Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education
ISSN: 2326-7070 (Print)
ISSN: 2326-7062 (Online)

Volume 2 | Issue 1 (1983) pps. 33-35

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Recommended Citation
Schwarz, Cynthia (1983) "Art Education as Apprenticeship: The Art of Making a Chair," *Marilyn Zurmuehlen Working Papers in Art Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/mzwp/vol2/iss1/13

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ART EDUCATION AS APPRENTICESHIP: THE ART OF MAKING A CHAIR

Cynthia Schwarz

As the focus of my dissertation research I have been learning how to make a Windsor chair. The subject began to take shape two years ago in the first course in Living Traditions in Art taught by David W. Ecker at New York University. In that class were graduate students from all over the world--Lebanon, Thailand, Israel, Brazil--who brought with them traditions in art that were in danger of dying out. We were encouraged as artist-researchers to do something about it. Documentation of artistic processes was a central activity; yet we saw that the most direct way of preserving and advancing these traditions is to learn the processes themselves. The model for such learning is also the oldest: art education as apprenticeship.

But for some of us a problem arose. Such traditional arts as ceramics and textile design have been accepted in American schools as art, while other traditions have not. And why not lace-making for example, or knife-making or chair-making? Indeed, American artists are to be found knotting ropes, forging knives, and constructing furniture. The subject becomes highly controversial when attempts are made to classify these activities as art, to differentiate between art and craft, to distinguish the products of the creative imagination from the products of labor. The argument, therefore, is not with the object, but with the verbal explanation or concept of what art is supposed to be. For example, can an object be both a fine art and a craft object? How are we to classify the "primitive" artifact, which we gaze at in a museum, when we do not know what it was used for or why it was made? Does an object lose its "fine art" quality once we know its use, or even worse, once we see it being used? How did the "art" get into the art object which we find aesthetically pleasing? Since these are the kinds of questions I am researching, I thought I would turn "to the things themselves". I would learn how to make a Windsor chair with hand tools in order to understand the process. By this phenomenological/hermeneutical approach I hope to describe and interpret the meaning of artistry within a specific tradition.

The first Windsor chairmaker I heard about was Michael Dunbar of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He has "reclaimed" and extended this tradition which seemed to have petered out in the late 19th century. There have always been craftsmen who make copies of antiques. These "period pieces" may well exhibit identical baluster and ring turnings on a leg according to the exact measurements of a particular chair from a documented date. But no personal decisions are made beyond the technical ones regarding the unseen details of construction. Dunbar, on the other hand uses the traditional woods, tools and hand methods of construction much as the early chairmakers did, to make chairs that are uniquely his own. He has discovered the early methods of construction by researching the documentary evidence and by "reading" old

Windsors that have come to him for repair or restoration. Actually, the chair that is beyond repair is the richest source of information, for it can be taken apart and "read" for tool marks and techniques.

Chairmaking, as with other traditional arts, continues even today on the basis of a master-apprentice relationship. I spent a week at Dunbar's woodworking school (held each summer in Hiram, Ohio) learning how to use the tools and how to construct a bow-back Windsor. But learning cannot be completed within the time it takes to construct one chair. So this spring I will visit Dunbar at his home-shop in Portsmouth, to add to, and, if necessary, to revise, what I have learned so far. Moreover, the complexities of Windsor chairmaking are best appreciated by observing more than one woodworker in order to see the subtle differences, the characteristic approaches and ways of performing technical operations that occur in each one's methods. Last summer, in South Woodbury, Vermont, I observed how David Sawyer, another extender of the tradition, makes a continuous-arm Windsor. In Baltimore John Alexander demonstrated how he constructs his post-and-rung, or ladder-back chairs from green wood, and how he makes his conscious decisions about the art of his work. Wendell Castle, who exemplifies the "fine" art of furniture-making, was interviewed at his school and workshop outside of Rochester, New York. Since Dunbar's book, Windsor Chairmaking, first came out in 1976, more than a dozen Windsor chairmakers have appeared in New England alone to extend the living tradition, while the possibilities of chairmaking have inspired architects and even sculptors. I intend still to interview other Windsor makers, a designer of chairs, a sculptor, and someone who "just makes a chair".

One can readily perceive why the Windsor was the most popular chair made during the hand tool era. It is constructed generally from three kinds of wood: oak for the supple parts, maple for the support pieces and pine for the sculpted seat. Because of the woods used, and the method of wedged supports, green wood drying over dry wood and the lightness that the steaming of the bow back allows, this chair endures and holds together through generations of stress and wear.

Although my research is grounded in hand tool processes, there is not time to describe more than the use of one tool, in one procedure, which shapes the billets of wood after the logs have been riven into workable size. A drawknife has two handles at right angles to the blade between; it is worked through traction rather than percussion or thrust. It does not split or tear apart the fibers of the wood for that is where the strength of the wood lies - where its means for resisting stress are the greatest. Instead, the sharp, thin edge of the blade shaves off the excess wood by following the natural line of the fibers. But what is happening when the woodworker uses the drawknife to shave down the billet into a piece shaped to serve as part of the chair he is making? The billet takes shape; the shavings scatter and pile up on the floor. The tool can be seen to be brought down on the wood in what appear to be repetitive movements: the woodworker's arms are bent, his head is down and he bends over the shaving horse as if he had made himself the driving shaft of a jointed mechanism. It requires complete concentration. One

of the chairmakers said, "A blind man could do it better!" He wanted to emphasize the fact that such woodworking is done through feel rather than just watching shape take form. This is non-verbalized activity that must be described in a manner that can be understood in order to interpret and communicate it.

Edged tools, such as the drawknife, the spokeshave, the adze, and various planes and chisels all leave their own mark on the chair parts in this kind of rough workmanship. Each chairmaker, however, has a different pressure, a different slant to his woodworking much as in handwriting. These cuts into the wood that shape it while thinly slicing it away, might be called the "marks of the maker". The chairmaker also must decide the cant of the back, the width and bend of the bow back and the angle of the legs in proportion to the rest of the chair. These are the decisions he makes when he stands back to look at his work, what he calls "eyeballing it". They also might be called the "marks of the maker".

The questions that this research hopes to provide some answers to are suggested by all of the above. What are the differences between art and craft, and what do they share in common? How does art get into the work of art, and do we have a theory of art for our time? How does one communicate non-verbal techniques and thinking? Do the politics, economics and social attitudes of an era effect the making of chairs? What is the relationship between technical dexterity and the quality of being aesthetically pleasing? What do we mean by "hand work", power tools, finish and "make-do"? What is the relationship between the tool, the woodworker and the wood when a chair is being made? And, finally, what is the art of chairmaking?

Wood can be an exciting medium to work in; it has a texture and a structure that humanity has always found satisfying and useful. In Vermont I saw a maple tree felled. The widest, unknotted parts of the trunk were used for chair legs and stretchers, while the remaining logs and branches were stacked in the log pile to be burned in the wood stove for heat that winter. Hand work traditions make use of what is close at hand. The tool, whether chisel, needle or blacksmith's hammer, is worked by the hand. It becomes an extension of the hand transferring the maker's touch to the material he is working in whether it is whale bone, berry-dyed flax or red-hot iron. Making a Windsor chair is an early American tradition, but all over the world there are traditional art activities which are in danger of being lost to industry-produced goods or choked out of the production of tourist-trade objects. I am a member of an organization, ISALTA (International Society for the Advancement of Living Traditions in Art), whose artist-researchers are attempting to preserve, document and learn these traditions. If the objects of these activities give aesthetic satisfaction to their users, why should not such traditional art practices be learned in our art departments? Learning these traditions should also help to open up that over-settled tract that was delimited for us by words and attitudes a long time ago.