

Rabbit Run

On the arc from Dostoevsky to dados, Gary Rogowski '72 has carved his niche in the fine art of woodworking.

By Romel Hernandez

In an increasingly tech-obsessed world, Gary Rogowski '72 prefers his chips to be made of wood rather than silicon.

Early on, Rogowski rejected a self-imposed trajectory towards a career in academia to become a fine furniture maker. Nearly three decades and countless rabbits, dados, and dovetails later, he says he's never been happier with his choice of vocation. "We all have these opposable thumbs that have a funny connection to our brains," he says. "We like to make things. . . . We don't have these thumbs just to hit the space bar on a keyboard."

Rogowski, 52, works and teaches joinery in a modest studio inside a sprawling warehouse complex in northeast Portland. His four-legged companions Buck and Jimmy stroll to the door to amiably sniff visitors before resuming their naps in a corner. The studio walls are lined with an array of hand tools—hundreds of planes, drills, chisels, files, presses, saws, each with its own purpose and idiosyncrasies.

A small hardcover titled *Fundamentals of Solid Geometry* lies on a desk scattered with wood shavings. A side room houses most of the heavy machinery. He admits a soft spot for old stuff, like a cast-iron green Yates-American band saw, one of the first pieces he bought when he started out.

"I tell students if there's a fire they're on their own, because I'm not leaving this saw."

Although Rogowski majored in literature at Reed (he wrote his senior thesis on Dostoevsky), his friends were a clique of physics students who helped shape his worldview. He recalls funny, weird, intense, middle-of-the-night conversations about theoretical physics or why fingertips get sticky when wet.

"I knew about symbols and motifs," he says, "and these guys understood the way the world worked."

After graduating, Rogowski dropped a plan to pursue a doctorate and then teach. He was working a dreary job pouring concrete when he serendipitously found a hunk of cedar and a hand plane discarded in the bushes outside the house he shared with friends. He crafted a simple bench from the wood and launched himself into a new career.

It was a strange sort of choice, given that he had never before shown the slightest interest in making anything out of wood or any other medium, for that matter. A bookish boy, he had always steered clear of high school shop classes.

So like any good Reddie, Rogowski started out by getting himself some books and some tools and locking himself away to study and learn.



The early years were a struggle as he worked day and night to master the craft, living practically hand to mouth. He started showing handcrafted pieces at Portland's Saturday Market and eventually moved on and up to art galleries around the country, showing one-of-a-kind pieces that could fetch upwards of \$10,000.

From the beginning Rogowski's philosophy and approach to work was firmly grounded in the Arts and Crafts movement's dedication to simplicity and integrity. His work gradually evolved into a modern sculptural style, incorporating glass and metal into more playful, kinetic designs, like a mahogany coffee table with a beveled and rabbeted top that seems to float. Recently he has found renewed inspiration in more traditional forms, but his work is a unique amalgamation of wide-ranging influences—the elegantly sweeping lines of a sturdy oak stool reveal themselves as the shape of a Chinese character, while the sharply angled legs of a koa, aluminum, and glass writing table are distinctly Art Deco.

Rogowski's fine furniture drew praise—he designed and built the desks and tables for the Oregon State Archives in Salem, his largest public commission—but he struggled to find a market. As much as he loved the work, his distaste for business nearly led him a few years ago to ditch everything and look for something new to do.

Instead, Rogowski reinvented himself as a teacher and writer, coming full circle to his college career plans. He's never enjoyed so much success. He has written numerous articles for *Fine Woodworking* magazine; written two books, including *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Joinery*, an impressively illustrated text for hobbyists; and starred in a series of instructional videos such as *Twelve Ways to Make a Mortise and Tenon*.

And after teaching woodworking at art schools in the area for decades he finally decided to start his own school and transformed his workspace into the Northwest Woodworking Studio. The idea took off—last year he enrolled around 300 students, and he plans to expand offerings in 2003.



On a recent rainy Saturday morning, Rogowski proves himself to be a patient and genial instructor to about a dozen students learning how to fashion dovetails. Some students have driven two or three hours to attend the all-day class. He demonstrates proper technique as he exchanges easy banter with the class—“You need to practice. Hey, Milt. This won't just come to you the first time you pick up a saw.”

Rogowski stresses the importance of dedication and integrity. A person who sits in a chair someone else spent hours crafting may not be able to see, may not even care, how it was constructed. The maker, on the other hand, knows the painstaking toil and attention that went into every joint.

“This isn't really about making stuff,” Rogowski says. “In the end, the work is what makes you.” 