continue painting my work until I had an opportunity to research a well-known craftsman, Sam Maloof. I met him at his lecture at Rhode Island School of Design. I found his works to be very beautiful; however, my response to his work was fleeting. I was concentrating on other design techniques at that time and I was not searching for furniture styles that would specifically influence my own design. Four years later I re-encountered examples of Maloof’s work, reproduced in library books. I was really intrigued by Maloof’s techniques for shaping wood, handling furniture details, and most of all, for his philosophy and appreciation of wood. “The distinctive shapes and surface patterns of Sam’s furniture are often derived from his observations and appreciation of nature, especially of wood itself. . . .”

Maloof’s tactile quality in his furniture details (Figure 6) really fascinate me. I want to develop my own techniques to create a better relationship between the material and tactile forms. Like Maloof, my main

3 Ibid., P. 15.}
Figure 6: Sam Maloof's Door Locks Designs  
(Background: Sam Maloof's Door Lock Design)
focus is to bring out the beauty of wood itself, and at the same time I want the wood to be more than a medium for furniture that I build. My intent is to utilize wood as the primary support for my design concept. As Maloof describes in his process, I make a nonverbal statement\textsuperscript{4} with my works and wood is the important element in my pieces that will lead to that statement. It is also important for my work to have function. Like Sam Maloof, no matter how sculptural my furniture becomes, if "it ceases to serve a functional need, it runs the risk of becoming art for art's sake and untrue to its nature."\textsuperscript{5}

The concepts for each piece I build comes from my personal experiences and feelings. I believe that part of the real meaning of art is real involvement with life, whether it be the complex statement of a novel, hidden beauty revealed in picture or sculpture, a gracefully formed piece of furniture, or a clever and effective door knob.\textsuperscript{6} One well known furniture artist, Rosanne Somerson, also successfully expresses her own personal feelings through her work. Somerson states that, "each time a person sits in one of my chairs, eats at one of my tables, or opens one of my cabinets, I want him to feel that particular piece was made especially for him to use."\textsuperscript{7} I hope to help to generate these same special feelings through my furniture to viewers recalling their own experiences. Wood is the material I want to utilize because I

\textsuperscript{4} Fairbanks, P. 15.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., P. 15.
\textsuperscript{7} Fairbanks, P. 189.
believe “solid wood is honest and real”.  

Different materials have different characteristics. When someone asks, “if the artist makes something beautiful with wood, will it be different from what he makes with steel or stone?” my response is clearly yes, there is a difference. The solidity and volumetric qualities in wood automatically provides a chance to shape my furniture into organic forms when other materials cannot do this as well as wood can. Wood is the essence of the concept and furniture I design. My goal is to create unique, hand-crafted furniture.

The medium always makes a contribution. But the contribution can be slight, minimal. Normally, the wood makes only a minimal difference in the work of art, a greater difference in a work of craftsmanship, and a maximal difference in the purely confrontational situation where we attend to the wood itself.

My furniture is made only with wood; it can not be produced with other materials without altering the design, concept, or form. This is reflected in all of my thesis pieces. Eric Anderson and George Earle, two authors of a book called Design and Aesthetics in Wood, said, “The object of the artist is . . . . to make something beautiful. Maybe he will do this best by paying attention to what wood can or cannot do.” And they continued saying,

From the aesthetic stand point, there is nothing that can

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9 Anderson and Earle, P. 24.
10 Ibid., P. 24.
11 Ibid., P. 24.
quite compare with wood. The many limitations on the market merely emphasize the aesthetic qualities and the wide spread public acceptance of wood as a beautiful material. It does have beauty; it has texture, pattern, and color which cannot be matched else where.12

Not all artists agree with what Anderson and Earle believe. Tom Loeser, a contemporary furniture maker, challenges this reasoning. Loeser, who uses artificial color and pattern to elucidate his shapes, says that "once you know the correct way to do things, you can never go back."13 He thinks that the chance of one venturing out and inventing one's own kind of system decreases as one learns and increases respect for the traditional way of doing things. He also mentions that

I'm really against the preciousness of materials. Another thing furniture has against it is that it takes a hell of a long time to make stuff, and the more hours you put into a piece, the tighter you get and the less willing you are to take risks.14

It is my intention to investigate the possibilities for creating contemporary furniture without the help of any other media, other than wood. While I respect Loeser's views on furniture making, his approach is one that I have experienced in my undergraduate work and I no longer find that this philosophy applies to my own directions in wood.

12 Anderson and Earle, P. 167.
14 Ibid., P. 54.
The Works
Each of my furniture projects begin as a significant challenge. I found it difficult to focus first on the form and to focus secondly on surface embellishment for viewer interest. Therefore, I selected a clock as my first project (Figure 7). I could design a very sculptural clock, providing that there was clock movement in the structure. My clock directed my ideas for my next works. Experimental design in shaping and carving the clock then influenced my next projects. The concept was to practice all the shaping techniques that I would use in the vanity, my second project. Consideration for the color and arrangement of exotic wood choices, chakte coc and wenge, were critical to the finished work.

The clock was a combination of shaping a big round form in walnut, the largest part of the clock in size, as a background for other, smaller and more intricate parts. Delicate, small cherry numbers decreased as they progressed around the face of this round walnut, right to left. These numbers begin to appear from a small, red chakte coc pocket that was imbedded into the round walnut surface. A curved, wenge element connected this round form with the small walnut clock face. Here the movements were concealed.

The clock involved a minimal number of traditional woodworking techniques. There were simple, dowel joints where every number overlapped and the half-lap joints in each ends of the wenge piece connected the big and the small walnut forms. Even the big walnut form was hand-shaped with the angle grinder and a rasp. Instead of turning this round form on the lathe to get a perfect circle, I preferred to create the
Figure 7: Clock
(Background: Clock Initial Sketches)
irregular rounded surface shape I created by hand. All the elements were pre-cut with either the band saw or scroll saw and then shaped with an angle grinder, a rasp and sand paper. A scroll saw was used to cut the delicate shapes like numbers. Numbers were shaped in the same way, except in this step I used a rasp and sand paper because they were too small to shape with the big grinder (Figure 8). The clock face was made in the same way, except before shaping, I drilled a hole first on the backside of the form to house the clock movements.

Walnut, wenge, chakte coc, and cherry are incorporated in the clock. My personal interpretation of tactile furniture is, for the first time, evidenced in the clock design. There exists a playfulness, in the delicate shaping of the numbers which express lyrical whimsy and playfulness. This is balanced by a smooth, organic clock face surface. The clock is physically inviting to touch and handle. “Hidden beauty indeed is to be found in man’s ingenious way of using wood.”15

Exotic wood and the choice of organic form were evident in my second work, the vanity (Figure 9). This work was inspired by a song of praise, entitled As the Deer pants for the Water. This project expresses my appreciation for God and the people I care about. I set up an environment expressive of feelings that were conveyed in the hymn. I selected bird’s eye maple to interpret the sand on the side of the river. A deep river of dark walnut was incorporated for the table top. A round bowl with a cover symbolized a rock. A back-lit, curly maple mirror sug-

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15 Anderson and Earle, P. 29.
Figure 8: Clock Detail
(Background: Clock Initial Sketches)
Figure 9: Vanity - Front View
(Background: Vanity Form Study Sketches)
gested Moses’ burning ambush. Two red containers created sound as they were removed from and replaced to their location in the vanity (Figure 10). The words from the hymn provided me with symbolic elements. The audience does not have to know the exact meaning for all the symbolism and the whole story behind the vanity. My intention was simply to capture the feeling expressed in the hymn. I interpreted the lyrics as a message of beauty, intimacy, imagination, and happiness. A famous woodworker, Rosanne Somerson explains a similar concept in an interview in American Craft magazine January, 1994. She talked about a couch she designed that expressed her personal experiences. She said,

The couch does not seek to replicate either experience but instead provides an environment in which others can conjure similar feelings that might derive from very different experiences. If someone says, ‘This reminds me of parasailing in the Caribbean.’ I’m not going to be upset, as long as it gives him or her a way to get to something that was a pleasant experience.16

The organic vanity encourages the audience to examine it closely, perhaps even to touch the piece (Figure 11). It is small enough to suggest intimacy, yet large enough to function well as a vanity. It is designed with many small bowls, adding a distinct feature to the work. If this vanity was designed in metal, glass or stone, not only it would be extremely heavy but also it would seem cold and impersonal.

The templates were made with 1/8” masonite from the full-sized

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Figure 10: Vanity Detail 1 - Chakte Coc Containers 

Background: Vanity Mirror Sketches
Figure 11: Vanity - Bottom View  
(Background: Vanity Initial Sketches)
foam core model to router the exact shapes. This vanity needed to be precisely cut since it involved many different angles and wall hanging hardware. With these templates the mirror frames were traced. The mirror frame had both hidden and visible mortise and tenon joints. After the inside frames were cut accurately, the outsides were cut roughly for gluing and clamping the frames. Then the outsides were also routed accurately. The back wooden bracket holding the mirror was screwed directly onto the wall and the keyhole brass hardware was used to hang the mirror on the bracket. The table was stack laminated, although there was another set of mortise and tenon joints in the table and the leg. Color was derived from maple, curly and bird's eye maple, wenge, walnut and chakte coc. Chakte coc was used only on small details, to accentuate the piece. All shaping was done both before and after gluing. The covered bowl was an example (Figure 12). A hole was cut out from the table surface. A roughly carved walnut bowl was then glued underneath the table right below the hole that was cut out. Then the final shaping of the bowl was done. The same techniques were used for the opposite end of the table where two small holes were cut out for two chakte coc containers and the stacked laminated bird's eye maple member. The differences were at the leg where one set of mortise and tenon joints were located before laminating. This accommodated a leg which supported the table and necessitated my using a new tool, a powered Dremmel tool, that was used to carve the small containers. The table was supported at three different points and locations: a leg, a wall, and the wenge mirror frame.
Figure 12: Vanity Detail 2 - Bowl, Cover, and Handle
(Background: Vanity Form Sketches)
I enjoyed the process of transforming rough wood into a smooth form. I rough-cut my shape on a band saw. Next, I laminated walnut layers for the vanity. Then I began to shape the wood with a power grinder and a rasp. Finally the wood was transformed into its final form. Then the finishing oil was applied and darkened the vanity.

I dedicated the last of my thesis to my parents, the subject and the title of the next piece, the rockers (Figure 13). I want to recognize my mother and father, in gratitude for their support and love, and assisting me in my educational pursuits.

I wanted to approach the wood differently with the rockers. I designed these rockers to have contrast between their straight and curve lines. This was similar to my textured, wood experimentation in the vanity. Juxtaposing straight and curved lines was the main concept for the rockers. The straight lines represent Oriental culture and the curves symbolize Western culture. Traditionally the rockers themselves symbolize a couple, sitting side by side, holding hands (Figure 14). I added a traditional Korean architectural feature. The backs of the rockers suggest sliding door design, emphasizing the heritage of my parents. Only three species of wood were used. I chose a very white, curly maple, along with cherry and walnut. This light, curly maple gave my rockers a contemporary appearance, unlike traditional, dark rockers. My selection of cherry and walnut was intentional. The two rockers were sized differently; one is little bit smaller than the other to distinguish the female and the male, mother and father, rockers. The use of different wood
Figure 13: Rockers
(Background: Rockers Initial Sketches)
Figure 14: Rockers - Front
(Background: Rockers Initial Sketches)
species helped to differentiate the rocker’s identities. Cherry denoted feminity. The dark walnut gave the impression of the dignified, male figure. This concept worked best when these two rockers were positioned side by side, so that the relationship could be easily recognized.

Each rocker was identified by human traits. This was especially evident in arm rests for the rockers. They were bent toward each other, reaching, as if to hold hands. The smaller rocker was designed to be positioned left of the larger walnut rocker, in order to create this humanistic gesture. The texture of curly maple reinforced the concept.
Conclusion
It is easier to paint wood like Tom Loeser suggests. It is very forgiving. One can always fill mistakes with wood filler, sand the surface well and paint over it with many layers. Two years ago I would have totally agreed with what he said because that was what I was doing. My first cabinet was not artistic. It was not truly functional or sculptural. It was an Industrial Design solution to furniture making. Today in my woodworking, I find it important to use the full potential of each wood selected. I have just begun the learning process by building this new furniture series. Like Loeser mentioned earlier, this furniture took a longer time to execute than my previous painted furniture. However, I don’t agree with Loeser’s thinking that people are not willing to take risks in developing their own style when they are caught up in a traditional woodworking approach. One can successfully develop a personal system and style no matter how much one considers wood as a precious material and has experienced traditional woodworking. “Wood is a material related to man, a material that fills a need in human consciousness . . . “17

I have learned to truly appreciate wood. At first I was nervous about the idea of not using surface cover-ups, like dyes, epoxy, paints or stains. I also developed a style and a system for designing my own furniture that could be understood, appreciated and have strong aesthetic qualities. Wood allows my work to be unique and expressive. This is more evident as the wood ages, darkens, and wears out which are the

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unique qualifications of wood that no other materials have. Now I can more fully appreciate Sam Maloof, George Nakashima, James Krenov and many other contemporary woodworkers who have employed traditional woodworking techniques in their work. Through their work and my personal explorations, I have begun to recognize that wood does not require surface embellishment as a criteria for creating contemporary furniture. Wood has intrinsic qualities that gives it substance and beauty, and wood also provides me the full range of many other possibilities for me to explore. Most importantly, perhaps, wood can best express my design concepts, simple or complex as they may be.
Thesis Plates
Plate 1: Clock
Plate 2: Vanity - *As the Deer Pants for the Water*
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Jody Clowes, “Romancing the Surface”, American Craft, August/ September 1994, Vol. 54/ No. 4, P. 54-57, 68.


