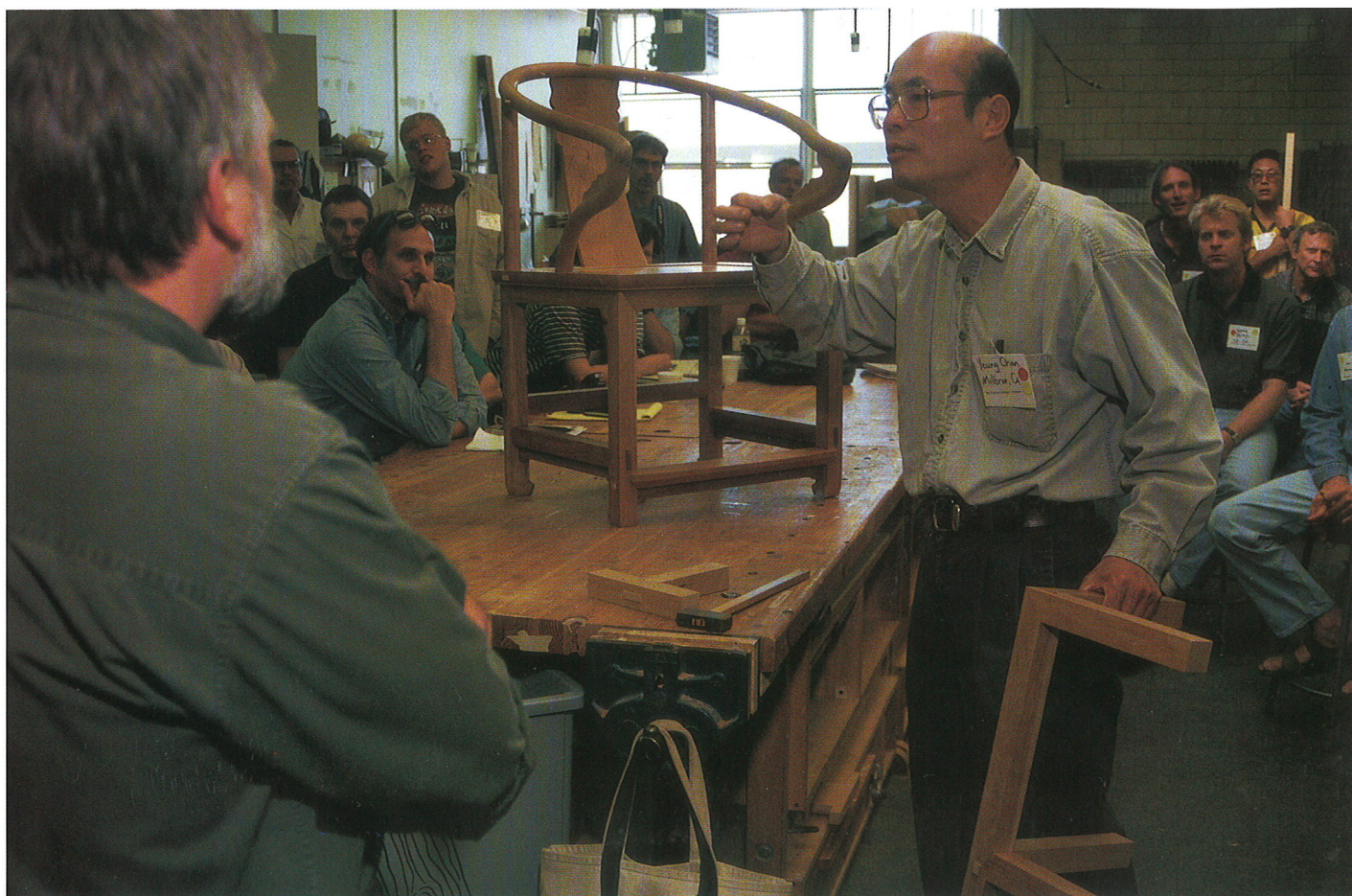


# The Furniture Society Conference

BY THEA GRAY PHOTOS BY RICK MASTELLI



*THE 1998 FURNITURE SOCIETY CONFERENCE drew a crowd of enthusiastic woodworkers from all over North America. Three days of workshops, panel discussions, slide talks, and informal conversation included this presentation by furnituremaker Yeung Chan.*

**A**laska. Alabama. Kentucky and British Columbia. New York, Missouri, Utah and New Hampshire. Woodworkers with interests and backgrounds as diverse as their points of origin descended on the San Francisco Bay Area in June for a long weekend of story swapping, technique trading, moral support and philosophical wrangling.

“East Meets West: Visions Beyond The Horizon” was the second annual conference staged by the Furniture Society,

whose goal is a desire to “advance the art of furnituremaking, by inspiring creativity, promoting excellence, and fostering understanding of this art and its place in society.” The Society was started in 1996, when Sarah McCollum gathered a number of furnituremakers together to discuss and plan the creation of an organization comprising not just makers, but all the people—professionals and enthusiasts—who are involved in the studio furniture field: educators, designers, gallery directors, curators, writers, collectors.

McCollum, who has a degree in architecture, came to furniture, by way of construction and cabinetry, when she realized she wanted something more hands on, more materially challenging than what the cerebral field of architecture could offer. She spent ten years going to woodturning conferences with her husband, Bob Sondag, who is both a furnituremaker and turner, and says, “[I] watched that whole field boom, from being unknown to being prominent in the craft world. It was very active in

developing itself, and it was conferences and having organizations that did it. I wanted that for my field.”

Craig Nutt, the Furniture Society’s webmaster, added, “[Sarah] did a terrific amount of research, talked people into coming to after-hour meetings at conferences to get their ideas and opinions, and finally cajoled about a dozen people like myself—who were mostly apprehensive about whether an organization like this could succeed after so many failed attempts—into coming to a meeting in Philadelphia in April of 1996.”

There had been earlier attempts to foster a furniture community and kick-start a studio furniture movement similar to what the woodturning, glass, ceramics and fiber fields have enjoyed. Two wood furniture conferences were held in Purchase, New York, in 1979 and 1980. Dennis FitzGerald, Vice President of the Furniture Society and the chair of the conference committee, is an Adjunct Professor and Technician at Purchase and was present for those conferences. “[The] ones 20 years ago actually did have a [non-profit] set up, but they really didn’t have a strong organization to back it. And it was one or two people, and eventually it just became too much work for them. . . The trustees [of the Furniture Society] are an incredible mix of people who have really put out an enormous amount of effort and time in trying to make things work. And you just can’t replace that. So far its been a lot of people, not just one or two, and I don’t see why that can’t grow and more people can’t become involved.”

In a short period of time, this intrepid band took care of establishing a non-profit status for the organization, building a membership, and planning a conference. Purchase College, site of Wood ’79 and Wood ’80, hosted approximately 350 people at the Furniture Society’s first conference, in July of 1997. It was important to the Society that their second conference be held on the West Coast, demonstrating their commitment to be a furniture organization for all of North America. This year’s theme, “East Meets West,” echoed that concern, and also reflected an interest in exploring the Pan-Pacific influences on many West Coast furnituremakers.

The conference was co-sponsored by the Oakland Museum and the California



*THE CONFERENCE PROVIDED a number of gallery opportunities for attendees to display and view work. Clockwise from the top of this page:*

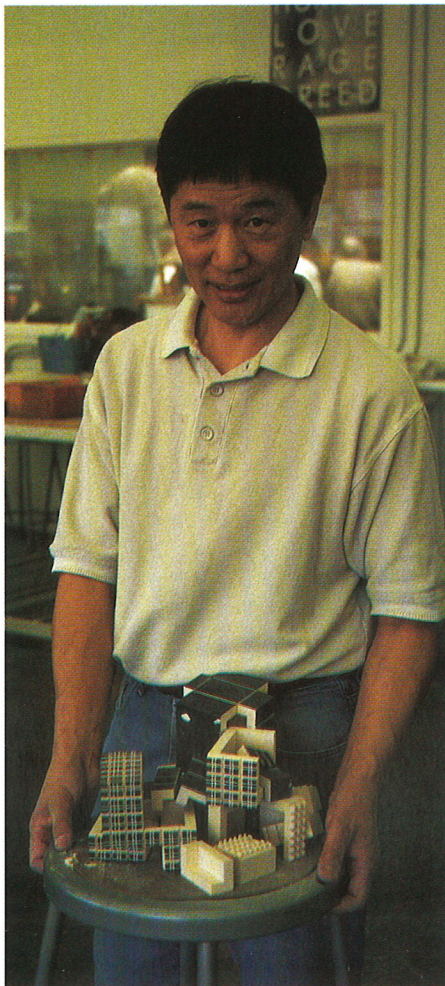
*FURNITUREMAKER Garry Knox Bennett and his wife Sylvia loaned their collection of chairs to the Oakland Museum for all to see and admire.*

*A JURIED EXHIBITION in the Member’s Gallery showed off the work of some of the conference-goers. Located in the main hall where the conference was held, it served as a constant inspiration throughout the weekend.*

*A NUMBER OF ARTISTS, such as Wendy Maruyama (in center of picture), contributed pieces of their work to an auction, held on the final evening of the conference, that raised money for the Furniture Society’s ongoing projects.*

*PO SHUN LEONG (whose glass-topped table can be seen against the wall in the Member’s Gallery picture) with some of the fanciful “building blocks” he made in the surface design workshop.*

*CURVED-FRONT display cabinet, 26" x 17" x 7", by Oakland furnituremaker Stephen Moss. The casework is ash and bird’s eye maple, the handmade pulls are doussie.*



College of Arts and Crafts, and was underwritten with many hours of effort on the part of Furniture Society volunteers and CCAC students. At CCAC's Wood/Furniture program, Department Chair Donald Fortescue, Senior Lecturer Peter Pierobon, and Studio Manager Hayami Arakawa shouldered the responsibility for on-site conference coordination, while Steve Clerico, the Furniture Society's administrative assistant and sole paid staff member, handled the mountains of paperwork at the headquarters in Virginia.

On the first day of the conference, attendees met at the Oakland Museum.

Aaron Betsky, Curator of Architecture and Design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, started the day off with a healthy dose of critical theory in his opening speech. He addressed furniture as an extension of the body which can connote a certain time or social status, or even act as tool for change, though he remarked that inevitably such revolutionary developments are co-opted into an established style.

Glenn Adamson, a graduate student in the Decorative Arts Department at Yale University, proved the theory that "a piece of furniture can really be the first



piece of a new world” with his panel “From the Personal to the Technical: Bay Area Woodworking 1965-75,” which provided background on, and insights from, such influential and longtime participants in the northern California woodworking scene as J.B. Blunk, Donald Braden, Art Carpenter, Marcia Chamberlin, and Michael Cooper.

John Lavine, woodworker and editor of *Woodwork*, moderated the panel “Closing the Circle: Japanese Influences in West Coast Furniture,” which examined the ways in which that field, as represented by the work of John Burt, John Cederquist, Donald Fortescue, Seth Janofsky and Wendy Maruyama, is influenced, directly or indirectly, by Japanese architecture, woodworking and other arts. Wendy Maruyama, with typical wit, quipped that the panel was ironically comprised of “four white guys and me,” before going on to give a very personal account of how her Japanese heritage eventually played into her vocabulary of textures and techniques.

The day ended with an on-stage conversation between Susan Baizerman, Curator of Crafts at the Oakland Museum,





*A WIDE VARIETY OF SURFACE DESIGN TECHNIQUES were explored during the course of the conference. Clockwise from above:*

*AN ALMOST ENDLESS SEA of sample boards, each done with a different surface treatment, provided by Kim Kelzer to inspire those in the hands-on workshop.*

*THE DELICATE INLAY work of Brian Condran's "Rose Case" (8" x 10" x 7"), part of the Members' Gallery.*

*KRISTINA MADSEN'S DEMONSTRATION of the Fijian-inspired freehand carving technique which she meticulously applies to her furniture was repeated several times during the conference and was always crowded.*

and Sylvia and Garry Knox Bennett about the collection of chairs the Bennetts have lovingly assembled over the years. The excellent and eclectic collection was on display in the museum for the duration of the conference, and the range of styles, from William Morris to Tommy Simpson, was a reminder of the extraordinary scope of furniture available to serve as points of inspiration and departure.

While introducing the topic of his panel discussion, John Lavine remarked that briefly outlining the history of Japanese influences is, as the old Chinese phrase goes, "like looking at flowers from horseback." Much of the remainder of conference, held on CCAC's San Francisco campus, was of that same dizzyingly fast nature. The next two days were jam-packed with panels, artist's presentations, workshops and demonstrations. Some offerings were repeated, but for the most part, conference-goers had to choose one over another. Some people never made it to half of the presentations they had hoped to attend, finding themselves instead in riveting conversations with new friends and old.

There was an abundance of panels to attend, from new methods and materials in furniture design and production, to sessions on issues of ethnicity, gender, and education in the field. Participants in a panel on "The Next Generation" of furnituremakers debated the feasibility of occupying "the gray space" between furniture and sculpture. The subject of marketing hovered around many of the discussions, including those on the nature of the commission process and the curator's approach to collecting. Of the collector's and curator's panels, one conference attendee commented, "I didn't agree with anything that was said, but I found them very interesting and enlightening." Many panels tended to err on the side of long presentations without adequate time for questions or discussion, but talks have already begun about how to improve the format for next year's gathering.

One panel took place in three installments. Loy Martin, who moderated "A Critical Discourse: Meaning and Value in Studio Furniture," described various moments from those three sessions. John Dunnigan, who is a professor at Rhode Island School of Design's furniture department, gave "an historical perspective on themes and problems that furni-

ture designers and makers encounter over and over again in different periods. He went all the way back to ancient Egypt and came forward to the present. . .it gave lots of little handles for the discussion.”

Martin, a furnituremaker and former university English professor, described his own presentation as being “about how different kinds of contemporary studio furniture define the viewers that are necessary for them . . . I talked about the relation between that way of defining the object in relation to a subject (viewer, maker, consumer, etc.) and the other side of furnituremaking, which is performing a service. My key for thinking about that is that there is the word ‘furniture’ on one side, which is about objects, and then there is the verb ‘to furnish,’ which is about process . . . The concept of a process of furnishing is specifically architectural in some cases (when furniture is made to complete an architectural entity) or there could also be a social sense of furnishing, say, providing Louis XIV with specific symbols of his power, his position in a social structure or whatever. And I feel that may be what’s unique about what we do—we’re always working between the object pole and the process pole in a way in which a sculptor or painter maybe isn’t as much.”

Amy Forsyth, an assistant professor of architecture at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who has recently turned to furniture, spoke about the issues of furniture versus furnishings and the different functions furniture can serve, contrasting two chairs one can find in a museum; one on display, enjoying a life of contemplation, and one engaged in an active life as the museum guard’s chair.

Ned Cooke, professor of Decorative Arts at Yale, addressed issues of authorship by examining the ways the furniture of Green and Green was influenced by the vocabulary of skills and materials of relatively unknown (and unrecognized) craftsmen actualizing their designs. Like an architect might, Green and Green designed furniture façades, and left construction details to the craftsmen.

Of Linda Donley-Reid’s presentation, Loy Martin commented, “She’s one of those dynamo people: a psychoanalyst, anthropologist, archeologist, and a very engaging speaker. She talked about objects and furniture in Swahili households, as well as a psychoanalytic inter-

pretation of the nourishing role of furniture in our lives—all fascinating stuff about the way objects take on cultural and ritualistic kinds of meaning— and people loved it.”

Martin remarked, “It’s so much fun to talk with a large group, because an issue has so many different facets and people

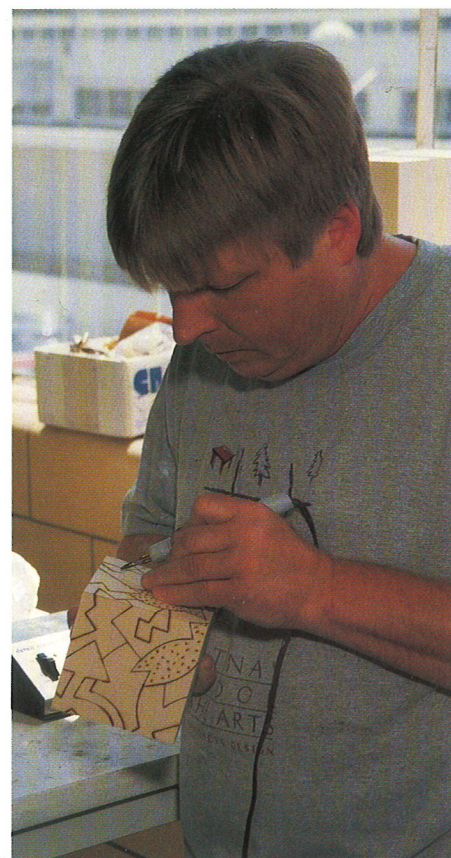
patination by David Marks. There were additional opportunities to learn technical skills, as Piero Mussi of Artworks Foundry in Oakland joined Garry Bennett to explain the processes of bronze casting, and Gord Peteran and Amy Forsyth showed examples of presentation drawings designed to snag a commission.

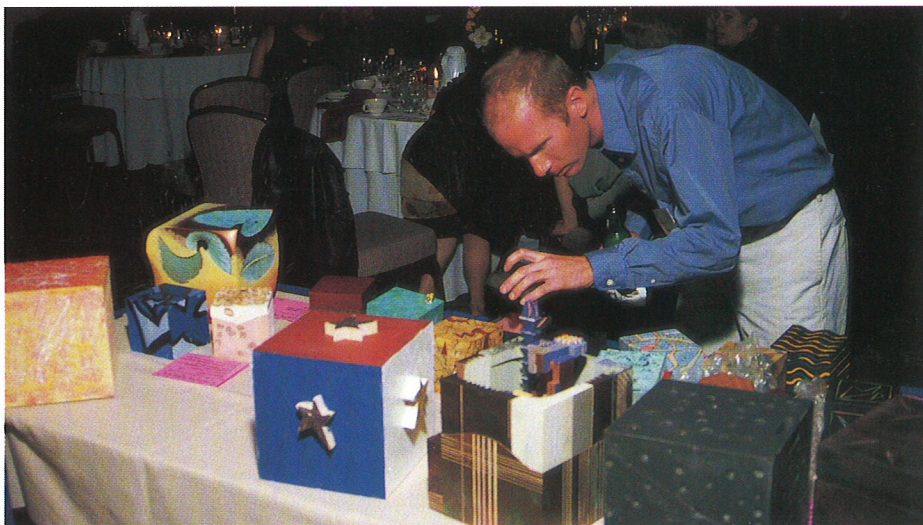


come at it from surprising directions. What really carried over [from one conference to the other], and what I had no expectation of when I went last year, was the high level of intelligence. I didn’t expect a bunch of furnituremakers to be so sophisticated and thoughtful about what they do.”

“Tired of talk? Come and get dusty!” was the sales pitch for the hands-on Surface Design Workshop, which was open all day Friday and Saturday. Michael Hosaluk, Kim Kelzer, Paul Sasso, and Merryll Saylan presided over the workshop and offered a roomful of supplies and ideas to those folks who wandered, with glazed eyes, into the shop. Boxes, tables and other objects created in the workshop were donated to Saturday night’s auction to benefit the Furniture Society.

Those people hoping to learn surface design techniques weren’t disappointed; other presentations during the weekend included Kristina Madsen demonstrating Fijian-based freehand intaglio surface carving, Greg Johnson’s painted wood and special effect finishes, and gilding and





*THE PLEASURE OF DETAILED HANDWORK* was an ongoing theme throughout the various demonstrations and workshops. Clockwise from the top of this page: TOSHIO ODATE used traditional Japanese tools to make a small Shoji screen. AN ASSORTMENT OF UNIQUE BOXES were made in the Surface Design workshop, and were eventually auctioned off to enthusiastic bidders during the closing banquet. MICHAEL HOSALUK, who helped preside over that ongoing workshop, applies a drawing to one such box. COLLABORATIONS were a large part of the workshop, as participants learned from each other and were inspired to stretch their own creativity to new levels.

Yeung Chan and Toshio Odate displayed the results of centuries of refinement in demonstrations of the joinery techniques of China and Japan, respectively. Toshio Odate also gave a special artist's presentation on "The Nature of a Profession," urging furnituremakers to train their eyes and hands to do what large manufacturers cannot. He delineated his notion of the nature of craftsmanship and quality, and suggested that much of the furniture available today is not of an acceptable level of quality.

Those folks who still possessed energy at the end of the day on Friday could attend the opening of the member's and student's exhibits, the Slide Wars, or Midnight Madness in the Surface Design studio. The ever-popular Slide Wars was an open slide show, and anyone interested in participating popped their slides in a carousel and had one minute to introduce themselves and talk about their work to a boisterously interactive crowd.

Saturday evening's wrap-up featured a closing speech by Ken Trapp, Curator-in-Charge at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, who urged the audience to actively participate in forming the American craft scene by creating good furniture and by giving their Congressional representatives feedback about what the government-run Gallery should exhibit. The speech was followed by a banquet dinner, and a lively Furniture Society Benefit auction, which raised about ten thousand dollars for the Society.

Based on discussions during the panels and informal conversations in the hallways, there were many new and varied ideas generated for next year's conference. Gary Venable, a furnituremaker from Michigan who chaired the panel on the impact and influences of ethnicity, voiced one: "There were a lot of people [at the conference] who wanted to make some distinction between the designers and the makers. . . I know I always say to myself, 'well that guy, he just designs it, he has four or five guys who are making it. How much credit can you take for something if all you did was design it?' I think there needs to be some dialogue between these two groups, some opportunity for people to understand a little more where the other group is coming from and what their life is really like."

Dennis FitzGerald, chair of the Conference Committee, added, "There's

so many things we can do—we've really just touched on the field. The hard part of putting a conference on is what not to do. Even at that we still get a lot of complaints that there are too many choices. You try to overmatch your different programs so that someone who doesn't have an interest in this, or is very familiar with that, has something else to go to. But often you have programs where people want to go to two or three at the same time, and that's a little frustrating for attendees, no doubt, but it just shows the extent of what the field has to offer, and how thirsty people are for dialogue."

Furniture '99 will be held next summer, June 17-19, at the Appalachian Center for Crafts in Smithville, Tennessee, with the theme: "The Circle Unbroken: Continuity and Innovation in Studio Furniture." The Board of the Furniture Society wants to bring more traditional furnituremakers into the fold of the organization, and into the dialogue. As different as marketing a piece of furniture is from marketing a turned bowl or a piece of art glass, notes Sarah McCollum, "the marketplace is different for one making traditional furniture than for one contemporary furniture. There are just different marketplaces because of perceptions ... It's just another part of the mix that we are bringing together: the galleries and the makers and the collectors. It's a place for dialogue for the makers of traditional and of contemporary, or re-interpreted traditional, or of way-out fantasy furniture. For whatever reason, there have been more contemporary makers coming to the conferences so far. So we will take care to include programming that is attractive to the traditional maker. We want to be really inclusive, of all ages and all races and ethnicities and all materials."

The mere act of gathering furnituremakers of all media, and the collectors, educators, designers and other sometimes unacknowledged members of the community together is wonderful. To maintain a connection throughout the year with a deep and necessary dialogue about the community's roots, and how to develop the craft, and further the field is downright revolutionary, and may spell out why the Furniture Society seems likely to succeed in its mission.

They have created a number of ways for their membership to stay connected;

in addition to the conferences, there is a newsletter, a website, and a resource guide. The website has contact information for the Board and committees, past newsletters and archived information from the first two conferences, membership directories and educational resources, as well as "Furniture In the News," which features articles on furniture from all manner of publications. The resource guide can, for example, help you locate neighboring furnituremakers, help a collector find you, or provide you with the contact information for 58 galleries across the country carrying studio furniture. This year's guide has 90 very worthwhile pages of information, and it's already grown since it was printed.

Preparations are also under way for the inaugural issue of the Furniture Society's publication *Furniture Studio*, which is aimed at continuing the kinds of discussions which go on at the conferences. Dennis FitzGerald, one of five editorial board members, describes it as "a meaningful production that would take what some magazines tend to do in a four-page layout and carry that out to fruition, do instead maybe 10 to 16-page layouts, and really cover subjects in much more depth, in a range of directions from historical to contemporary. [It will] give

much more substance and social context, I think, to what the field does. The conferences really get people together and there will be a connection between *Furniture Studio* and the conferences. One thing will build on another. We're hoping this is where we can start reaching the general public more."

In addition to that goal, the Furniture Society has long-range plans to gain a more international membership. "And there are many more ideas," observed Craig Nutt, "which are under development, or waiting for volunteers and funding to bring them to fruition . . . Judging from our board and our membership, I believe that the time is finally right for an organization like the Furniture Society to succeed. I think the studio furniture field is about to come into its own."

To receive more information, or to donate funding or time—they welcome volunteers who can spare an hour here or there as well as those who can work on a project basis—contact the Furniture Society at: Box 18, Free Union, VA 22940; 804-973-1488, fax 804-973-0336; e-mail: Furniture@avenue.org; website: www.avenue.org/Arts/Furniture

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