

# An Interview With Sam Maloof

by Bill Farnsworth



Photograph by Bill Farnsworth

Figure 1: Sam Maloof shares his woodworking experience with western woodworkers at a University of Washington workshop.

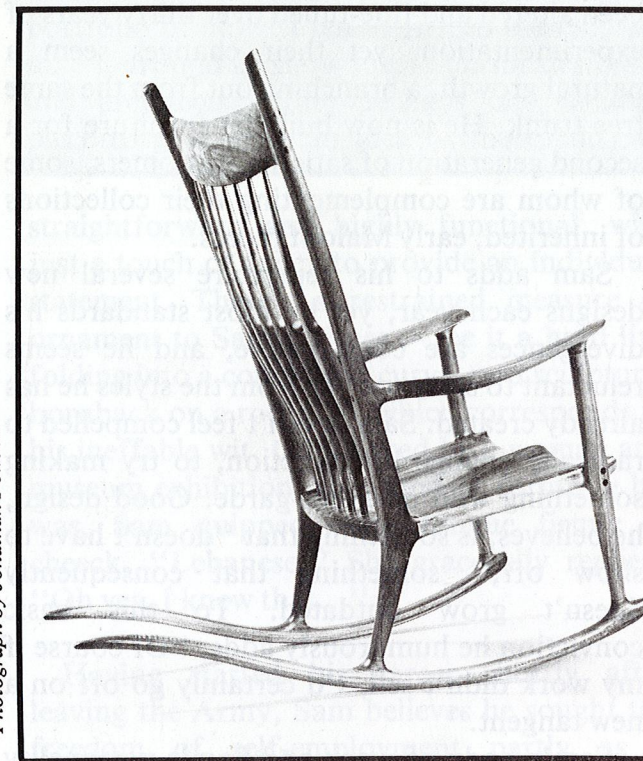
Sam Maloof is a self-taught, home-shop woodworker with furniture pieces he has made on display in some of the world's most prestigious museums, the mansions of wealthy business executives and the boardrooms of major corporations. He and his wife Alfreda recently were invited into the Oval Office to meet President Reagan and to attend the presentation of a Maloof rocking chair to the permanent White House collection. A similar rocker was acquired for the vice-presidential living quarters during the Carter administration.

Yet for all his success and notoriety, this man Maloof remains "Sam" to those who attend his workshops and lectures, and to the many amateur and professional woodworkers who make pilgrimages each year to his Alta Loma, California shop. Sam still builds his furniture primarily for typical private individuals. Although he holds himself to the highest quality standards and maintains strong personal views about how his furniture should be made ("A Maloof chair should last forever"), ultimately Sam is a modest, down-to-earth individual who at age 66 still works a

full shift-and-a-half each day, coating himself with the dust and shavings of his craft.

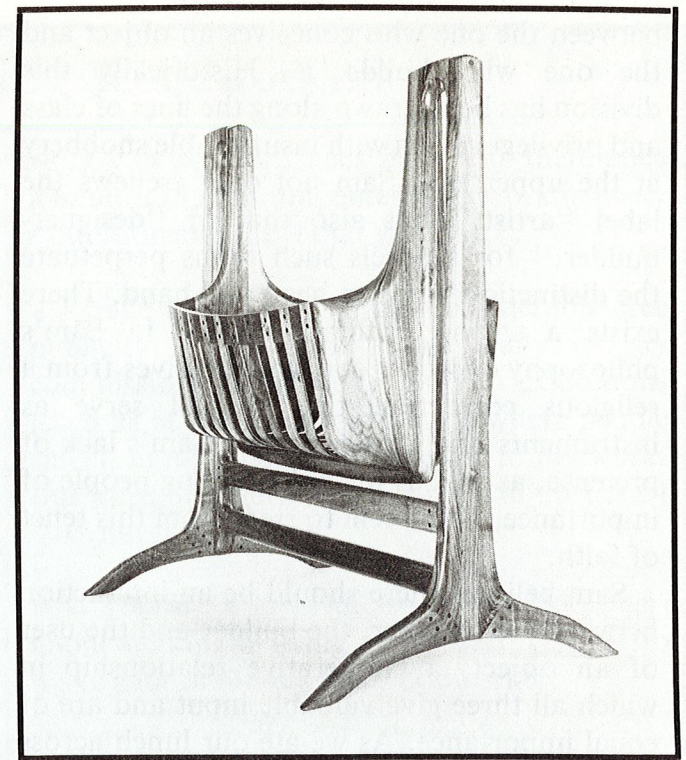
Recently I talked with Sam in Seattle, during a lunch break from his workshop at the University of Washington. I felt myself in the presence of a very talented, intelligent and self-reliant man, who nevertheless feels a bit overwhelmed by his own celebrity. He had appeared more comfortable earlier in the day with tools and wood in his hands than when talking about loftier subjects, such as what it was like to meet a president.

There is something about Sam's openness and casual demeanor that sets at ease the most admiring of younger woodworkers, and makes them feel like colleagues. Sam's approach to his workshops, for example, is not that of a Socrates imparting wisdom to proteges beneath an olive tree, nor does he act like some medieval priest possessing some secret store of magic. One is struck by Sam's willingness to share everything he knows, to pass along his woodworking techniques and make them part of the public domain. He is more like the amiable fellow one might meet in the next booth at a crafts fair, or, to some of us, the



Photograph by Jonathan Pollock

Figure 2: A Maloof rocking chair rests in the permanent collection at the White House, Washington, D.C.



Photograph by Jonathan Pollock

Figure 3: Graceful lines, balanced design and impeccable craftsmanship are trademarks of Sam's furniture.

perfect father figure.

Not only has Sam raised his own son to become a talented woodworker (who set up shop across the lemon grove from his dad), but also he has been an inadvertent father to the so-called California school of modern woodworking. Well before the invasion of Danish modern styling persuaded us to purge our chests and dressers of gee-gaws, and before the studio-crafts movement demystified certain artists and designers into craftspeople, Sam was getting his fingernails dirty turning his original, simple but elegant designs into hand-made, gallery-quality furniture.

Sam tells a story of a trip to the Vatican, where he was to give a speech to an international assemblage of professionals. While listening to the other speakers, Sam says he stared up at the Renaissance stone architecture surrounding him — the designs of geniuses like Michaelangelo — and he could not help but think of the legions of anonymous stone masons who built those monuments. "I am a woodworker," he says, "not an artist." Then he adds paradoxically, "But a bricklayer can be an artist."

Traditionally there has been a dividing line

between the one who conceives an object and the one who builds it. Historically this division has been drawn along the lines of class and privilege, often with insufferable snobbery at the upper end. Sam not only eschews the label "artist," but also that of "designer-builder," for he feels such terms perpetuate the distinction between head and hand. There exists a strong egalitarian ethic in Sam's philosophy of work, one which derives from a religious conviction that we all serve as instruments of a greater design. Sam's lack of pretense, as well as his poise among people of importance, both seem to stem from this tenet of faith.

Sam believes there should be an interaction between the designer, the builder and the user of an object; a cooperative relationship in which all three give valuable input and are of equal importance. As we ate our lunch across the street from Gould Hall, where numerous architecture professors and their students were



Photograph by Bill Farnsworth

Figure 4: Sam Maloof completes stock removal with rasps and files.

busily drawing lines on paper, I asked Sam if an architect could successfully design a chair. Although he has worked with architects on a number of occasions, Sam responded that "an architect should know how to build what he designs. A chair should not only be beautiful and functional, but should invite a person to sit on it," Sam says. Chairs are his specialty, but I was surprised to learn the diversity of other things he has produced over the years. He has made many varieties of hutches, cabinets, tables, shelves, print stands, music stands, cradles and other items for all rooms of the house. He has been commissioned to do altars and pews for churches, menorahs for synagogues, executive desks and twenty-foot-long conference tables for corporate suites. He has worked with walnut primarily, but also has done amazing things with other woods. Some of his rosewood pieces project such vivid color and figure that they appear as if made of exquisite leaded glass. Yet each of his pieces bears his unique design and uncompromising craftsmanship, and each individual item he has made seems to be part of an organic whole, which is his body of work. Sam's designs have been altered and fine-tuned over thirty years of experimentation, yet their changes seem a natural growth, a branching out from the same tree trunk. He is now building furniture for a second generation of satisfied customers, some of whom are complementing their collections of inherited, early Maloof pieces.

Sam adds to his repertoire several new designs each year, yet by most standards his divergences are conservative, and he seems reluctant to stray too far from the styles he has already created. Sam doesn't feel compelled to radically change his direction, to try making something wild or avant-garde. Good design, he believes, is something that "doesn't have to show off," something that consequently doesn't grow outdated. To this basic conviction he humorously adds, "Of course if my work didn't sell, I'd certainly go off on a new tangent."

Sam's body of work and Sam's personality are inextricably intertwined: solid, reliable,

## Sam's Advice To Fledgling Woodworkers

*Thirty years ago Sam Maloof set up shop as a professional woodworker with just a few simple hand tools in a dirt-floored chicken coop. Today he runs one of the world's most famous woodshops, although he purposely keeps his operation small-scale in order to maintain creative and quality control. Here are a few of Sam's words of advice to woodworkers just starting out on their own professional careers.*

- Don't overly romanticize the role of the woodworker. Keep in mind that much of it is just plain hard work.
- I have been fortunate to be able to build from my own designs and choose what I make and what jobs I refuse. But if I were just starting out today, I would do anything to work with wood. I have seen some beautiful kitchen cabinets.
- At the outset, getting your work known is most difficult. Make up a professional portfolio of at least ten to fifteen pieces, then take it around to show local interior designers and architects. Bring perhaps one finished piece to give them an idea of the quality of

work you can do. Check back with them once a month. In addition, enter your work in every exhibition and show that you can.

- I have been lucky to get considerable free publicity in magazines, and many of my commissions result from museum exhibitions (such as at the Boston museum) where people can sit in my chairs and get close to my work. But word of mouth referrals are still the best. I have never advertised.
- If you are a lover of wood, you don't care about making a living at it. Don't expect to make a lot of money as a woodworker.
- If you are married and just starting out, your spouse *must* be with you. I never could have made it without Freda's help, understanding and patience.
- Don't get into debt. Buy tools, equipment and lumber as you can afford them.
- Don't go into partnership.
- **Don't give up!**

straightforward and highly functional, with just a touch of fancy to provide an individual statement. There's a restrained measure of ornament to Sam's pieces — be it a hard line folding into a compound curve, or a sculptural hornback on a rocker — which corresponds to his ineffable wit. Once asked by a woman at a museum exhibition what kind of furniture his was, Sam quipped, with tongue firmly in cheek, "Lebanese." She gracefully replied, "Oh yes, I knew that..."

Having started his career shortly after leaving the Army, Sam believes he sought the freedom of self-employment partly as a reaction to the structured discipline of military life. He has always made a living from his

shop, which currently supports three families (including those of two shop helpers) with its proceeds. But at the height of his fame and gross receipts, Sam personally nets what amounts to a relatively modest, middle-class income. "You have to love this work," he says. "I like the action of working with my hands... it keeps me going. I'll retire when I die." But Sam feels woodworking is overly romanticized, as much of it is "just plain hard work."

"I'm not a purist," Sam says. He uses power tools unashamedly whenever he can, and he does whatever is possible to get the job done properly but quickly. His methods, often unorthodox, are intended to strike a balance

*continued*



Figure 5: Rockers grow under Sam's skillful hands at his Alta Loma, CA, shop.

**Interview With Sam Maloof**, *cont. from page 9* between high quality and speed of production. Though Sam believes woodworkers should know how to draw well, he rarely makes detailed drawings other than an occasional chalk drawing on the shop floor to help figure out something a bit tricky. For a new design he prefers making a full-scale, finished prototype, about 75 of which now furnish his own home ("I can't afford other people's furniture"). He uses patterns — but not jigs — to rough out pieces he reproduces regularly, free-cutting on the bandsaw and rough shaping with routers to get parts rapidly to the point where Surform tools, rasps, files and sanders can form by hand the finished product. Everything is eyeballed, including the most intricate chair arm or table leg, and yet Sam professes no variations beyond one sixteenth of an inch in a set of twelve side chairs. Sam achieves comfort in a chair by first forming it to fit his own body. He then makes adjustments for the particular size and shape

of his client.

Beneath Sam Maloof's free-form, production-oriented approach to woodworking, however, lingers the soul of a perfectionist, and possibly the shadow of a purist. As one example, he has never used metal hardware for function or ornament. His hinges, drawer glides, pulls and joinery (with the exception of screws) are all of wood, which aside from adding to the uniformity and integrity of his chosen medium, in part contribute to its undated styling. One need only remember some of the garish chrome cabinet jewelry of the fifties to understand why Sam's early pieces do not now look like relics from that bygone era.

More importantly, Sam willfully keeps his shop operations small-scale. Currently he can boast a backlog of over 150 orders, each for one to forty pieces, which may well keep him occupied for the rest of his days. Yet he refuses to hire additional help, or capitalize his shop



Figure 6: A forest of furniture patterns overhangs the ranks of chairs-in-progress in Sam's shop.

with more expedient equipment. He feels strongly that expanding his production level would force him to relinquish creative control over his work and inevitably compromise his quality. If he were to become distanced from the actual day to day process of working wood by hand, Sam says, he might as well quit and go design for industry. That is certainly a purity of thought and action from a man willing to continue working very hard when most men his age have already retired.

Although Sam's notoriety, perhaps even his not-excessively-affluent income, are enviable rewards in the minds of many of us. I suspect what younger woodworkers most envy is the control Sam has over what he builds. His financial position and backlog of orders allow him the freedom to turn away any work he feels is not well suited to him, and one consequence of his celebrity is that he is approached for the most part only by clients who are familiar with the style and nature of his designs. However, Sam tells me if he were just starting out today he would do anything necessary to work with wood and he believes that framing houses or building kitchen cabinets can be just as enjoyable and ennobling as what he does. Yet he admits he has been very fortunate to always have creative control over his work... with one possible exception.

He was once approached by an oil tycoon from Texas, who told him, "Sam, I want you to make me a wagon-wheel table." Sam had reservations about taking on the commission, but after persistent persuasion from the man, he finally relented. A short time later a truck pulled up to his shop with the biggest wagon wheel Sam had ever seen. He determinedly proceeded to make what he could of the wheel, and with a kind of sinking feeling, in time delivered what the man requested. His client absolutely loved the piece, and in rapture told Sam that every oilman and rancher in Texas would want one. But Sam has managed to avoid repeating this success.

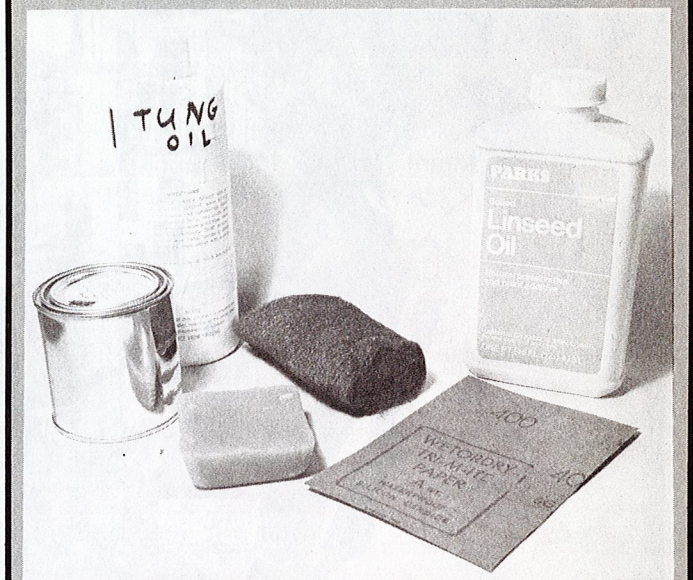
What perhaps was a loss to Texas clearly is a gain for the rest of the world, and in particular represents an inspiration to us who revere Sam

*continued on page 21*

## How To Create A Maloof Finish:

1. Mix one-third semi-gloss or gloss polyurethane varnish, one-third pure tung oil, and one-third boiled linseed oil. You can substitute linseed oil with another third tung oil if it is polymerized (pure tung oil dries too slowly).
2. Apply this mixture with 4/0 steel wool and rub hard. Wipe off the surplus and let set about two days. Repeat three to five times (don't use steel wool on open-grained woods such as oak, as the steel dust will catch in the pores).
3. For a final coat, heat a 50-50 mix of pure tung oil and boiled linseed oil (or 100% polymerized tung oil) in a double boiler. Grate solid beeswax and add to the heated mix until a creamy consistency — about two double-handfuls of wax per gallon of mix. Let cool. The wax in the cooled mixture will stay in suspension and has a good shelf-life.

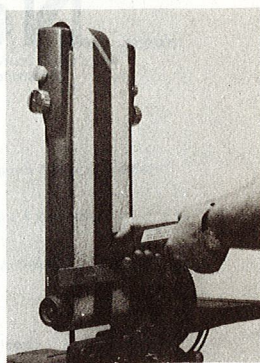
*Note: Sam sands all his work to 400 grit before finish is applied!*



*Some of the ingredients in a Sam Maloof finish: poly-urethane varnish, pure tung oil, beeswax, 4/0 steel wool, 400 grade sandpaper and boiled linseed oil. Not shown are lots of loving care and elbow grease.*

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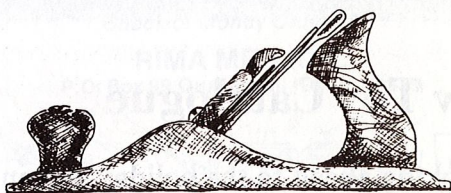
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## **Interview With Sam Maloof**, *cont. from page 13*

Maloof for his insistence upon originality and excellence. In a culture too often rife with shoddiness and compromise, Sam Maloof shines as a sterling example of what is possible if one has talent, maintains high principles and determination, works hard, and gets a little lucky.

*Sam Maloof currently is engaged in an active season of workshops up and down the West Coast, and is also in the process of preparing a book about his work and woodworking philosophy, publication date still uncertain.*



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