



# WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

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

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## January Meeting Robert Erickson, Furniture Maker



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# February Meeting Notice

Who: John Lavine on Chinese and Japanese Joinery

Where: Wigfield Woodworking, 660 Lakeville St., Petaluma, CA 94952

When: February 7, 7:00 PM

John Lavine will talk about Japanese and Chinese joinery and the possibilities for its use in modern furniture construction. John is well-known to SCWA members, having served as a judge for several of our shows, the latest one in '11, and as a past presenter concerning his editorial efforts at *Woodwork Magazine*, a job he left several years ago.

The meeting will take place at Steve Wigfield's shop in Petaluma. To get there, take the Highway 116 exit in South Petaluma, then go right (north) on Lakeville Street. Look for Steve's address on the left (west) side of the street. Parking is limited, so we encourage car-pooling. Also, seating is virtually non-existent, so you are strongly advised to bring your own chair if you expect to sit down.

## January Meeting

*By Jim Heimbach*

Our guest speaker for January's meeting was Robert Erickson. Robert gave an excellent PowerPoint presentation covering Designing, Shaping Wood, and Marketing and Selling furniture.

Robert Erickson is a renowned woodworker of 41 years, best known for his chair making skills and design. He has received many awards and honors and honors over the years. His work has been shown in many galleries and one-man shows and is included in the several public collections including the Yale

University Art Gallery and the Smithsonian Art Museum. Robert has also written a number of articles featured in leading woodworking magazines

Robert began his presentation by introducing us to his shop and work environment. He built a Norwegian style office at his Nevada City home, where he has been since 1970. His shop is entirely off the power grid using a large 18 megawatt solar power array. He air dries his wood until about 20% and his solar powered wood drying kiln for final finishing brings his wood down to about 6%. It holds the wood at about 20 degrees above outside ambient temperature.

Robert then took us through the process of how he shaped one of his arms and front legs which are characterized by flowing curves rather than more linear or geometric forms. A key point he made was that establishing clean, even facets helps produce more consistent, symmetrical pieces of furniture because facet edges provide feedback on how your shaping is progressing.

He first uses templates to draw reference lines on each plan face of the wood he is shaping. He uses a band saw to make the cuts, and Maloof style to cut twisting shapes freehand. After establishing the initial four sides he then marks his piece to produce flat facets, or chamfers, between the four existing sides. He uses the band saw to cut the initial facets. Robert doesn't recommend using the band saw in this way, because it can be dangerous, but he does it all the time. The secret to the technique is to keep at least part of the piece on the tabletop at all times. The safer way to shape the facets is to use a #49 patternmaking rasp, or a 1 1/8 in. Makita belt sander, a tool he highly recommends.

He now has eight sides on the piece. Robert will shape as many additional facets as needed, paying attention so that each facet is clean and smooth. He may have up to thirty-two facets before he smooths the facets together to get to the final form. He may decide to leave the hard lines of some facets to produce the Sam Maloof style interplay of rounded form and hard line edges.

Robert uses the nose of his belt sander to produce the transitions of his contoured joints. Where he needs to make tighter radius curves he uses a Nitto Kohki pneumatic belt sander with a ½ “ diameter nose. Another tool he uses is a Bosch 1278VS sander, which has a nose less than ½ “. Other tools he uses are the classic #49 & #50 patternmaker rasps, a spokeshave to make fair, even curves and remove bumps, and a ¾” single cylinder sander inserted into a drill.

Robert recommends Ekamont sandpaper from Sweden, which he finds lasts much longer than Klingspor or other similar quality sandpapers.

He uses the Makita belt sander in three ways: plunging the nose; the foot for creating a more flat, fair surface; and the neck, which doesn't have any backing, for smoothing things out.

For initial shaping, he uses 40-grit sandpaper. He also uses a Dynabrade pneumatic random orbit sander for smoothing after shaping.

Many of us found Robert's method of scooping a seat particularly interesting, though I am not sure how many of us were interested in adopting his use of a chain saw to accomplish the initial removal of wood to make a contoured, tractor style seat. He said that when he began woodworking, he had a number of chainsaws at hand and got used to handling them. Today he uses Stiehl electric chainsaws.

To shape a seat, he starts with 8/4 boards glued, or perhaps coopered into a scooped seat. After drawing the inside outline of his seat and highlighting it with blue masking tape to make the line clearly visible (even with sawdust flying), Robert cuts a series of front-to-back kerfs with his chain saw, feathering it out to the back edge. This he follows with another series of kerfs at right angles, finally removing wood from the seat with the nose as you would carve an eagle in a tree.

Though he uses masking tape to provide some protection from spraying chainsaw oil, he is careful to limit the amount of oil, otherwise it throws too much oil onto the seat. Robert asserts that, although using a chainsaw seems really crude, anybody, after

an hour of practice can develop a surprising proficiency.

He can shape a seat with a chainsaw, start to finish, in about an hour. He follows the chainsaw work by smoothing and shaping using an auto-body grinder with 36-grit abrasive. Michael Wallace asked whether he made any marks to guide how deep to cut the saw kerfs. Robert replied that some of his workers placed a depth gauge on the bar so they can see how far to go down. He then creates a clean chamfer on the front of the seat so as not to cut into the thighs with one of his belt sanders using the foot first, then the neck to do the rounding over. This shaping is followed by using a random orbit sander through several steps up to 400 grit.

Robert made the point that you can create some drama and dynamic in your work by removing material under the seat and at the corners, or at the front of an arm, thereby directing the eye to the edge. It accentuates the hard lines and makes the piece look more delicate.

At this point Robert moved to furniture design. He showed us several of his designs. The first was his Van Muyden chair, which has been particularly popular over the years. He recently reworked it for a client who wanted a leather upholstered version. He upholsters using a ½” plywood substrate, with the seat cut out, Elastabelt Italian webbing, latex rubber (the best, though illegal in California) or urethane foam and Dacron fabric. Robert has a leatherworker stretch the leather over the seat.

One of Robert's characteristic themes is the curved line, a simple bent laminated curve. He has used this design element repeatedly in his work. He discovered that, if you just pay attention to your environment, you can identify shapes, curves or forms that you can use in to inspire new furniture designs. A curved arm of one chair became the leg of another, and then the curved plank back of yet another.

In the mid-1970's, Robert invented a contoured floating seat back consisting of flat spindles that are not glued into the seat or headrest. They flex and adjust when leaned upon.

Several of his pieces are collaborations with Daniel Dole, an artist blacksmith from Berkeley. One of his tables has the tabletop ingeniously supported by some of Daniel's work where the metal support curls around from below clasping the top on the outside edge. While clasping the tabletop securely, the curled metal flexes allowing for wood expansion.

Robert's designs begin with a sketch. He finds that the more engaged a client is with the design process, the more ownership he has, and the more he is willing to pay for an expensive piece of furniture.

A sketch leaves a lot to the imagination, not providing a lot of detail, only a thumbnail. This provides a great start for developing an idea and just getting it out there. Robert provided an example of a sketch that resulted in a completed furniture piece in ebonized elm with madrone backslats. He found that when working in ebonized wood he had to provide natural wood accents to avoid a commercial, plastic, artificial look, while being careful to avoid crossing the line into the world of decorator colors, rather than the craftsman tradition he seeks to capture.

When someone asked a question on how to bring attention to the grain in ebonized wood to avoid the plastic look. Robert replied that using black aniline dye does allow the grain of the elm wood to show. He mentioned that Brian Boggs achieves a black coloring by using steel wool together with a South American tannic acid solution which results in a beautiful finish (see [http://www.popularwoodworking.com/techniques/ebonizing\\_wood](http://www.popularwoodworking.com/techniques/ebonizing_wood)).

Another design inspiration for Robert was the original version of the Adirondack chair called the Westport chair, designed by Thomas Lee in 1903. He loved the chair, went home and remembering the piece designed his own version, which he has varnished, painted, or used natural wood. He uses brass and bronze all throughout and supports them with a hidden, custom welded, powder coated steel frame. They are designed to withstand the elements for decades. He uses Epifanes varnish for his natural wood chairs, which he finds to be by far the best exterior varnish available with an epoxy primer. He

uses two-part custom colored epoxy paint for his painted chairs.

One interesting piece, which Robert related to marketing, was a madrone bench where the plank had an interesting story. The plank had a distinctive pattern at a particular growth ring. It had come from a tree he had cut below his house. He counted the rings and matched it to the year 1911, a year noted for the significant wildfire occurring at that time. Apparently fire had stimulated epicormic branching in the wood causing beautiful figuring. He was at the east coast at a show where he had been able to relate the story of the bench to a visitor from the Smithsonian. The story became an effective marketing tool for that bench. He went on to show examples of other furniture makers' work as examples of good design.

Robert still has to hustle after all these years building and marketing furniture. Robert spoke of the challenges of showing in outdoor shows, relating a horror story of encountering a micro burst thunderstorm with eighty mph winds blew the tents away. He said it is challenging to create an interior environment in an outdoor space.

Finally Robert related how he developed a design from one of Hans Wegner's classic chairs (PP 503), which came out in 1949, one of the best of the mid-century modern designs. He actually was given the chair, which was used in the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debate, and spent time with it in his shop. This seat has a wonderful curve that smoothly transitions from one arm into the back and then back to the other arm in one smooth piece. He turned over his design sketch to a graphic designer to turn it into a presentation for his client using a PhotoShop rendering.

Robert gave other examples of creating client presentations using CAD software (Alibre Design) that gives a client a photo-realistic idea of how the furniture piece will look, even to the point of rendering the surface it in the wood with which it will be made, and setting it in the room location the client has planned for the piece. This kind of work takes a ½ day to a day of work by someone experienced with the software. The design can then be used to generate patterns to use in construction.

Robert mentioned that most clients do not want to pay for design. They think that design should be rolled into the cost of the piece. Using a CAD program allows for a lot of playing and exploration at the design stage to really visualize how it is going to look before building a model or prototype. He affirmed that building a prototype or model is essential and can be very informative, interesting and creative, but using a CAD program at the front-end of the design process allows a lot of imaginative work to be done. Robert does not copyright his designs, though he does think there is a place for it. He said that his contoured floating back has been borrowed any number of times without his receiving any credit.

Robert completed his presentation showing a number of photographs he had taken of wild animals outside his shop. He followed his presentation with a Q&A session.

Someone asked Robert what role a web site has in one's marketing. Robert believes that a website is essential to have, as is a phone, etc. You can't get along without it, but he doesn't sell anything from his web site. A person has to know his work, has to have seen it in person and sat in his chairs. Then the website can be used as a reference.

Robert currently does five to six shows per year. He has a gallery show in Santa Fe this year, a major show where he will show new work. He is working on an iron and wood piece for that show right now. He has other shows scheduled in Baltimore, Atlanta, Saint Paul, and Chicago.

Robert said that some small outdoor shows have allowed him to meet clientele that don't go to the other shows. In his experience a small show can be better than a big one like the Smithsonian that attracts 30,000 people. Nonetheless, Robert insists that you have to show your work even though it is risky, expensive, and depressing if you don't sell anything.

Robert shows his work himself and does not use galleries, though he does occasionally show pieces at the Dovetail in Healdsburg. He said that, even though the price may be the same, people don't think they are getting a good deal at a gallery. But he also said that galleries are important in that they can

provide status. If someone has seen your work at a gallery, it may stimulate a sale later on.

Robert employs two workers including his son. He had more employees when things were going gangbusters in the 80's and 90's, but on average he has always employed about 2 ½ people, including himself.

Someone asked how many pieces Robert completed in a year. Last year he did 45, but he has done more than 100 pieces in some years.

In his gallery shows, he typically has from 10 to 30 pieces. Shows tie up a lot of resources.

In answer to a question on how he picked the particular shows he attends, Robert said that he shows some places because he has developed a clientele around a particular city. He mentioned that Boston, New York and LA are tough markets for him.

Michael Wallace asked what challenges Robert experienced in using power tools off the grid. Robert answered that, if he didn't tell you, you wouldn't notice. He has a 15 KW solar array, inverters, and batteries providing 110V and 220V single phase power to his shop.

When asked where he gets his wood, he mentioned Robert Beauchamp, [www.thewalnutplace.com](http://www.thewalnutplace.com), in Zamora, CA, northwest of Woodland.

Robert mentioned that his partner, Michael Henwood, is a wonderful teacher and a master finisher. He encouraged SCWA to invite him to give a session on finishing. He has refined a technique for finishing tabletops which he teaches very effectively.

Robert's final question asked what brought him to Norway. His wife is from Norway, so it was a marriage requirement to visit and experience Norwegian life. He has been there a couple times and had an exhibition in Bergen. He found it quite an education to find out how things are sold in Norway, a semi-Socialist country, where the idea of selling anything is a foreign concept! Artists, including woodworkers are all supported by government grants. Nevertheless he managed to sell all his pieces to people from the shipping industry!

We all appreciated the wealth of experience Robert brought. Another example of the excellent presentations we have come to expect at the Sonoma County Woodworker's Association. One new member asked, "Are all the presentations this good?"

## Calendar

February 7: John Lavine; Chinese and Japanese Joinery

March 6: Walter Kitindu; Musical Instruments, Artist Sculptor

April 3: Laura Mays; Furniture Maker, Educator from Ireland

May 19: Bruce Johnson; Sculptor

## From the Chairman

*By Michael Wallace*

Well, we kicked off 2012 in grand order, no? The presentation by Bob Erickson was interesting and enjoyable. There's more like that to come. So, come to a meeting, soon! We have over 100 paid up members, but when I do a head count, we're lucky to see 25 – 30 people. I know it's hard for some to come to a meeting. Given individuals' situations, it could be work, family, or just general disinclination that stops people from coming out. I understand and am sympathetic to those can't come out. But it would be nice if we saw more people. The Association spends up to \$300 for each presentation and one way we know if the presentations are the right ones, is by attendance. If the monthly presentations are not meeting your needs, please let us know. All of the officers' phone numbers are listed in each Forum and my email address is [mjmwallace@gmail.com](mailto:mjmwallace@gmail.com). Love to hear from you.

Prior to the general meeting, the officers got together and held our first meeting for the year. We had a lot of items on our agenda so we barely touched them in any depth. We'll be reporting back on the various topics, but chief among them is a revised By-Laws. Our By-Laws are outdated and often not helpful. Mike Burwen has taken this task on and the first task is to develop a proposed revision that will get a once over by the officers. After that, then it will go out to the general membership for comment and final approval. If you would like to help with this effort, and believe me, we would welcome it, please contact Mike at [mike@pamg.com](mailto:mike@pamg.com).

Our financial status was next on our list and we are looking at it very closely this year. We have a number of expensive items, like our annual show, that we need to make sure are covered by our annual dues. While our bank account remains healthy, we need to create a budget that reflects reality.

I am set on a goal to have monthly officer meetings, so if there is something that you would like us to discuss and resolve, please let us know.

Finally, I don't know if you're like me, but I tend to collect more woodworking magazines that have great projects and articles then I have time to read, understand and perhaps build.

For years, I have been hearing how in the "good old days", there was better writing, projects, etc. Well, I have a bunch of those older magazines, specifically "Fine Woodworking" and I just don't see where those magazines were better than today's. Sure, the earlier issues would have great articles from the likes of Krenov, Frid, and others and the project were challenging that often required you to fill in the "blanks" as it were. That said, the current crop of magazines (and there are more now than there were back in the '70's), seem to hold up. While some might cringe at "Wood" and its emphasis on the casual woodworker, there are others that are helping to further our craft. A good example is "Popular Woodworker". In the last two years, they have gone under a change and now have a new editor. The projects now, to me anyway, are much more interesting and challenging then they were 5 years ago. And there are others like it. I think the current

authors are very good. They seem to write clearly and specifically so that amateurs like me can follow along. I might never build specific projects but it helps to understand the techniques that are used as it might give me the confidence to try them in my next project.

What do you think? Do you think that the current crop of magazines is meeting your needs as a woodworker? If, so, which ones and how? Send me an email or just call and chat.

Well that wraps up this month's column. If you want to discuss any of my topics or ask a question about the association, please contact me.

## Digital Workshop

*By Michael Wallace*

This is a start of series of columns discussing how digital products are become more common in wood workshops. I hope that I can do justice to the scope of this topic and I hope that you will point me in the right direction when I go astray or get stuck. It should be interesting.

Go to your workshop right now and look through all your nooks and crannies (I have tons of those!) and pull out device (tool, measuring device, etc.) that has a digital readout. I bet you have more than one and I further bet that you probably bought the item in the last couple of years. Get use to it, you'll be see more in the near future.

In my workshop I have a digital inclinometer, caliper, scale and tape measure. On my, "want to buy list", is a router lift and a table saw fence with digital readouts and a small CNC machine. In my "dream shop", I also have one of those 3-D printers. Years ago, these devices just did not exist or were expensive and out the reach for most of us. Now, you can buy some of these tools at Rockler.

Just as power tools changed the woodworking industry, so will these new tools. They allow us to create to higher levels of tolerance and for those who

do woodworking for a livelihood, save time and money.

On the creative and design side, while CAD (computer aided design) software packages have been around for over 20 years, the price of ten was prohibitive. Not only that, but the packages were often hard to learn and required significant investment in computer power. With software like *SketchUp* from Google, which is free, it's possible to design a new table, chair or even a whole building in minutes and if you don't want to do your own design, there are plenty of free models available. Not only that but SketchUp is easy to learn and use.

So the digital revolution continues. I hope in the coming columns discuss how these tools are changing us as craftspeople. I know a few of you have actually invested money in CNC machines and if you would care to share your thoughts, please let me know.

Predicting the future is often fraught with traps, so I won't, but I can see the time when we will see objects being submitted to shows where the craftsman has not done a thing, other than to select the wood and perhaps the finish. Are these items equivalent to someone who spends hours at a table saw or lathe? Are they even art? What are your thoughts on this? What would you like to know? Let's explore this topic for a while and see what happens, ok? You know the drill, call or send me an email.

**Next month ... CNC machines.**

**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. Submit your entries to:

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**And you thought you were a good woodworker!**

## About the Association

The *Sonoma County Woodworkers Association* is a 32-year old association of more than 100 professional and amateur woodworkers. Monthly meetings are held at member's shops and other venues to share experiences, ideas and techniques, and to hear well-known woodworkers discuss their work. Each year, the Association sponsors the *Artistry in Wood* juried exhibit at the Sonoma County Museum at which members are invited to submit pieces. Annual dues of \$25 cover membership for one calendar year

## Officers of the Association

Chairman	Michael Wallace	824-1013
Vice-chairman	Michael Burwen	658-2844
Treasurer	James Heimbach	355-9013
Secretary	Bill Hartman	792-4460
Program Director	Art Hoffman	542-9767
Guild Director	Larry Stroud	823-1775
Artistry in Wood	Michael Matsumoto	869-1205
Librarian	Dennis Lashar	823-8471
Forum Editor	Michael Burwen	658-2844
Seminars	Bill Taft	794-8025





# Membership Application

I would like to join the SCWA to meet other people interested in the craft, the art and the business of fine woodworking. Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$25 for the annual dues. I understand that this fee entitles me to attend monthly meetings and to receive the Wood Forum newsletter by email or via the SCWA's Web site.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ Address 2 \_\_\_\_\_

City, Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Work Phone \_\_\_\_\_

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

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