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by John N. Cole

A Cabinetmaking Revival

Photographs by Tom Jones

JUDGING FROM THE PROGRESS being made by two rather different sorts of cabinetmakers in Maine, the craft, the art, and the profession of cabinetmaking is in the early stages of a gentle renaissance. Already it provides the area's economy with a jolt of dependable vigor. It also provides the cabinetmakers themselves with a way of life that captures those elusive qualities of independence, self-sustenance, personal achievement, and relative financial stability. Add to these the fulfillment of personal creation that cabinetmaking can bring, and you begin to understand why Thomas Moser and Duane Paluska appear content in their work.

As noted, there are differences between the two. Moser works on a commercial scale and makes no bones about it. "I want to make a living here," he says, sweeping his arms to indicate his large shop, the ample lawn, and the restored church vestry across the green that serves as his showroom. Farther up the road is the handsome, eighteenth-century clapboard house that he and his family have been restoring during their seven years in New Gloucester.

Duane Paluska also wants to make a living, but he does not say so, and his visions reach no further than the limits of the small, shingled, cabinetmaker's shed behind his Day's Ferry home where he works alone, designing and crafting a maximum of forty pieces a year.

Taken in tandem—Paluska the loner and Moser the shop master who plans for expansion—the pair can be seen as a composite of cabinetmaking in the abstract. In their combined perspectives, an observer can find enough details to sketch a reasonably accurate picture of the current state of the art and make some observations about its future in New England.

If you agree to classify cabinetmaking an art, then you must also agree that wood is its primary medium—its soul, its substance, its mystery, and its challenge. Trying to comprehend cabinetmaking without some comprehension of wood is like trying to make sense of dairy farming without understanding milk. Wood is where it all began, three thousand years ago and more. The same joinings used by the coffin makers of ancient Egypt were used by Chippendale and Hepplewhite and are still being used by Paluska and Moser. They are the joinings that are compatible with wood's unique organic qualities.

Immortality is among those qualities. Wood never dies. It breathes always, expands and contracts, inhaling and exhaling moisture from the air around it in replication of the way its roots once drank moisture from the living soil. Its grain runs along the lineal systems that once circulated that life's blood; the heartwood and the sapwood are present in nearly every plank, as are the knots where branches were, as is the crotch grain that marks where limbs once leaped. There is the burl, the dry rot of disease, the scars of wire fences, carving knives, and arrows loosed a century ago. Wood immortalizes each of them, covers them in its years, only to release them a century later when the saw whines and the planks fall to the sawmill floor.

Like every cabinetmaker before them, Moser and Paluska visit the mills regularly and with reverence. The wood that holds so much of its own past also holds the future of their work and must be chosen with knowledge and great care. Birch, beech, butternut, mahogany, maple, oak, cherry, walnut, and pine—each has its own character, its own strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes a cabinetmaker can "see" a piece of furniture in an exceptional piece of raw wood; most of the time, he must study each plank for overall quality, seasoning, and sheen.

Today's cabinetmakers travel to Boston for much of their kiln-dried "imported" woods, like mahogany, cherry, and walnut. Other wood, like pine, birch, and some maple, can be found in New England's small mills, close to where it has been cut. To air dry their cabinet woods, the Shakers used to allow one year for one inch of thickness in a plank. The wood they once cut could be three, four, six, or eight inches thick, and it rested in long and serene rows, waiting as the years passed for its cells to release their moisture to the thirsty air.

Tom Moser has some wood like that, racked in the shadow of the towering former Grange Hall that is now his shop. The wood is pine and maple, some of it cut from the land that stretches behind his home. But most of his wood, already kiln dried, is organized in tidy rows in the dry basement under the shop—the same basement where the furnace roars and keeps the wood warm and relatively dry.

"This is walnut," says Moser, lifting a four-inch plank about eight inches wide. "I have been thinking about leaving this for my children. This is all there's going to be of wood like this. There just won't be any more. No one is going to wait a hundred and fifty or two hundred years for such trees to grow. We are seeing the last of those."

Duane Paluska's wood rests in rows across the rear of his work shed. He warms it in the winter when low humidity makes it more workable. "Sometimes in the summer there is so much dampness I quit trying to work," Paluska says. "It's too much trouble to try to allow for all the shrinkage that's going to come once the piece is moved into a heated home."

This sort of compensation—this kind of planning—springs from the cabinetmaker's fundamental comprehension of wood and his reverence for its qualities. After selecting the finest planks he can find and after deciding whether cherry, birch, or maple will function best in a particular design, the cabinetmaker must decide on the joinings that will best allow the piece of furniture to continue to breathe, to continue to expand and contract while, at the same time, the chair or desk or table retains its strength and the integrity of its construction. It cannot crack, check, split, or wobble. The entire continuum of stress must be prepared for, just as the joinings that cope with that stress must be aesthetically appealing, smooth to the touch, and orderly to the eye.

Joining—that is what cabinetmaking is about. The dovetail, dado, mortise and tenon, bevel, butt, and finger joints—these are the age-old names for the age-old systems for bonding one piece of wood to another in ways that are harmonious with wood's character, that give with expansion and contraction, that float, that conceal, that grace and, above all, that persist. Joining is primarily what a cabinetmaker does, what most of his tools are for, and where most of his skills are combined.

"With bench saws and planers, almost anyone today can produce a flat board with a straight edge," says Moser. "It's joining those boards, knowing what they can do and can't do that a cabinetmaker must understand."

Both he and Paluska agree there are no more than six, if that, fine cabinetmakers in Maine. "There's too much to learn," says Duane Paluska. "It doesn't take long to learn the basics of how to throw a pot or weave cloth. Almost anyone can throw a pot after a bit of practice. There is no fast way to learn joining. It takes years. That's why there are so few cabinetmakers."

Moser puts it another way. "Many of the basket weavers and pottery people are in it for a kind of therapy, and that's fine," he says. "But cabinetmaking is a profession. It's, well, you could say it's an art. It's also a craft, a trade of another century. Perhaps we are a hundred and fifty years out of phase here.

"What do we do? We make fine furniture for people. We make it by hand. We *join* it. We create the designs. We shape the wood, we finish it. None of it is ever perfect because it's all done by hand and the hand is not a perfect mechanism."

WHAT GAVE THESE TWO MEN the confidence to try their hands at such a demanding skill? Neither was born to the trade. Instead, in a surprising circumstantial parallel, both Palus-

Thomas Moser with some of his creations

Butt joint

Through dovetail

Finger joint

Slotted, or housed dovetail

mortise

tenon

Mortise and tenon

Stop dovetail

spline

Splined bevel joint

Dado, or housed joint

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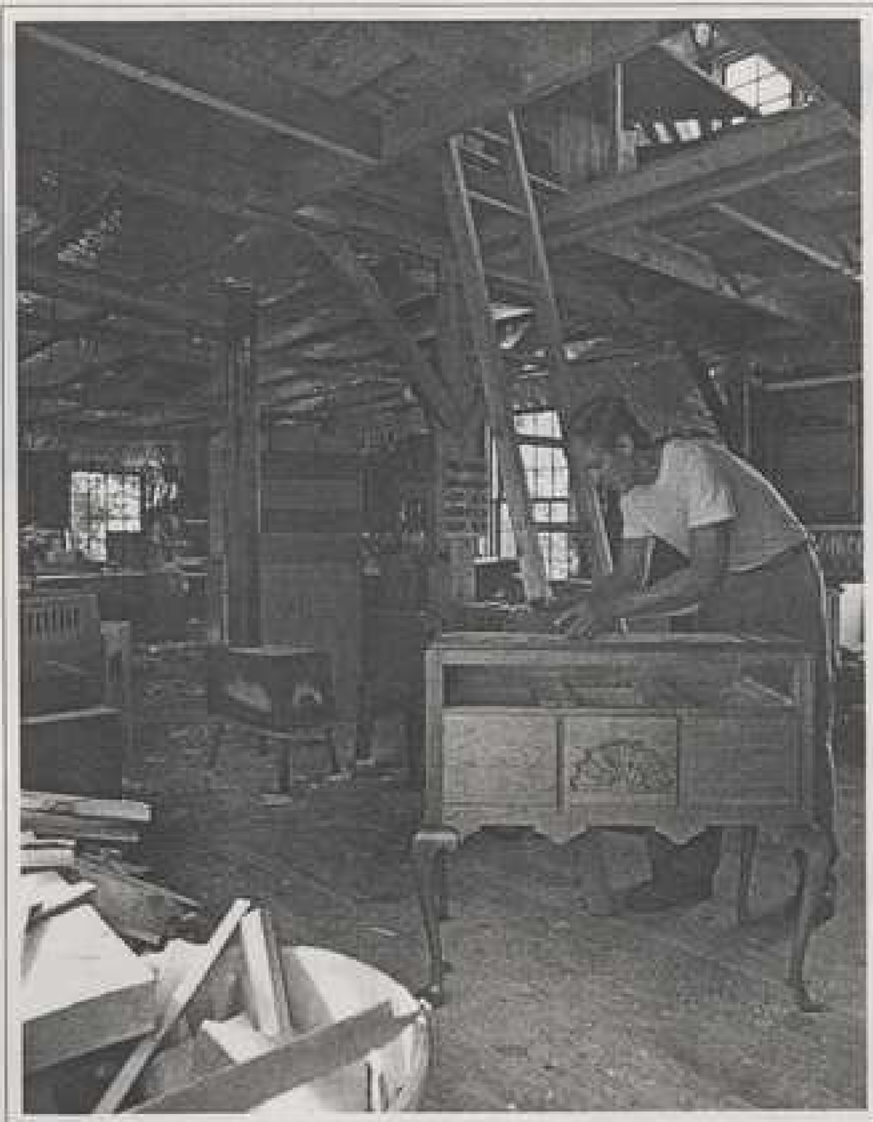

Duane Paluska at work in his shop

ka and Moser moved to cabinetmaking from the campus. Paluska was a member of the faculty at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, where he taught English. Moser toiled just a few miles away in Lewiston, where he headed the speech department at Bates. Both were in their mid-thirties when they left the relative security of academe to work with their "imperfect mechanisms" at designing and constructing fine furniture.

"I've been making things of wood ever since I was in high school," says Paluska. "If I had to choose the work I would do for ten hours a day, this would be it. I've been learning it all my life, and I'm still learning."

"I served no apprenticeship," says Moser, "but I've been working with wood since I was a boy. At Bates, I found my thoughts kept turning to doing something like this, so I left the campus. That was four years ago, and I still don't know if we can make this go. But we're in Maine, we're doing what we like best, and we've been building the business."

For Moser, cabinetmaking is a kind of business and that's the significant and primary difference between his operation in New Gloucester and Paluska's in Day's Ferry.

"I've reinvested more than eighty thousand dollars in the place and, yes, I'm doing better than I was at Bates," Moser explains, "but I'm a long way from where I want to be."

He has two men working full time in his shop; his wife, Mary, coordinates the national advertising that appears in such publications as the *Smithsonian* magazine, and she has been primarily responsible for the fifteen thousand copies of the "Thos. Moser" catalogue (third edition) now coming off the presses. Last year, more than two hundred tables, chairs, chests, clock cases, cupboards, and candle shelves—each numbered and bearing the signature of the maker—were sold.

"Sometimes we forget to sign a piece," Moser says, "and the customer is at the door the next morning. They get upset when a piece isn't signed."

And thus this cabinetmaker illuminates one of the reasons why he and a score of his contemporaries are able to witness the gentle renaissance of their trade. Until the early days of the nineteenth century there was no thought that cabinetmaking would ever slide toward oblivion. Why should it? Everyone needed furniture and nearly every community had a "joiner" to fashion it. In places like London, New York, and Boston, there were the Chippendales, the Hepple-

whites, and the Duncan Phyfes to set the styles and create the designs that others followed.

THEN CAME THE MACHINE. Swept up with everyone else in the early enthusiasms of the industrial age, the joiners of the Victorian era pushed wood and machine together. Delighted by the dadoes a machine could make, elated at the notion that an apprentice made of steel could cut one hundred patterns without variation, the cabinetmakers of the 1860s and 1870s set the course that eventually landed them in Grand Rapids, where they became furniture manufacturers instead. Mass-produced fastenings, synthetic glues, foam-filled upholstery, plywood, steel, aluminum, Formica, polyethylene—everything but virgin wood came to be used—everything that could be machined, that stayed put, that did not breathe long after it should, that did not swell, shrink, split or crack. And as wood disappeared, so did the cabinetmaker.

"Machines took over," Moser says. "It got to the point where furniture was being designed to meet the demands of the machine rather than the demands of the eye. Joints were made for mass production rather than for their holding ability. What we are trying to do is bring back the concepts of good design along with meticulous, if never quite perfect, construction."

Both Paluska and Moser use some machines. Each of their shops is hung and strewn with similar arrays of the essential tools of cabinetmaking. Clamps, mallets, chisels, braces, planes, and calipers have the same intrinsic hand-tool forms they have had for centuries; what is new are the belt sanders, table saws, rotary planes, and power lathes—the technological inheritance of an industrial century. But these new cabinetmakers are the machine's masters rather than their slaves and they use their mechanical servants with absolute understanding of their limitations rather than blind faith in their supremacy. Both Moser and Paluska can make every one of their designs totally by hand. If their machines were paralyzed, the cabinetmaker's work would continue. Only when the hand tools have been mastered are the power tools used in their place, and then only for the crudest work.

Moser demands that his apprentice workers achieve the same mastery, and Paluska will travel for miles to find an authentic chisel or mallet at some country auction. "I found this chisel at a garage sale for two dollars," he says, holding up a massive, wooden-handled, brass-trimmed chisel of fine steel, burnished at Paluska's polishing wheel until it shines like a surgeon's knife, its edge equally keen.

"There is no steel made today that will hold an edge like this," he adds, putting the tool carefully back in its place. "I'd rather have the old tools than the new ones. I wouldn't buy anything I couldn't use."

Their designs are individual and pre-industrial. Using his classic implements, Duane Paluska works entirely within a framework of his own creations. Each piece, whether it be a dining table and eight graceful chairs, a corner cupboard, or a feathery writing desk for a woman's room, emerges from Paluska's concepts combined in a sensitive osmosis with his client's needs and the limits of the chosen wood. "I do not copy," he explains, "but throughout my work there is the essential spirit of eighteenth-century design."

Moser finds his essential inspiration in the poetic simplicity of the Shakers. His pieces have the same functional purity, yet he adds a shard of his own persona, a delicate insinuation of the contemporary. As he finds himself in his craft, Moser's designs will doubtless become more individual. After three years, there is already a uniformity of style that holds together most of the pieces of his catalogue.

He is concerned about design. He yearns to have the name "Thos. Moser" make an individual statement in wood that will somehow set him apart while, at the same time, it establishes his hold on a market that, in his view, may or may not be out there. It is a difficult performance he has outlined for himself. In one scene, he treasures the quality the hand's imperfections can create; in the other, he depends on the volume that an appealing design can guarantee.

"I'm not puttering here," he says. "This is not therapy. I would like to have five men working in this shop. I want to be able to send my kids to college if they want to go. I don't look on this effort as a sacrifice, as some sort of acceptable failure. I want it to work.

"Already I'm hoping that we can reach the stage where I can take on half a dozen apprentices each year to make this a sort of school. We get at least one application a week from some young person who wants to learn these skills. We've got room enough here once we get organized."

"That's in the future, Tom," says his wife, reaching toward him. "That's in the future."

It is a future that Duane Paluska might view with alarm. He has no catalogue, no system of design. "I'm a professional," he says, "who makes one-of-a-kind stuff on commission. I take separate pieces of wood and combine them into a single unit. Each one is different—each one is partially my creation and the creation of the people who want it."

Whatever there is in Paluska's work, it communicates. Each of his orders originates with the furniture he has crafted. "Someone sees my stuff in someone else's home and the next thing I know they are over here wanting me to make a chair or a table or a cupboard or furniture for an entire room.

"No, I don't advertise. I don't go looking for work. I have more than enough to do as it is. I seem to spend most of my time trying to pacify people whose orders I can't fill on schedule."

Paluska is collected and serene. He puts a coat of paint on a special cupboard he has fashioned for the Bath Marine Museum's set of rare china as he listens to Schubert in his shop.

When his day ends late in the afternoon, he walks across the yard to his home where his wife, Susan, and two young children live with the handsome furniture he has made for them, has one drink and dinner, and talks about his next commission.

He wrote his thesis about Moby Dick and understands compulsions and searches. His own appear to be singularly satisfied.

Between Duane Paluska's private and solitary contentments and Tom Moser's busy dreams there stretches an entire range of cabinetmaking attitudes. What these men share, as do their scattered New England counterparts, is the certain knowledge that there is a demand for their skills, a fulfillment in their days, and evidence that new markets are developing for the products of a joiner's genius.

It seems only fitting that the gentle renaissance of that genius should occur in New England—the place where cabinetmaking flourished not so long ago. ◇

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