

The Human Nuance in Woodworking

A Guest Contribution by Toshio Odate



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During the period of our last generation, when I was still a young apprentice, neatly and tightly fit joinery was one of our many concerns. To accomplish this type of work, we had to complete long and strenuous years of training. Even after becoming a mature craftsman, one would always put serious efforts into executing the joinery. Today, for the sake of time and convenience, people without much training use jigs, gadgets and power tools to become a tradesman. Because of the involvement of high technology, people's attitudes toward woodworking have changed to the point where they often ignore the value and capability of the human hand. Woodworkers have become far too dependent on machines and gadgets that are fast and easy. This trend—these manners and attitude of using too many machines and gadgets—disassociate the end result of the work from the "human touch".

When looking at cabinets or furniture made in previous eras, most exude an organic feeling. But in today's world, many of these objects seem cold. They look as though they were just made for practical purposes. Of course the last generation also aimed at accomplishing work for practical purpose; however, they mainly used hand tools to do work. Why was there more of an organic emotion reflected in their woodworking?

With anger in the heart, one walks differently. When happy, one talks differently. A body conducts and expresses whatever an individual has in his heart and mind. The arm, hand and tool work just like a flexible shaft, chuck and bit. The arm can be moved into very intricate positions and placed within very minute intervals. In fact, there is no shaft more flexible than the arm. The hand also can be seen as a universal chuck or joint. The tool then, is the bit and is held by the chuck perfectly. However, this wonderful mech-

anism is very much a tool in itself, manipulated by knowledge, experience and wisdom. Therefore, the craftsmanship or skill is achieved in the heart and mind of the individual.

The heart and mind accumulate virtually an infinity of information—some necessary, some not from past and present. This becomes the craftsman's knowledge and experience. The great craftsman knows how to select the necessary information, sometimes knowingly and sometimes unconsciously. The arm, hand and tool conduct and express the values that the heart and mind accumulated. Whether slicing a log or cutting into a mortise, the combination of information and energy always changes and the outcome will never again be exactly the same. However, a great craftsman tries his best to compose every situation in the highest standard. When an accomplished woodworker, for example, cuts a series of dovetails, they're all slightly different, but all are clean and snug. The slight differences are so delicately fine and exhibit such a clean, tight fit that they create an organic emotion. Some people call this "vibration" others say "crafty feeling," I call it "human nuance." The elements in the completed work include the craftsman's pride, concern, love, warmth and sincerity—all familiar traits of human sensitivity and emotion. Often we cannot see these elements clearly but we are very much capable of feeling their richness. These are simply the by products of an accomplished craftsman's handwork.

The great Japanese plane blade maker, Chiyozuru Nobukuni, broke with tradition and incorporated machinery into his work. Then when he produced a great blade, he said "today, manufacturers use machinery to produce tools, but they do so only because the process is



photo by Laure Olender

faster, easier and cheaper. The result is a product that does not demonstrate quality." Nobukuni learned much from his great master, but he also enhanced his knowledge with the works of scientists and scholars. Because he had great achievement in his heart and mind, he could use large machines as an extension of his body, as if he were holding a little chisel in his hand.

Without the achievement that springs from the heart and mind, a machine does nothing but a practical procedure. Therefore, you cannot find or feel the human touch anywhere in the product. When you understand these elements, then you also understand that woodworking is not only a matter of clean, tightly fit joinery, but also a way to add richness, like rich soil adding nutrition to food.

Toshio Odate mastered the art of building shoji (sliding doors) as an apprentice in Japan and is currently professor of sculpture at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He is a highly regarded author, lecturer and teacher who has been pivotal in spreading knowledge about Japanese tools and woodworking techniques throughout the Western world. He is an active instructor in our workshop program, and has taught several workshops on making Japanese shoji and conducted seminars on various aspects of the Japanese woodworking tradition.

FALL 2002 SEMESTER - TWO CLASSES WITH TOSHIO ODATE - SPACE LIMITED TO 12 STUDENTS

WOODWORKING I :

Tuesdays 9am-12pm
*Japanese Woodworking Tools:
Their History, Anatomy and Design*

WOODWORKING II :

Wednesdays 9am-12pm
Theory and Fundamentals of Hand-Cut Joints

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