



# WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

[www.sonomawoodworkers.com](http://www.sonomawoodworkers.com)

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## April Meeting: An Evening with Ejler Hjorst-Westh



### inside:

May Meeting Notice  
April Meeting Report  
Calendar

Artistry in Wood 2011  
Stickly Exhibit

Wood Artistry Report  
Essay by Ejler Hjorst-Westh

## May Meeting Notice

We are sorry to announce that there will be no meeting in May. Bruce Johnson has many commitments pile up on him that will take him away from his shop in Cazadero in the coming month. We are thus forced to re-schedule a visit to Bruce's place for some time next year. We and Bruce apologize for this. We hope that members will attend instead the Wooden Boat Challenge on April 30.

The Challenge is part of the Bodega Bay Fish Fest: The Wooden Boat Challenge is at Westside Park on Saturday, April 30th. Teams will be given a set of supplies, several sheets of plywood, one by twos, screws, caulking, etc., and are expected to construct a usable little boat in three hours. The construction contest starts at 10 AM and ends at 1:00 PM and the race starts at 1:45 pm. SCWA will be fielding two teams, so let's get out there and root them on. There is an admission fee of \$10.00.

How to get there? From Sebastopol head west on Bodega Avenue, and then north on Route 1 to Bodega Bay. Go past town and take a left onto Eastshore Rd. Take first right onto Bay Flat Rd. Continue onto Westshore Rd to Westside County Park.

Art Hofmann, Program Director

## Calendar

Here is the calendar for the next few months:

June 7th - Kevin Drake

July 12th - Artistry in Wood judging night

August (TBD) - Artist night at the museum

## April Meeting Report

*By Art Hoffman , Michael Burwen*

The April meeting at the Rancho Cotate High School woodshop was called to order at 7 PM by our Chairman, Bill Taft, who reminded us about the Wooden Boat Challenge (three hours, build a boat that is water-tight enough to row around a buoy). Our Association is sponsoring two teams, both of which have student members. Also, it was announced that Mike Wallace is forming a sub-group of the organization for members interested in improving skills. Mike reminded us, too, that John de Marchi had some of his antique chisels for sale, with handles turned by the maestro himself.

Art Hofmann introduced the evening's speaker, Ejler Hjorst-Westh, the chairmaker, teacher at the College of the Redwoods (COR), and fisherman from Elk on the Mendocino Coast. Ejler's presentation began with a search through the past concerning chairs and their function and meaning, an historical-philosophical investigation that then centered on the evolution

of the modern chair which he traces to the Art Deco movement of the 20's and 30's. He then delved into his personal history of chair-making, illustrating his points with an example, and how its design had grown through a series of chairs over the course of several decades. Over the course of the evening, it became clear that Ejler's passion is hitched to his intellect: his talk on chairs conveyed an intense search for honesty in form and materials as well as a stubborn justification for handcraft at a point in history where society does not have much regard for it. It was indeed inspiring.

Here are a few high points of Ejler's talk:

Chairs have a strong relationship with their function, namely to hold our frames. Thus even the parts of their frames mirror our bodies with their anthropomorphic names; legs, arms, back rests, and head rests. Using stick figure chairs, he gave us a quick design history. The box or stump, the stool, the chair with a straight back, a curved back, and, finally, arm rests.

Ejler brought along two chairs, one of his making, the other, an old American-made, chrome chair of the sort we have all seen. He has a set of these chairs at home with a matching table. He says he has learned a lot from the chrome chair, and has applied what he has learned to his craft. The chrome chair, he says, has its roots in Art Deco, while his chairs have their roots in the Danish Modern style that evolved in the '50s in Denmark where Eljer grew up.

The individual chair is a recent historical development. Traditionally, people sat on either the floor, stools, or benches. Manufacturing has made chairs affordable and now we have a surplus of them. Chairs have a political context, and symbolic value. They serve as thrones, both secular and religious. The 'chairman' is an important person. The 'floor' addresses the 'chair.' The president is, if we check the etymology, the one who sits in front of, or before others. At home, in bygone times, many of us were taught not to sit in daddy's chair.

Design considerations followed: Modern chairs have to have a visual function as well as a practical one. They not only need to work, but have to look good, and that is the challenge for the chair designer. The modern chair, stripped of excess wood, form following function as far as possible, can not be cumbersome and padded, except for the seat. Chairs have to 'make a promise' i.e. dinner, a game of football, a good read. They should promise comfort, not pain, unlike some of the ultra-modern studio furniture.

Ejler's study of chairs is very personal. Having bought several Wegner (Hans Jørgen Wegner - a leader of the Danish Modern movement) deck chairs at a garage sale, and on the basis of experience with other chairs, Ejler narrowed his design parameters. The Wegner chairs are initially comfortable, but soon that feeling fades and the sitter wants to get up and out of it. How comfortable does a chair need to be? What is its function? Receiving a commission for some backed bar chairs,

Ejler did his research, hitting every bar in town. Some customers wanted a quick drink, others to socialize, and still others to drown their sorrows. His high bar stool had to accommodate a range of purposes. The chair designer has to answer the question, “What is this chair supposed to do?” In general, take any parameters that you can find, and work within them.



Ejler makes some chairs with a solid seat, and some with an upholstered seat; In response to a question concerning seat height, he suggested using 18” for an upholstered seat and 17” for a solid seat. His chrome chairs and the matching table have given him much information, made as they were “back when America was a manufacturing country.”

Although Ejler never made a chair during his time at the Fine Woodworking program at COR, he did a drawing that he liked and held onto it. Later, that drawing served as his inspiration when he went into chair-making. After a few years, he did a full set of chairs based on that drawing with the help of a fellow woodworker. He showed us a photograph of the chairs and the dining table. He said the commission was a financial bust, but he learned a lot, and the photographs were great. Subsequently, he gained more experience, and learned to listen carefully to what his clients said they wanted. For example, a client said he wanted something “sleek and rugged that looked like it might belong on a wooden ship, like the handle of an ax”.

Over time, he made a whole series of related designs. At one point his chairs were bulky, throne-like, with enough wood in them for two chairs. Later his design objective became reducing the amount of wood used. This journey ultimately resulted in his ‘Casper’ chair model, light and strong, with an obtuse angle theme that goes throughout the chair like a leitmotif.



Ejler showed us how to use a set of draftsmen’s ducks, heavy leaden objects, about the size of a grapefruit, but shaped like a little whale with

bent points on the ends, with which he can take a slender stick of very straight grained old growth redwood, bend it and keep it in place with the little points. He adds tension on the ends by putting another duck on each end, a very neat approach that yields the line that he needed for the back of the rear chair leg. Little by little, he arrives at a mock-up of the chair, cut at first in scrap redwood. He concentrates on the back leg of the chair, goes more free form and draws directly on the wood. Each part might go through six variants before he is satisfied. Wood selection sometimes takes him days.

The way the wood is milled is crucial to obtaining strength as well as beauty. Ejler uses rift sawn wood for legs and arms, cut in bookmatched pieces. When assembled the grain orientation has to be opposing and the curve of the grain must follow the shape of the piece. For example, the curve of an arm has to follow the natural curve of the chair part. Again, one must make sure to reverse the grain pattern when cutting matching parts, i.e. if thick arm part is at bottom of board, then the thick arm part of the next section will be on the other end of the board.

This composite curve follows the shape. When in doubt, get a piece of rift sawn wood and cut into it. He sometimes takes a piece of pine, cuts a curve, separates the parts, opens it up to re-instill the idea about which way curves run in rift sawn wood. Ejler: “Then when I have my mock up, I draw on my paper or a piece of MDF, two views, a side view and a plan view, which is really the seat plan. If I have doubt, then I do the back view as well, then I can see how the joints crowd each other.”

The leg joining the seat joint is the most important joint in the chair. Ejler uses loose tenon joinery throughout. He came up with his own solution to the joint where the arm rest support meets the seat, which he solved with a tapered dovetail. He created a notch for the support with some aides of his devising. “I look at the joint, on a sample that’s laying around. After making many jigs, all of them got boiled down to two blocks of wood; jigs are not the end of evolution, merely the beginning”. “Jigs are just a crutch”, said James Krenov. Ejler didn’t believe that when he began, but does now.

Using a facsimile of one of his side rails, Ejler cut the joint that he invented in our presence, using a square, a scribe, and a sharp pencil. He made a notch in an arm piece into which its support strut was going to live. He works from 90 degrees whenever he can, which he recommends; i.e. at least one element of the strut is cut at 90 degrees. One face of the notch is at 5 degrees, and thus the strut acts like a dovetail. He used an inexpensive dozuki, that cuts aggressively, fitted with a stop and a guide block on the side of the saw to determine the depth of cut. Then he switched the arrangement to the other side, and chiseled out the waste, cleaning it with a shoulder plane. He hammered in the strut, but it was tight, which is what he wants, since he can sneak up on it later with chisel and/or shoulder plane if necessary to get a perfect fit.

Ejler discussed steam bending versus laminating. When the

back slat is a simple curve, he uses steam (which he calls “fun”). He learned that spring-back after steaming is uniform across different woods. If the back splats are a serpentine, then he laminates because steam-bending a reverse curve requires too many jigs.

He showed us his first chair, made of ash, which is, he says, is flawed, and his latest chair, which was made to go with a with a mid-1800’s writing desk. It is rather squarish, a far throw from his Danish-modern comfort zone.



He cited the long history of woodworking. He sees woodworkers as a kind of kind of retro avant-garde. “I refuse to abandon the legacy of woodcraft”. He appreciates wood as a material that has accompanied man throughout human history. Life

depended on our skills and knowledge. Concerning the delicate structure of his chairs people ask if there is enough wood in these joints to keep these chairs together? Yes there is, he says. His signature chair, he says, is sound and is worth keeping. And thus the craft is worth preserving. Chairs offer challenges in aesthetics, engineering, joinery, and design, personal discoveries that carry over to any other woodworking endeavor. Thus, the world does indeed in many senses, need another chair.

After a round of applause there were some questions. Not all of Ejler’s tenons, are loose, some are live, i.e. the back slats, where there is no point to a smaller tenon. The reason that he uses loose tenons is that allows him to cut the shoulder on the table saw. Then he cuts the mortise. That way, you’re not always chasing the shoulder with a shoulder plane.

He uses yellow glue where he can forcefully clamp without bowing any elements. When he cannot clamp with great pressure, he uses Gorilla glue. He waxes (Clapham’s Beeswax) the area around the joint before gluing, and removes the wax with naphtha. The technique takes practice, but it is worthwhile learning.

For finish he uses an oil-varnish blend (any “Danish Oil” formulation works), usually in three coats., He sands to 320 before glue up, and wet-sands the first coat of finish with 400 grit paper. The subsequent 2 coats are rubbed in with steel wool before wipe-off.

Back slats are not glued in order to maintain flexibility. All tenons are single tenons. Corner joints in bottoms are reinforced

with corner blocks fastened with screws. He hires a upholsterer to cover his seats, at a typical cost of \$100, but says you can do your own. He cuts the seat frame for the upholstery from 1/2” ApplePly. He dishes out the edge a bit so it is not feel-able by the sitter.

Ejler concluded his presentation with a philosophical homily that captures his thoughts about chairs. You will find it on page 4 of this month’s Forum.

## Artistry in Wood 2011

The dates for the show are as follows:

July 8 - Acceptance of pieces

July 13 - Judging event

July 15 - Opening

August (TBD) - Artist night at the museum

September 25 - Closing

## Stickley Exhibit

Following is a description of a show that is coming to the San Diego Museum (the ONLY California museum to be exhibiting this show)

### **Gustav Stickley and the American Arts and Crafts Movement**

**June 18, 2011 Through September 11, 2011**

“The San Diego Museum of Art is proud to present Gustav Stickley and the American Arts and Crafts Movement. Organized by the Dallas Museum of Art, this is the first nationally touring exhibition to focus on the career of Stickley (1858–1942), one of the leading figures of the American Arts and Crafts movement. The exhibition will examine Stickley’s contributions to the history of American design and architecture during his most productive and creative period, from 1900 to 1913, and will provide new insights into the artistic, commercial, and social context of Stickley’s work. From The Craftsman magazine to his own stores in New York, Washington and Boston, Stickley offered customers a complete lifestyle based on his philosophy of simple design and quality materials. Ranging from furniture to metalware and embroidered textiles to architectural designs, the majority of the more than 100 objects in the exhibition are from private collections and have never been seen before by the public.

One of the exhibition’s highlights will be the re-creation of the dining room first displayed in the 1903 Arts and Crafts Exhibition organized by Stickley and exhibited in his Syracuse Craftsman Building. Other highlights include an armoire, ca. 1907-1912, which Stickley kept for his private use in the decades after he sold his business, and works showcasing his experimentation with different varnishes, which can still be

seen as a patchwork of colors on the undersides of the drawers. Also on view will be a rare armchair, c. 1903, with copper and wood inlay reflecting Stickley's brief foray into decorated Arts and Crafts furniture influenced by the work of progressive British and Scottish designers.

The exhibition finds a particularly appropriate venue in San Diego, which has a rich heritage of Arts and Crafts architecture and decorative art. Communities such as North Park and Mission Hills are well known for their historic homes from this era. Marston House, at the edge of Balboa Park, was designed by local architects William Sterling Hebbard and Irving John Gill and is one of California's finest examples of the Arts and Crafts movement. San Diego also saw the production of Arts and Crafts pottery, tiles, and metal work."

The San Diego Museum of Art is at:  
1450 El Prado  
Balboa Park  
San Diego, CA 9210

## **Wood Artistry Report**

I was surprised at the interest we had at the SCWA January meeting where I demonstrated the Orion-4 prototype speakers.

I did not know we had that many audiophiles in the membership.

We completed the changes to the design and have just returned from Atlanta where we showed them at AXPONA.

John Atkinson, editor of Stereophile magazine wrote: "Definitely one of my two best sounds at Axpona ... the "William Tell" section from Shostakovich's Symphony 15 had superb dynamic range, with a "quiet" quality that seemed like there was a lower level of spurious behavior from the room. This allowed a wealth of detail to be perceived even when the music was itself quiet."

For those that attended and heard the prototype version I thought might like to know of our success.

The other best sound was from a cartridge for a turntable using some \$66,000 speakers.

Don Naples

## **Does the world need another chair?**

An essay by Ejler Hjorst-Westh

As a furniture maker I have an unshakable confidence in the virtue of my craft. Thus it is my contention that the further society moves into virtual, synthetic reality, the stronger is our compulsion to become and remain the retro avant-garde.

By that I mean that we must be at the forefront of preserving the legacy of wood craft, a legacy rooted in the very beginning

of human cultural history.

Since stone age, or before, up through all the ages: copper, bronze, iron, until about 150 years ago, almost everything was made of wood: farm equipment, bridges, ships, carriages, even airplanes. These weren't stone age, bronze age etc. They were all wood age.

And now we are in the age of alloys and polymers, except for pulp and lumber, and doors and windows for as long as that lasts.

We used to be really good woodworkers, and with fairly primitive tools at that. At the peak of our skills and knowledge we had no more use for this heritage. I don't blame cultural evolution, history, progress. But I refuse to abandon our legacy of wood craft.

In 1854, the Flying Cloud, a clipper ship, set a world speed record, sailing around the Horn, fully loaded with cargo and passengers. That record stood until 1989, when it was broken by a high tech catamaran, by 3 hours.

We have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. I find that disturbing and crazy. I do not look at wood as just another construction medium. I look at wood as nature's wonderful engineering, challenging our skills and knowledge, carrying our cultural progress: that's how we have used wood, our very survival depended on deep and growing knowledge of the amazing and subtle properties, from balsa wood to ebony, amazing beauty, amazing emotional appeal.

I have been asked about the delicate structure of my chairs: is it sound?

Yes, it is!

Will my chair survive being thrown across the room?

No. Nobody would do that!

Why?

Because it is worth keeping, worth taking care of. It will last a long time for that reason.

The chair offers great challenges of aesthetics and engineering. It forces us to look closely at wood properties, design, joinery, function, beauty. These personal discoveries carries over to any other woodworking endeavors we undertake - with much more confidence.

We cannot bring back the clipper ship or the carriage. But we haven't abandoned the chair yet.

Yes, the world needs another chair.

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# WOOD FORUM

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**Join Us!** The Sonoma County Woodworkers Association is a 31-year old association of over one hundred professional and amateur woodworkers who meet monthly at members' shops to share experiences, ideas, techniques, and mutual enjoyment for creating with wood. Membership entitles you to attend monthly meetings, receive Wood Forum, our monthly newsletter, attend our annual show, and apply for seminars and demonstrations. Annual dues, payable at the beginning of each calendar year, are \$25. New members joining after September 30 may, for \$35, have their membership extend through December 31 of the following year. Please consider joining the SCWA and meeting people who, like yourself, are interested in the art and business of fine woodworking. Send dues to:

**PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402 Santa Rosa, CA 95402**

*Wood Forum* is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles, notices, photographs, announcements, and comments for inclusion in the publication. Advertisements are accepted with a per-entry cost of \$5 per column inch. All submissions for the April issue must be received by April 15, 2011. You may submit your entries to the editor listed below.

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# WOOD FORUM

## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Yes, I would like to join the SCWA and meet other people who are interested in the craft, the art, and the business of fine woodworking. Here is my application. I have enclosed a check for the annual dues of \$25 that covers my subscription to Wood Forum and entitles me to attend the monthly meetings.

Send check and completed application to: Sonoma County Woodworkers Association  
PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402

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