

Recreating the Classics

Master craftsman Frank B. Rhodes restores and creates museum-quality furniture in his Chestertown studio

By Rosemary Knowler

Frank Rhodes is a craftsman and a scholar, a woodworker of distinction and a lover of the classic designs of colonial furniture. In his Chestertown, Maryland, studio, he is listening carefully to the two women who have entrusted a family piece to him for restoration.

The chair has cradled generations, but has been badly mended by several amateurs in its 150 years of life. Rhodes bends over it, lovingly stroking the carved curves of the wood. He has taken it completely apart, much as an archaeologist might deconstruct an artifact, and is considering what needs to be done to make it strong and useful again.

"I was explaining to her that the reason this arm is kind of loose is that it's been mended before; you can't put any pressure on it," he says, later. "Somebody's put a nail in the leg, and it's wobbly too. I had a customer a couple of weeks ago who had some Chippendale chairs that had been nailed this way. You can't do that to



Frank Rhodes at work in his studio carving a shell detail for a Philadelphia Chippendale mahogany dressing table, circa 1750-1770 (above). He excels at detail work, as shown on this Hepplewhite mahogany Pembroke table circa 1780-1800 (left).

furniture without consequences, and it's amazing how many times I find that previous restorers have taken that shortcut."

Rhodes discusses what needs to be done—first the restoration of the wood, then the building up of damaged surfaces, the reconstruction of the padding and springs and, finally, upholstery with a rich ivory damask that enhances the wood's subtle graining and patina. "It'll be about two weeks," he says: The elder of the two women, who has just turned 80, is smiling happily. She's giving the chair to her granddaughter as a wedding gift and she knows that it will last as long as it has been part of her life in her home.

But Rhodes is far more than a restorer of damaged treasures. He is a cabinetmaker in

the old-fashioned sense, building the Early American and Victorian armoires, chests, sideboards and desks he loves. Rhodes is involved in every step of the process, from creating architectural renderings to polishing beeswax in a final piece. His work has often been featured in designer show houses, particularly those that emphasize the Tidewater and Pennsylvania heirloom traditions. He has recently inaugurated a new workshop just east of Chestertown, where a large complex of design and fabric showrooms, workshops, varnish and finishing rooms and a wood curing room allow him the scope his work needs.

Rhodes is passionately precise in his

(continued on page 60)

work. Every piece of cherished walnut, aged oak, cherry, maple and mahogany, every chisel, lathe and tool has its place in the workshop, a great sunny cavern full of museum-pieces-in-progress. Just now he is working on a painted chest in the Pennsylvania Dutch Mahantongo Valley tradition, a massive armoire with a number of secret drawers, a Thomas Eastlake desk, several graceful chairs, two Chippendale sofas, a cherry pencil-post bed, and a Queen Anne porringer-top tea table. He discusses each piece lovingly, from the delicate shell pediment ornament in progress on the carver's bench to the plaster cast of Thomas Affleck's famous claw-and-ball foot destined to be fabricated in wood for the Philadelphia highboy.

He has amassed an extensive library of joins, carvings, hardware and details, and made clear, proportioned renderings of each. The drawings are works of art in themselves, reminiscent of the famous executions by the WPA artists who worked on the Index of Early American Design. When he needs inspiration, he goes back to his library of renderings.

"I was working on a piece of carving a few weeks ago that I hadn't done in a while; I had to go back and refresh my

memory about the proportions, the techniques," he confides. But there's no fooling his eye, which can discern the subtle differences in the taper of a Queen Anne leg, from the relatively sturdy country versions to the fine, slender curves of the 'city cabinetmakers' whose interpretations of the style were more refined. Every window in the workshop has its festoon line of hanging table legs, from William and Mary to Queen Anne and Chippendale, three-dimensional templates for his lathe and carving work. A Colonial craftsman would instantly recognize that tradition; it's how the old cabinet-makers advertised what they could do.

Rhodes learned his skills the old-fashioned way. He grew up in homes full of beautiful things; his parents and grandparents were noted collectors of Americana. His family expected him to become an accountant or a lawyer, but when he took a woodworking class in high school, his life changed forever. From that time on, he knew that he wanted to work in wood, making things as lovely as those he grew up with. He taught himself, as painstakingly as any journeyman apprentice. Since 1981 he has been building museum replicas of historic



*An antique finish is hand applied and rubbed to achieve a rich patina as shown
~n these Queen Anne pieces, a walnut chest-on-frame (above) and walnut dressing table (below), both circa 1750.*

American furniture, beginning with the pieces in the Garbisch collection, assembled by his family, and going on to prestigious commissions from families who wanted their own heirlooms copied, so the frail originals could be preserved in a museum. Today, he often uses the restoration work as a springboard and inspiration for new pieces, taking them apart, doing renderings of the proportions and details, reassembling and restoring, and then building new versions.

The middle workshop is devoted to candidates for restoration. It is dominated by a 15-foot metal American Eagle in aggressive mode and a state of rust-molt, and it is full of other treasures: a Chesterfield camel-back sofa, a graceful lady's parlor chair, a child's chair, a small plain rocker with the rich glow of age, and two plush Victorian loveseats, all waiting their turn like so many patients in a clinic.


(continued on page 264)



Continued from page 60

Art Studio


THE VALLEY CRAFTSMEN LTD



WORLDLY DECORATIVE PAINTING
BALTIMORE, MD NAPLES, FL WASHINGTON, DC
4 1 0 3 6 6 7 0 7 7
www.valleycraftsmen.com



A tall canted back and frontal cabriole legs define the lines of an upholstered Queen Anne carved walnut-back stool circa 1730-1750.



BRENNEMAN & PAGENSTECHER
RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTS & BUILDERS
301.933.9305 www.Brenpag.com

Specializing in Thoughtful Renovations & Spectacular Transformations of Older Homes

Rhodes' work is painstaking. He documents each piece, whether original, reproduction or restoration, with digital photographs along the way. The process of building or restoring a complicated secretary or a tall case clock can take months. A single chair or sofa can take 200 hours to fabricate, and as many as 30 to restore. There is no way to hurry the process, and no shortcuts are taken in his workshops, where a staff of five, each with his or her own specialty, carries out every step in-house, from the preparation to the final polish on the period hardware. Rhodes' original works are all signed and dated.

In addition to his historical work, Rhodes has a line of furniture he has designed, including a particularly fetching modern side table, which can be executed in tiger maple, walnut or cherry.

Rosemary Knowler is a freelance writer based in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.

RESOURCES

For information, directions or a catalogue, visit Frank Rhodes' Web site at www.frankbrhodes.com or call (410) 778-3993.