

Shop talk: Nancy Hiller

F&C talks to cabinetmaker and author of *Making Things Work*

Can you explain the culture of unguarded saws in the US?

I think it stems from our use of tablesaws to perform a far greater variety of operations than you do in the UK. I can't recall using a tablesaw for anything other than ripping in the three English shops where I worked. In the States, we also use our tablesaws to cut grooves and dadoes, as well as the cheeks of tenons. Each of these requires that the guard be removed. The cabinetmakers' shops where I worked in England invariably used a spindle moulder (known as a shaper in the US) for grooving, a router for dadoes and a single- or double-ended tenoner for tenons. When you perform all of these operations and more on your tablesaw, it's tempting to leave the guard off. I bought a SawStop in 2009 and have not regretted the extra expense for one second. One of the things I love about the SawStop is that the riving and knife and guard are outrageously easy to put on or take off.

Describe your most memorable eureka moment in the workshop.

Superlatives are a challenge for me, but surely one of the most magical moments was when I cut my first large cove moulding on the tablesaw. (See? There I go again, using the tablesaw for an operation incompatible with the guard.) It seems delightfully counterintuitive that you can set up a tablesaw, which we ordinarily associate with the straightest of lines, with an angled, ad hoc fence, to create a concave moulding. I felt like jumping up and down to celebrate.

What do you collect?

I collect books published by Lost Art Press. Not only are they chock-full of substance; they're beautiful artifacts in their own right. The fact that they are printed and bound in the United States, then sold through a limited range of distributors, all of whom agree not to undersell the others, is the icing on the cake: At every step of the way, the company's operation exerts a powerful act of resistance against the value-eroding commercial forces of our time. For me, buying their books is a political act.

Do you think we're at a point where discussing gender is actually perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions?

This is one of the conundrums of our age. Of course the more we mention gender, the larger it looms in our consciousness; we give it power. And yet, by trying to ignore it,

we allow deeply entrenched attitudes and longstanding patterns of behaviour to endure. So my answer to your question really has to be yes and also no, because some matters do not allow for easy resolution in the space of a paragraph.

If you're making to a period style how important is it to you to use period methods of construction?

It has never been that important to me, because as someone who has lived primarily on her income from making furniture, both freestanding and built-in, for clients of modest means, I haven't been in a position to take the time to make things entirely by hand. Hand-cut dovetails for drawers and casework? Sure, some of the time. But I use machines (20th-century machines, not their CNC counterparts, which come with a different set of phenomenological questions) to mill lumber and cut most of my joints for

everyday work. I have enormous admiration for those who carry their scholarly dedication through every step of the process of making. I'm just not one of them, at least at this point in my life.

Do you think you might have taken woodworking at school if it was offered?

I might have, had it been offered at my high school, but it wasn't. I did take woodworking at boarding school in Sussex. It was a school where everyone had to take sewing and woodwork, with no gender division. As a result, my parents have a crude cheese board I carved from apple wood, and I have a mechanical wooden toy in the shape of an alligator (which bears more resemblance to a recumbent dog than a reptile).

Clamps or cramps

When in Rome, for gods' and goddesses' sake, please speak Italian. I spent 16 years in England, beginning at the age of 12, but I've been back in the States for 30 years now. I knew nothing of "clamps" until 1987. Cramps, on the other hand, came in two varieties, one of which visited me every month. (One of the great things about getting older is the freedom from that sort of cramps.) The point of speaking is to communicate. Unless you wish to convey that you're a poser (I do not), it's best to adopt the local dialect instead of straining to hold onto something you imagine others deem exotic. When I visit friends in England, I fasten joints with cramps and machine timber using a thicknesser, pack my bags in the boot of the car, spell with the letter "zed," and visit the bog/spend a penny. (I know, this dates me. Last time I was in England the price had gone up to 20 pence.) In the States I clamp things together, mill lumber using a planer, load my luggage in the trunk, spell with the letter "zee," and go to the bathroom (which is free, because this is America, and we believe in equality -- at least where relieving ourselves is concerned). It took some time to get used to speaking the American way when I returned, but I made a point of it, because to do otherwise strikes me as affected.

Alive or dead, who would you most like to commission a piece of furniture for your own home?

This is a tough one, as there are so many makers whose work I admire. I'd be ecstatic if I could have a piece made by Vincent Edwards. I love his fluid way of seeing. He weds plant, animal and mechanical forms.



Photo by Bradley Cox, Giant Eye Photography

Beyond the bench

I've always seen happiness, for myself, as a three-part thing involving a self-made home, a good relationship and satisfying work. I am blessed at this point in life to enjoy all three. That, to me, is success.

Nancy lives with her husband, Mark, two cats, and a gimpy dog named Joey. She reads David Sedaris and Alexandra Fuller for essential sanity enhancement, cooks a mean nut roast and spends summers covered in insect-induced welts as she persists in growing an English-style cottage garden amidst the inhospitable conditions of the American Midwest.