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## FEBRUARY 2010 NEWSLETTER

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### ***The Cumberland Furniture Guild's Winter Meeting***

will be on Saturday, February 20th, 2010 from 2 p.m. until 5 p.m. at  
O'More College of Design in Franklin, Tennessee.

***This Meeting will be our annual "Members' Meeting", and members are encouraged to bring their portfolios or examples of works in progress.***

***Unlike many of our meetings where we just have finger food, at this meeting a BUFFET MEAL will be served, so come hungry!***

We will also be holding focus groups moderated by Guild Treasurer Alan Daigre with the CFG Board to get ideas from the membership about the Guild's Five year plan. This is an opportunity to help shape the future of the guild, so bring your constructive opinions and turn out to help us create the Cumberland Furniture Guild you would like to be involved with.

↔ →

***Directions to O'More College:*** From I-65 South of Nashville, take exit 65 for U.S. Highway 96. Turn Right (or Left if you are exiting from 65 North) on Highway 96. Go 2.4 miles and Turn Left on South Margin Street. In a block and a half the school entrance is on the left. ***The meeting is in the Pavilion Building behind the mansion. Follow the student parking signs and park around behind.*** The address of O'More College of Design is 423 South Margin Street, Franklin, Tennessee 37064. On that day call (615) 504-5832 for more information.

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Thanks to all of the 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

Why are some furniture forms so iconic and long-lived? Why can humans across all cultural barriers agree on the pleasantness and appeal of certain designs? Some may argue that it's when the essential lines that make up the piece reflect the human form, or some other familiar organic shape. They wouldn't be wrong either. But how does that explain, for example, the almost universal appeal of the 18<sup>th</sup> C corner cabinet genre? Aside from a couple of Samoan pro football players I can think of, the corner cabinet really doesn't share much with the human body by way of configuration.

It's interesting that modern and contemporary furniture makers have shied away, for the greatest part, from trying to rethink, deconstruct, or improve on the traditional corner cabinet form. One could blithely assert that the form, from the simplest to the most ornate, has come as close as possible to achieving design perfection, but why exactly is that? And really, the corner cabinet is only one example of certain types of furniture design and proportion that beggar any attempts to revise them.

Ancient architects and furniture makers discovered and codified some amazingly astute facts about human perception and the proportional relationships that we respond positively to. It's been popular in the past to attribute all these discoveries to the ancient Greeks, partly because we do have their written records of such inventions, but also, I suspect, because they are the closest to the Western Europeans (the brightest race, don't-cha-know) from truly ancient times. In fact the discoveries in Tut's tomb and Ur have demonstrated to us that these principles were already in use, if not fully formulated, in African and Oriental cultures.

The most well-known of these proportional formulas is the Golden Mean, or the Golden Ratio, or *phi*, which divides a line into two unequal segments whose relationship to one another and to the whole most accurately reflect the proportions found throughout organic design. Our noses divide our face, and our belly-button divides our bodies roughly into the Golden Mean. There are many other examples in the natural world.

The ancients recognized many other relationships that were often subtler and harder to formulate. It's here that we do have to give our props to the Greeks, who established the "Order of Columns", and plumbed the depths of their potential in helping to design every detail of classic Greek architecture. It was these relationships that Andrea Palladio rediscovered and popularized in the Italian Renaissance, and whose interpretations are still regularly used to create a sense of grandeur and harmony in public and private buildings. Even much of post-modern architecture has Palladian ideals underlying its creations.

The English architect Inigo Jones traveled to Italy around

1600 CE, and returned to establish Palladian ideals as the royally endorsed style. When Thomas Chippendale published his seminal *Gentleman & Cabinetmaker's Director* in 1754, he devoted more than 1/3 of the book to an exhaustive analysis of the four main columns – Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite. Chippendale annotated hundreds of relationships and pure geometric forms that could be derived from comparing the relationships of the various elements of a properly proportioned Greek column – the plinth, base, column-proper, capital, and entablature, and the molding shapes. He asserted that without a thorough understanding of these relationships and where to apply them, a maker could not produce agreeable designs. This assertion is certainly arguable, but I think that to a very large degree, these proportional arrangements have been so used and relied upon for centuries that they are imprinted upon the consciousness of anyone who stops to contemplate design. Or perhaps, as the Greeks asserted, these principles are so much

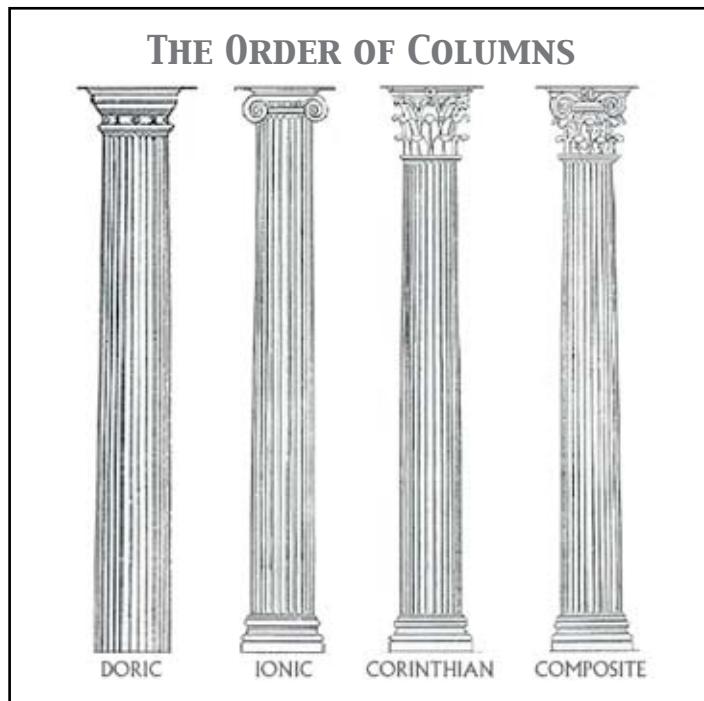
a part of creation and of our basic hardwiring, that we naturally respond by imitating them.

Want to test these principles against non-Western styles? Compare a Chinese altar table, or pagoda top. Apply the order of columns proportions to a Tansu chest. It's my opinion that the best furniture designs still reflect these verities. There's still plenty of latitude within this framework for masters such as Michael Fortune to create innovative and beautiful designs. It's by consciously ignoring these principles that an iconoclast like Gary Bennett establishes his

"bad-boy" sense of whimsy and his in-your-face artifacts.

Likewise, there is something about the corner cabinet form that made it natural and compelling for the 18<sup>th</sup> C makers to apply the classical principles – look how great a percentage even have some form of column applied at the sides. This was not true only of the American and English makers. Look at the wonderful German Biedermeier examples. Perhaps it was the sense that a corner cabinet presented a more two-dimensional aspect that helped designers to recognize the necessity for proportional purity in every detail. Try to make one too wide and see how quickly you'll recoil in disgust. All possible agreeable variations seemed to have been tried in earlier centuries, and so if a maker today undertakes a corner cabinet, no matter how contemporary in concept, it will still share its major proportions with earlier examples, and likely not depart far from the architectural paradigm.

An essay such as this is not meant to squelch experimentation, or to bind today's makers to a limited set of rules. It is essential, however, to be well aware of the time-tested proportional principles that reach deep down into our collective sub-conscious, and to have a very good reason for violating them. *-Alf♦*



## Swap & Shop

**For Sale:** Clifton planes #4 \$250, #5 \$250, and #6 \$300; Adria dovetail saw #32 \$100; Sorby 3/4" bowl scraper & 1/2" fingernail bowl gouge \$100 pair; Porter cable 690 router NIB \$85; SCMI/Rockwell sliding table saw 15" blade, 10' sliding table, biesemeyer-style fence, 7hp 3ph. \$2500 obo; Cemco 1000 37" Wide Belt Sander, 3ph. 20HP \$4500 obo. Call Aaron for more info (615) 545-5660

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**Shop space available** for lease- separately divided, lockable space approx. 750 sf. in a larger building near the Fairgrounds/ Sounds Stadium. Shared common spaces also accessible including a spray room, bathroom, and certain communal tools and equipment; very secure, 240 volt and 3 phase electric; loading dock w/ grade level garage door; \$425 per month which includes electric and water. Possibility of separating out or reducing the size of the space if someone was interested but didn't need as much space and was looking to reduce their costs. Call David Singelyn at 615-579-9872. ♦

## Member News

The Winter 2010 issue of **Woodwork** is now on the newsstands (including in every Home Depot, we discovered) and features the work from the CFG's recent exhibition, *Arms, Legs, Feet, Heart and Soul--The Cumberland Furniture Guild Explores the Anatomy of Furniture*. In the issue are works from Guild members Alf Sharp, Al Hudson, Chris Somerville, David Knudtson, J. Michael Floyd, Scott DeWaard, Matthew Teague, Craig Nutt, Peter Fleming, Martha Berry, James Horne, Worth Squire, and Kimberly Winkle.

Longtime CFG Members Randy, Keith, and Dylan Cochran at Wood Studio in Arley, Alabama were featured in

*Southern Living* in the 'Alabama People and Places' Section October, 2009. The coverage was only regional, so many in Tennessee may not have seen it. We hear they were the first woodworkers to be featured in the magazine. You can check out a PDF of the article on their web site at [www.woodstudio.com](http://www.woodstudio.com). Kieth says "I hope you have a good day, and be careful around them saws!" Always good advice.

### Just Call Them Wood Nerds

Randy Cochran and his sons craft old-fashioned, fine furniture from hardwoods. BY LAURA HELLING



LEFT: The Cochran boys work on a piece of furniture. ABOVE: Randy, Keith, and Dylan Cochran working on their wood studio.

**Just Call Them  
Wood Nerds**

Randy Cochran and his sons craft old-fashioned, fine furniture from hardwoods. BY LAURA HELLING

Guild member Norm Hein demonstrated 19th century chair making techniques at the James K. Polk Ancestral Home in Columbia, Tennessee through the month of January. Norm's demonstrations highlight the exhibit "*Chairs of Freedom: The Life and Craft of Dick Poyner*" which continues at the Polk House through March 28th. Norm's demonstrations are based

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on a survey of one of Poyner's post and rung chairs. His demonstrations have included spring pole lathe and shaving horse techniques as well as discussions regarding the Poyner chairs' features. Born a slave in Halifax County, Virginia, Poyner was the property (and probably the son) of Robert Poyner, a maker of bricks, shoes, and chairs, who likely taught him how to make chairs. Dick Poyner purchased his own freedom from slavery in 1851 by making chairs, and then went on to make hundreds of chairs in his Williamson county factory from 1860 to 1880. This exhibition features thirty Poyner chairs, the largest collection of his work ever assembled. ♦

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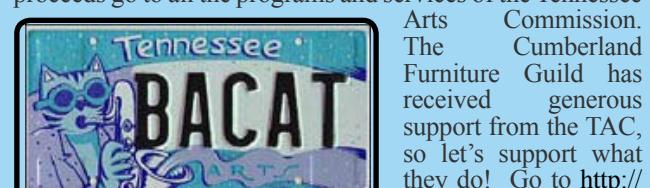
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Arts Commission. The Cumberland Furniture Guild has received generous support from the TAC, so let's support what they do! Go to <http://www.tennessee.gov/revenue/vehicle/licenseplates/misic/mostpop.htm> for more information on how to get yours.

## Cool Tool Review

### A Tool's Companions

By Scott Thompson

Regardless of the method with which we craft our furniture or the style of furniture we craft, all furniture makers—all artists—rely on their hands for the execution of their designs and ideas. While even the best tools are of little use in unskilled hands, even the crudest tools can perform great feats in a skilled set of hands.

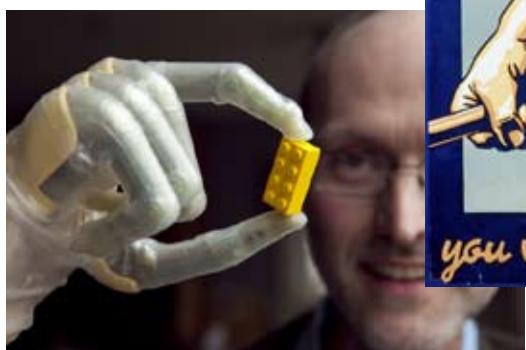


Hubert Compte, in his book *Tools: Making Things around the World*, argues that tools were discovered or created to extend the hands—to protect them and allow them to do



what they could not do unaided. The blacksmith can both handle and shape red-hot iron with the proper tools. The stonemason could not even begin to remove or effect his chosen material without tools. Mr. Compte also comments on the skill and dexterity of the hand at work with a tool:

"The hand's knack is something in addition to the



obvious gesture; it's extra management of exerted power . . . This addition softens a brute action, modifies it, makes it successful. It is comparable to the microscopic drop of oil that the clockmaker places on the movement of the clock, to the catalyst that triggers a reaction—disappearing in the endeavor. This is the mystery of the hand at work."

There is certainly a relationship between the mind, the eye, and the hand, but there are also certain processes that my hands seem to know or remember on their own. Is there an "intelligence" that the hands possess that is beyond mere training by repetition? Do our hands remember things that we have not been taught? Do we carry some inherent knowledge of our grandfathers and grandmothers—even of their grandparents, whom we have never met—in our hands?

The creative hands of an artist do not have to know all of these things in order to create—somehow they



know what to do, and it is a beautiful thing to see an artist's hands at work. Surely our hands are the coolest tool of all. —Scott ♦



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