



P.O. Box 68343
Nashville, Tennessee 37206

SUMMER 2012 NEWSLETTER

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The Cumberland Furniture Guild's Summer Meeting
will be on Saturday, August 11th, 2012 from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m. at the
Customs House Museum & Cultural Center in Clarksville, Tennessee.

The Cumberland Furniture Guild's latest Exhibition "Inspirations & Origins" opens at the Customs House on August 10th and we will celebrate the opening there the next day, on the 11th. We are sure everyone will be excited to get their first look at the exhibition! (more info on page 4)



Photo: Customs House Museum

Directions to The Customs House Museum:

From I-24 & I-65 North of Nashville **Take I-24 W toward Clarksville 34 miles to Exit 11** for TN-76 toward Clarksville and **turn Left onto TN-76 W**; in 3.3 miles **turn Right onto Madison St. (signs for TN 76 TN 112)**; in 4.7 miles **turn Right onto University Ave.**; in 500 feet **take the first Left onto Commerce St. and the Customs House will be on the Right** at 200 S. 2nd St, Clarksville, TN 37040. If you need help or directions the day of the meeting please call Dale McLoud at (615) 513-1924.

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Thanks to the many people who volunteer their time, without whom there would be no Guild and no newsletter.

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Letter From The President

By Alf Sharp

The Importance of Being Critiqued

I pontificated last time about my dilemma over whether, or when, to offer serious criticism to someone who proudly shows me their work. The obvious answer to “when?” is, “Did they ask for any advice?” If not, even constructive criticism isn’t likely to be received with boundless gratitude. Sometimes, though, one just feels the imperative to point out deficiencies and encourage greater effort, hoping that “One day you’ll thank me for this.”

In continuing to mull over this pickle, I’ve tried to recall the times when criticism directed my way has contributed to my advancement (from my point of view, obviously) in our craft. The first obvious, but still striking, realization has been that I can’t recall a single time when praise and adulation for my work has resulted in anything but warm and fuzzy ego-strokes. Believe it or not, this is not what I pursue in the long run, though it feels awfully good for a day or two. No, the direct criticisms are what I remember most vividly, and feel I’ve benefited the most from, the ones which honestly pointed out the deficiencies of my work. They usually, though not always, stung. I’ll tell you about a few.

The first I remember was delivered by one of the old Uthmann brothers I’ve alluded to previously. They were the ones who wouldn’t allow me into their actual workshop for a couple of years. After I finally breached that curtain, one of them gave me a nice mahogany cabriole leg blank and instructed me to come back with a carved acanthus-drape on the knee and a ball-and-claw foot, and gave me a picture of what he wanted.

Well, first I had to order some carving chisels, which I did, as well as buying a book on carving. I spent probably a week and a half carving what I thought was a pretty well-done example of the picture provided. I took it back to the brothers, and one of them took a cursory glance at my efforts, dropped it unceremoniously on the bench, and grunted, “Humph, not enough chisels.” He then ushered me to the door. Not exactly the kind of pep-talk one wants from a respected coach.

He was only partly right; with experience I’ve learned how much can be done with relatively few chisels. But the stimulus to progress to the next level was certainly ignited. I don’t know if that kind of “tough love” would even work in this era of the perpetual quest for universal self-esteem and social queasiness about possibly shattering delicate learning minds. But it sure lit a candle underneath me.

Not long after, I was commissioned by a lady to reproduce a dozen chairs copying an example her mother owned. It was

a fairly ornate Chippendale chair with carved crest and splat, and ball-and-claw feet. I was ecstatic, and threw myself into the task, even making an extra one for myself in celebration of my first serious reproduction commission. After the whole project was completed I took my personal example, which I had even embellished with an extra shell on the seat rail, to Ben Caldwell - an acknowledged local expert, married to my cousin - who had greeted my entry into the fine furniture realm with some doubts. I expected him to be blown away by the sophistication and technical expertise of my efforts. Anyone who knows Ben, and that would be many, knows he’s not reluctant to speak his mind. That being said, he did smile with a kindly indulgence, and said, “Well, Alf, that’s either a very good reproduction of a very poor example, or a very poor reproduction of a very good example.” (The truth was somewhere in between). Happily, considering the experience I’d had with the Uthmanns, he didn’t just leave it at that. He recommended to me Albert Sack’s book “Fine Points of Furniture” and Wallace Nutting’s “Furniture Treasury”, even giving me a copy of each. I devoured them, thus beginning a forty-year pilgrimage into the finer points of furniture design. Ben continued to direct me to sources of inspiration and examples of excellence for the next twenty years.

A more recent example of such a rebuke occurred about ten or eleven years ago. The Furniture Society had announced its intention to bestow the Award of Distinction, in recognition of a lifetime’s contribution to the studio furniture world. The Society was holding a competition for the design of the award statue. I took up this challenge with the zeal of a new proselyte, designing and then making a full-scale mock-up of my offering. I threw everything I knew

at it – manipulated turning, copper and silver leaf, and even some blown glass. I was certain that it would be chosen, so much effort and savoir-faire had I put into the project. Months went by, with another rather imploring request going out for designs to be submitted. Did they not have mine; what more did they need? Finally they announced the winner – of course you guessed it was not mine.

At the next conference, I worked up the courage to ask a couple of the judges where my submission fell short. Ned Cooke, kind gentleman that he is, smiled somewhat uncomfortably and said they chose a “cleaner design”. Bebe Johnson, just pursed her lips and said I had “tried too hard”. The two comments led me to understand that I had probably “gilded the lily”. I now also understand that in order to succeed in competitions such as that, one must work within the accepted design criteria that prevail at that moment, and at that moment minimalism held sway among the design cognoscenti. (It’s secretly gratifying to me that the chosen design quickly fell out of favor, and had I chosen to tone down and re-submit my initial design, it might have been greeted with greater appreciation.) Whatever, it was a terrific immersion into the world of high design – the combination of politics and au courrancy necessary to play that game. It made me much happier to be working in styles that



“Humph, Not enough chisels!”

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Letter From The President *Continued from page 2*

have endured years of scrutiny by multitudes of scholars, and remain desirable.

None of these, or any other such episodes, was pleasant at the moment. Yet each was a most valuable learning moment. If you want to improve the quality of your work, muster the courage to ask someone you admire to critique your work, and even if you haven't asked, listen objectively to what's being said.

You'll thank me one day. -Alf ♦

Anselmo Harris Carvings at the Tennessee State Museum

By Mike Bell

*Curator of Furniture & Popular Culture at
the Tennessee State Museum*

Anselmo Harris was a self-taught carver from northeast Tennessee who created some of the state's most striking output of folk sculpture. Born in Montgomery County in 1848, he later lived in Obion County working as a farmer, miller, and a horse trainer. He took up carving when he lived in Pleasant Valley and continued throughout his



*The Folk Art Sculpture of Anselmo Harris at the TSM:
Above: "Here Is Where We Play",
At Left: "Our Home" both works are circa 1890*

retirement in Union City. His carvings were inspired from religious topics, as well as from subjects from nature, some representing the region around Reelfoot Lake. The pieces shown here were rendered on a large scale from a single log, with the component figures roughed out with a mallet and chisel. "Here Is Where We Play," made about 1890, displays a variety of animals of the forest smelling flowers and coexisting with a boy and a girl at play. The other sculpture from the 1890s, "Our Home," is made from cypress wood and includes Christ on the cross and a woman at a well, perhaps referring to Rebecca in the Book of Genesis.

(Many thanks to Robert Cogswell, Ph.D., Director of the Folklife Program at the Tennessee Arts Commission for sharing his research regarding Anselmo Harris).

Mike ♦



Photo: Customs House Museum

“Inspirations & Origins”–Customs House Museum & Cultural Center Exhibition

We are pleased to announce that we have an outstanding variety of studio and reproduction furniture juried in to this exhibition. We are thrilled with the wide range of styles represented, the depth of quality of the works chosen, and the unique inspirations for each piece.

We are grateful to everyone for their participation as well as their patience with the process. There is a lot that goes into a show such as this, and we are glad that things have come together exceptionally well. We also want to offer a word of thanks to the Jury members: Candace Adelson, Ph.D., Senior Curator of Fashion & Textiles at the Tennessee State Museum, Kim Brooks, owner of Finer Things gallery in Nashville, and Matthew Teague, furniture maker and editor of Popular Woodworking Magazine (and CFG Board-member-at-large), without whom we would not have been able to pull this off.

Also, a word of thanks is in order to those who have participated in various ways in the exhibitions committee, including Mike Bell, Graham Campbell, Rita Kaplan, Dale McCloud, Craig Nutt, Worth Squire, Holden Thompson, Scott Thompson, and Kim Winkle.

Located in the heart of historic downtown Clarksville, the fifth largest city in Tennessee, the Customs House Museum and Cultural Center is the State’s second largest general museum. The exhibit space at the Customs House is outstanding, and we are grateful for the opportunity to show our work there.

Exhibition Calendar:

Monday, August 6, 2012 – delivery of pieces to the museum

Friday, August 10th – show opens at the Customs House Museum & Cultural Center

Saturday, August 11th – "Unofficial Opening" at the Cumberland Furniture Guild's Summer Meeting from 2 to 5 p. m. at the museum

Thursday evening, September 20th– Official Museum opening reception at the Customs House. (Please note that the calendar on the original Call for Entries had this incorrectly listed as September 6th)

Sunday, October 28th – show closes.

We have also received some funding from the Tennessee Arts Commission for artist's lectures and demonstrations throughout the exhibition. We will announce these as they are scheduled. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call Scott Thompson (615) 876-2724 or email info@cumberlandfurnitureguild.org. Thanks All!!

Support the Arts!

Support the Tennessee Arts with this special license plate. The plate is only \$25 more than a regular plate and the proceeds go to all the programs and services of the Tennessee Arts Commission. The Cumberland Furniture Guild has received generous support from the TAC, so let's support what they do! Go to <http://www.tennessee.gov/revenue/vehicle/licenseplates/misc/mostpop.htm> for more information on how to get yours.