FURNITURE DESIGN MARQUETRY VENEERING CARVING MILLWORK

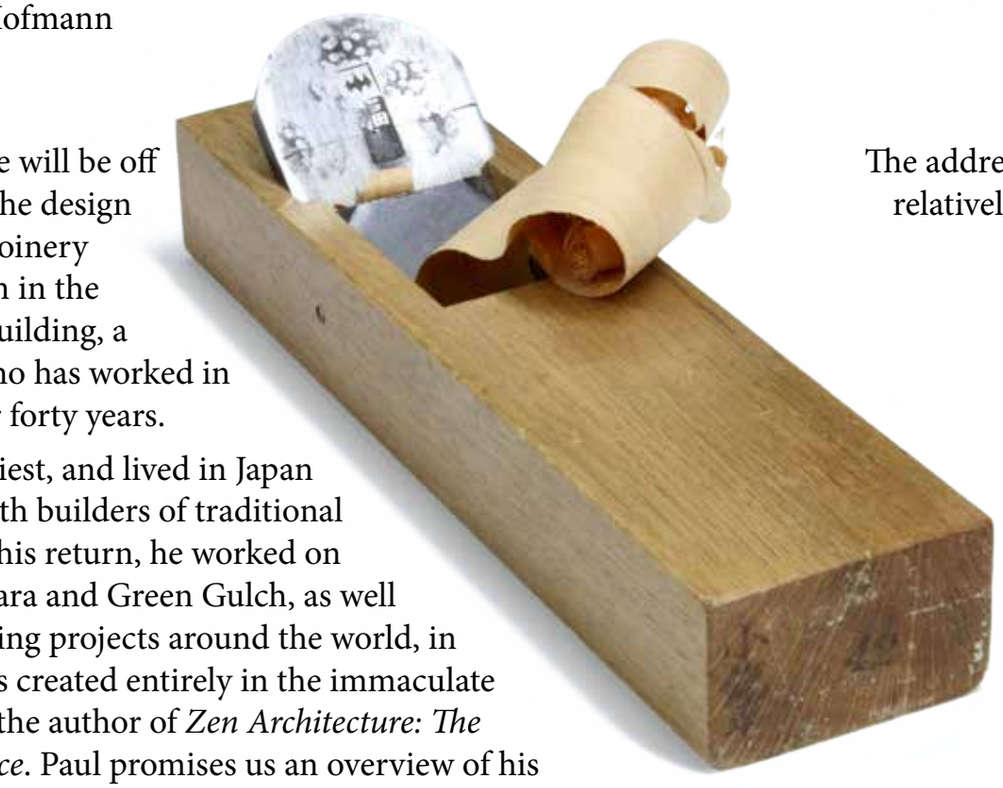
WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

Volume 34, Issue 4 April 2014

Zen Architect

by Art Hofmann



On Saturday, April 5th we will be off to Oakland for a visit to the design studio of Paul Discoe at Joinery Structures. Paul is an icon in the world of Japanese-style building, a designer and architect who has worked in the Japanese tradition for forty years.

He is an ordained Zen priest, and lived in Japan for five years, working with builders of traditional wooden buildings. After his return, he worked on major buildings at Tassajara and Green Gulch, as well as other traditional building projects around the world, in sumptuous private homes created entirely in the immaculate Japanese tradition. He is the author of *Zen Architecture: The Building Process as Practice*. Paul promises us an overview of his career, plus a tour of the Joinery Structures facility, with an emphasis on the furniture that he and his craftsmen create at Live Edge, one of Paul's companies, where woods harvested from the "urban forest" are used. Finally, he will discuss one of his latest projects, the Rikyu house, a green-oriented Japanese home.

The address of Joinery Structures is 2500 Kirkham St, Oakland, CA 94607, which is relatively near the maze where all the major highways join.

The meeting will begin at 11 am.

Driving time is about an hour and fifteen minutes. Carpooling is strongly urged. If you have a friend or acquaintance in the organization, then you can arrange to carpool privately via email or telephone. If you want to be a passenger and don't have a solid connection in the organization yet, this might be a good way to get to know people. The Petaluma Park and Ride, the ideal jumping off point, is on Lakeville H'wy south of Petaluma's downtown. Get off of the southbound freeway at Exit 472 B. You will be facing an In-and-Out Burger across the street on Lakeville H'wy. Take a left and look left, and you'll see the Park and Ride. We will meet there at 9:30 am. Either you can drive with others who will join you in your car, or you can get a ride with someone else.

Directions to Joinery Structures

The address of Joinery Structures is 2500 Kirkham St, Oakland, CA 94607, which is relatively near the Maze where all the major highways join.

Directions are as follows:

Take US-101 south from the Petaluma Park and Ride and go over the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge to I-580, which will be headed south. In approaching the MacArthur Maze take the Alameda/San Jose direction (I-880). Then take the Grand Ave. exit, which comes up quite soon. Turn left onto West Grand Ave. for 0.3 mi, then left onto Mandela Pkwy. 282 ft, slight right onto Peralta St. for 371 ft, first right onto 24th St. for 266 ft, first left onto Kirkham St. Destination will be on the right.

There is a Korean Restaurant nearby called Fuse Box - menu is online - which is reputed to be pretty good, small plates and that kind of thing. Alternatively, some blocks north is Arizmendi Bakery & Pizzeria at 4301 San Pablo Ave Emeryville, CA 94608.

Contemporary Rocker by John Moldovan

Photo by Tyler Chartier

26th Annual Artistry in Wood

Call for Entries

Since 1978 the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association has presented an annual exhibit showcasing members' creativity to the public. Beginning in 1989, the Sonoma County Museum has partnered with the SCWA in providing the venue for the exhibit. *Artistry in Wood* has become an annual favorite, attracting thousands of individuals interested in fine woodwork.

Entry in *Artistry in Wood* is open to all woodworkers. If you are not a member of the SCWA, a requirement to enter the show, you may join when submitting your entry. Entry and membership forms are available on the SCWA web site: www.sonomawoodworkers.com.

***Artistry in Wood 2014* – Show Schedule**

Wednesday, September 3rd, 9 am to 4 pm - Entry Day

Wednesday, September 10th, 7 pm - Judging and SCWA Show Awards Meeting

Saturday, September 13th, - Show Opening

Sunday, October 19th, - Show Closing

Monday, October 20th, 9 am to 4 pm - Pick-up Day

Please check the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association web site for any late schedule changes – www.sonomawoodworkers.com.

All entries are to be delivered to the Sonoma County Museum by 4 pm, Wednesday, September 3rd, which is the Entry Deadline. Entries are to be picked up from the Museum by 4 pm, Monday, October 20th.

Artistry in Wood is a juried Show. Entries will be juried by the SCWA Guild in accordance with the Jury Guidelines published in the Prospectus / Entry Form. All entries should be within the scope and spirit of fine woodworking.

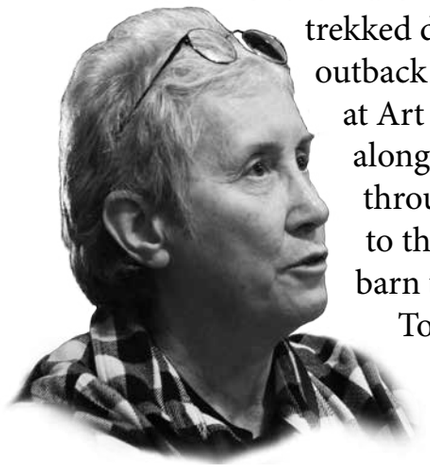
Entries will be judged for awards by an independent panel of judges. Entries are accepted in the following categories: Furniture, Turning, Art, and Miscellany.

For further information please review the prospectus available at www.sonomawoodworkers.com.

Questions? Contact: Scott.Clark@ispinwood.com (707-578-0331)

At Home with a Guitar-Making Physicist

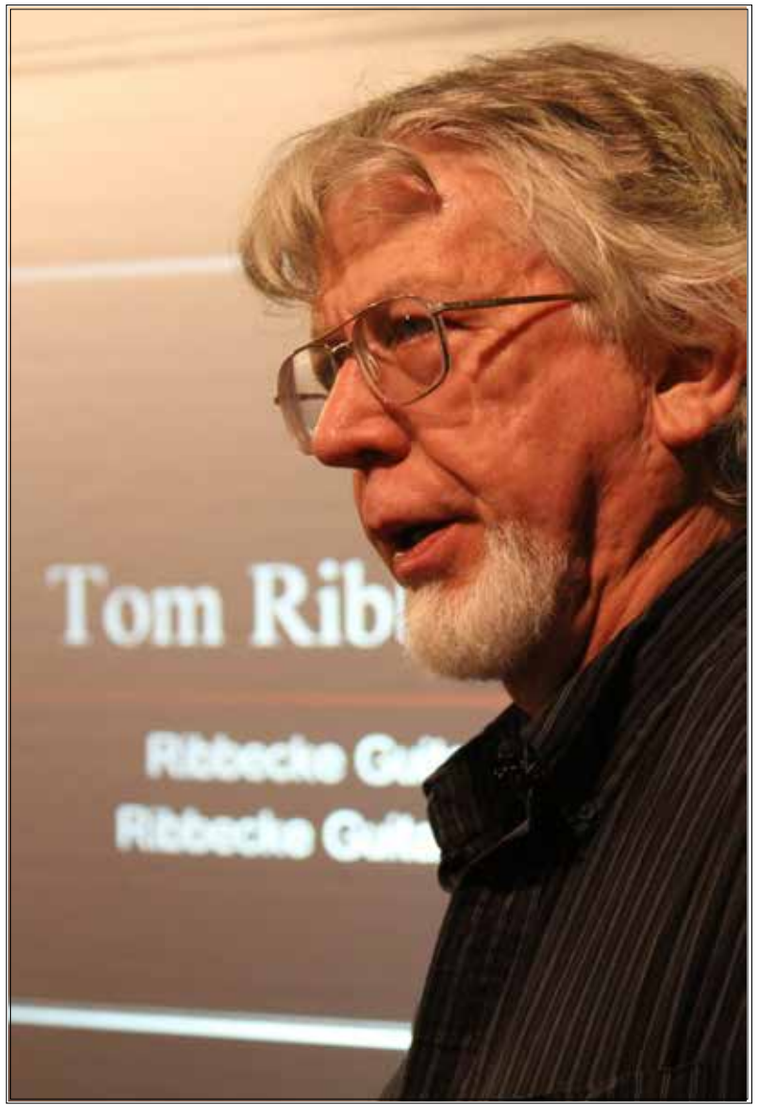
by Terrie Noll



For the March 4 meeting, SCWA members trekked down a country road in the outback of Healdsburg, turned right at Art the Traffic Cop, bumped along a dirt lane, then slogged through the mud of the driveway to the quintessential little red barn that is the private shop of Tom Ribbecke, master guitar builder. We were rewarded with an evening of artisan philosophy and the scientific nuances of instrument-making focused on Tom's current project, a "halfling" acoustic bass guitar for Jack Casady, renowned bassist for Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna.

At the last *Artistry In Wood* show, members who remained conscious despite the overheated rooms will recall that Tom won Best In Show for his 7-string guitar, an archtop both mystical and baffling to less sophisticated players. A style of guitar whose soundboard is carved from the solid into an arching, shaped top rather than the more common flat top, archtops are favored by jazz guitarists and are the specialty with which Tom lures the famous and affluent players who can afford his elite, high-end work. It is from this focused skill that Tom developed on commission and later patented a new style of instrument named a halfling, not after fanciful creatures from Middle Earth but because only part of the soundboard is arched while the bass side remains flatter to enhance the bass tones.

It was the result of his first halfling acoustic bass, which Tom developed for bassist friend Bobby Vega, that Jack Casady approached him to design an acoustic bass guitar to approximate the sound of an upright double bass and complement Jack's playing style. Casady had heard that the Bobby Vega bass had a "special healing quality," making it the right choice for a man who recently lost his wife to a long illness. Part of the commission was to incorporate in homage a lock of her hair in the instrument, so the project is referred to as the Diana bass.



Tom Ribbecke

Tom's long and winding road to this commission came by way of early guitar making in his teens, building "semi-hollow style carved guitars," a skill which earned him a job in a cabinet shop, which in turn supported his work building guitars on Guerrero street in San Francisco while curiously friendly locals huffed his lacquer fumes from a vent pipe on the roof. A guitar player his whole life, he also liked "fixing things on solid ground," one of the reasons he built guitars—to fix his own. But he saw himself as a "blue-collar woodworker who makes guitars, not a guitar maker who dabbles in woodworking" and didn't want to be narrowly focused on guitars unless he learned the woodworking field. Many ground shaper knives and kitchens later, "I thought when I was 18 my life would be full of romance and being in the shop, but I got sent out on job sites and realized this is hell on earth." He also did some tours as a guitar player but discovered his personality "was more suited to being at home." With a young daughter who he wanted to raise and most of his fingers still intact, he left San Francisco and moved his guitar shop to Healdsburg, remaining there for the last 20 years.

Referring to his private barn shop, Ribbecke Guitars, as "tight quarters" for "at most, three people" working there, he has another high-end production shop, Ribbecke Guitar Company, in Windsor "that is morphing into a custom division with investors and stockholders. The two businesses exist next to each other; one's private, one's a production company theoretically" he allowed, as some legal details are hanging. "My company has been a study in bringing investors into your life and letting everybody have a little piece of what you do." Protective of his personal custom work that he calls his "practice, like a physician," he said, "Nobody will ever own any of my private body of work unless they buy it."

For the price of that ticket, a player like Jack Casady, a "monster of the American historical music scene" and a "sensei of tone," gets an instrument ergonomically designed to fit his body and playing style and crafted to create the requested sound. "This particular commission is so special. I have a chance to practice at the highest possible level," applying a complex blend of art, science, skill, and experience, or as Tom described it, using his "43 years of doing this and teaching myself to become a better intuitional physicist."

Photo by Philip Barlow

Rattling off such considerations as soundboard length, exciting the air, bass waves, Helmholtz frequencies and large air masses that "go boom," Tom even studied films of Jack playing to find space in his stance to squeeze in a box producing a double bass sound on a 5' 4" man. "It occurred to me that we could put a wedge shape in the thing, oppose the planes in a way that there were no standing waves in the instrument and have a deeper bass air mass to get that deeper response. The guitar soundboard is so small it's not even technically capable of producing that big bass wave so you have to fool the instrument into thinking it's producing that wave and moving the air." The resulting instrument is narrower on the top side than the bottom one, has no 90-degree joints at the sides "which makes the binding a nightmare" and marries the single central brace of double basses and violins by flying it over the X bracing of guitars, another Ribbecke invention. Having already adopted the liquid fish glue used by violinmakers, his meld of bracing "opens the door to a new family of instruments that takes from the violin family and the guitar family."

The first crack of that door, after Tom's invention of the asymmetric halfling technology that facilitates hearing lower and more differentiated tones, was the Bobby Vega acoustic bass, which took 7 years to gestate, then utilized the halfling top and its offset sound hole in an acoustic bass of conventional shape. Members were treated to a demonstration of the sound from a guest appearance by Bobby Vega, known for playing with Etta James, Santana and Sly Stone, among others. Tom said, "If you build an instrument that's different, it's going to behave differently so players respond to it differently." Along with demonstrating the variety of sounds he could produce, Bobby said in musician-speak, "It has this kind of dimension hang" as the notes resonated. "When I play this instrument it's more engaging and there's more of an emotional thing than a regular electric bass." In another article, he said rather poetically, "There's something about it. It's almost like a sailboat—you look at it, it's peaceful, but if you know what to do with it, you can go almost anywhere."

This bass, along with the more recent Diana bass, used myrtle for the back and sides. "Myrtle is a great sounding material. It's like a superball; drop a superball and it comes right back to your hand. It's a material that doesn't have a lot of internal damping." Elaborating on how materials are chosen for their damping qualities, Tom explained, "A note is the sum of a lot of notes that you don't hear; it's the sum of the overtones and harmonics. It's like light. Light is all the different colors but you see clear light. So you're building with certain materials to propagate those frequencies."

Hand in glove with sound-enhancing materials is the finish. For a desired tactile quality, the myrtle of the Bobby Vega bass was finished with Seal-A-Cell and General satin wiping varnish, "in essence, tung oil and varnish on the back and lacquer on top." Because the finish on the back is a thin polymerizing finish "it doesn't affect the tone much on the back and sides which are sort of secondary resonators but the lacquer on top is beautiful because it's just getting tighter and more transparent. So then in 10 years you've got this great bottle of wine."

Bassist Bobby Vega

Tom uses only nitrocellulose lacquer for its "beautiful look" and "acoustic transparency." This lacquer continues to outgas and harden over the years so initially "The lacquer will take some of the treble response out, then a few years later as it's really getting hard, the treble response will grow back into the instrument." As for

acrylic lacquers, he says "I've yet to see a water-based finish I don't see blue in." Functioning as his own quality control, he says "This is my life. I can't leave stuff like that on the planet. I can leave stuff on here that I can tell my client will be better in 10 years."

As devoted to achieving superior finishes as he is to crafting superb guitars, Tom elaborated, "What I learned early in the world of guitars is there are not a lot of people who put the energy into making great finishes, and if you do a finish that's among the best in the industry, you sell guitars." He uses Seagrave lacquer, the same high-solids formula as McFadden's - "it's like a bar top lacquer, flexible but compliant" - along with various percents of thinning, often cross-layered with MEK and dye colors "to get incredible refraction," followed by as many as 10 clear top coats. Accompanying these is a lengthy progression of dry and wet sanding grits, with the 1000 to 3000 range covered by Meguiars paper from Hawley's paints on Mendocino Avenue, all followed by a buffing wheel. "I think we have 30 hours in the finish alone if we're lucky."

Imparting his belief in finishes to the workers in his shop and the students in his classes, Tom says "If you teach somebody to do that as a young craftsman, they'll always sell guitars. They'll hate me," he smiles, after "tying them to a finishing bench" but he finds if he keeps them at it they'll "never have a problem selling guitars because finish is a lot of why people buy these things." He admitted, "I push people who work for me. I want them to exceed themselves every single day. That's a big thing to ask anybody, but to me it's a deeply felt business to be in to create these things."

Don Naples

"If you want great guitars that exceed or outlive you, you have to have people putting 110, 120 percent into it." He expects to build around 800 instruments during his lifetime "and out of those, maybe 10 will survive 300 years. For me, that's a great feeling. At the end of my life, it would be beauty 1, ugly 0. At least I got that done and I left some kind of footprint on the planet." Somewhat ruefully, he mentioned "If I could buy the first 50 instruments I built and destroy them, I would do that. We all know that feeling."

Mark Tyndale

Besides his drive to excel, another reason for Tom's success is "the kind of folks I've worked with over the years. It's like putting a 100-watt bulb in a 60-watt socket." Explaining the division of labor in his companies, Tom says "People all collaborate. Each does different parts. All have some specialties, wear different hats. We're not a factory. I try to give people as much freedom as I can." Not only does this list of collaborators include "people that are better than me or as good as me" to learn from, but craftsmen like David Marks for special patinas or Larry Robinson for inlay work.

"Larry is the king of inlay," Tom grants. When the 4 months of finishing are completed on the Diana bass and "after Jack has had a chance to play it and decide what he wants," Larry will "do very personal work." Expanding to say that "Jack has a number of things that are important in his life," Tom adds, "Larry is a master of interpreting." The other important part of Jack's life, the lock of his wife's hair, will be incorporated into the instrument in its own "catbird seat," a hole drilled in the end block inside the instrument to lighten it and at the same time give her DNA a place to "have a window seat in the theater" inside the rest of Jack's musical life.

Whit McCleod

The theater inside the Diana bass has been made more accessible for technicians working with amplification by yet another Ribbecke invention, an access door in the side. "To build a door in an instrument is a really complex challenge and do it aesthetically … because you weaken something like this a lot when you cut a hole in it." Along with that door is a removable, adjustable door under the sound hole that lets you "port" the instrument, adjusting the emitted sound. "The way a microphone hears might be different than what another microphone hears, so it gives him that flexibility to adjust the tonal frequency. These are the tools. I'm the toolmaker."

Jeff Mecredy

Other features of the Diana bass include an adjustable tailpiece for attaching the strings "like a double bass, because I wanted to bring that aesthetic to this instrument" and a Kasha bridge, wedge-shaped and wider on the bass side "because it activates more of the bass side of the soundboard, like a lever." Tom explained that "Guitars are energy conversion machines. They're devices which turn one kind of kinetic energy into something we can hear through a series of three oscillators—the strings, the bridge and the top. My paradigm is the most energy efficient thing I can build." That includes reinforcing the necks of all his instruments with layers of carbon fiber, a 1938 banjo neck repair technique that he adapted to modern materials. When he teaches classes, he likes to stand on a neck to demonstrate its rigidity and "that you're not wasting any energy from that neck."

Philip Barlow

Carol Salvin

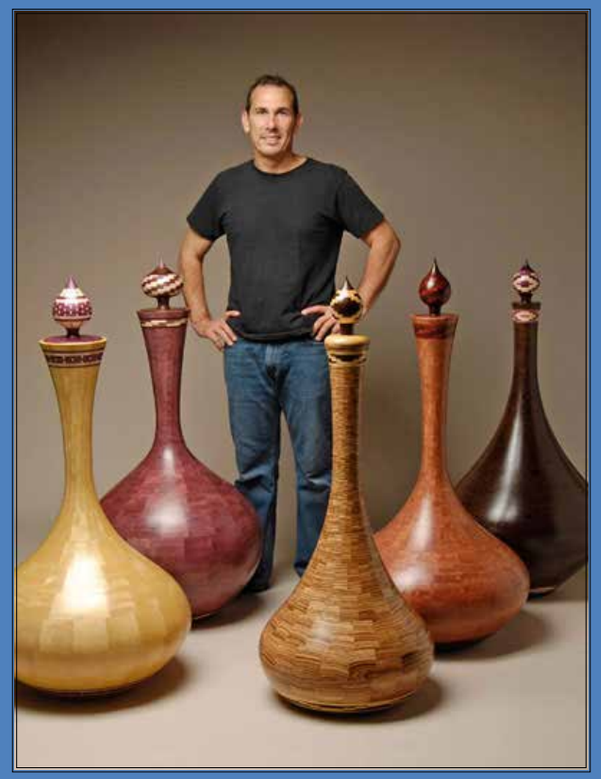
"Was it the chicken blood in his varnish?" Tom answers, "No. What it really was, the man spent 90 years building violins. He learned to turn his intuition on. He made choices every single day, over this particular piece of material which is not the same as that piece of material, and that to me is the alchemy of making these instruments. And the day somebody figures this out so you can plug numbers into machine and the machine goes ptooey ptooey ptooey, that's the day I'll go do something else. Why be a human when machines can do something better than you? This is something we do better. I love that aspect of it."

Photo courtesy Ribbecke Guitar

Notwithstanding the complex science incorporated into his instruments, Tom's take is "art trumps science every time." Asking rhetorically why Stradivarius was such a great violinmaker—

Steve Thomas

All photos in this publication, unless otherwise noted, are by Jose Cuervo



Robert Gauthier, a longtime SCWA member, announces a solo exhibit of his exotic wood vessels at the Gualala Art Center. The opening reception is May 2 from 5:00 - 7:00 p.m. and the exhibit runs through June 1, 2014. Admission is free.

Further information is available at:

http://tinyurl.com/lnvl7c9

If you missed the slide show Tom presented at the meeting, it can be seen at

http://tinyurl.com/ltxz798

Video footage of the meeting was produced by Gérard Angé and is available at

http://tinyurl.com/jwcp7vu

An interview with Tom, Casady and Vega is at http://tinyurl.com/k6v8vj9

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Wood Forum is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles and photographs for inclusion in the publication. You can send your submissions to the Wood Forum Editor at joejakey@comcast.net or at SCWAMESSAGES@gmail.com. Advertisements are also accepted with a per-entry cost of $5 per column inch.

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 $35 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 website.

[ ] I am enclosing an additional $15 to receive the Forum by regular mail.

Name _____ Email _____

Address _____

City, Zip _____ Home Phone _____

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Please send check and completed application to:

Sonoma County Woodworkers Association, PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402