

Q&A Podcast #3

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GR: Hi, this is Gary Rogowski for Splinters. Thank you for joining us. I've got Ashley Pieper with me. Hello, Ashley.

AP: Hi, how's it going, Gary?

GR: Well, I was telling you, it's not going that well, but we'll save that story for another time. I just had a little finishing mishap on a floor. But tell me what's going on in your shop now.

AP: I've been working on a plant stand design, which is fun. It's sort of like a box where it's a smaller project that you can play with some design ideas and it has more impact because of scale. So that's been exciting to work on for a small project. But tall fancy legs and stability to hold the pot for the plant in there is paramount. So trying to keep that in focus.

GR: Cool, that's great. I had built a little bench out of a slab of wood that I found. I still have it. It's, you know, crummy little design, but close to my heart. And then I built a stool out of two by twos and a two by 10 or something. And I screwed, you know, I cut an angle on the legs and I gave the stool rake front to back and no splay. And I got on the stool. I know this is audio, but I tipped over, just tipped over. That was my first attempt at a seating piece, really. There's a lot to learn. Yeah. There is a ton to learn. So the students in the second year of the online mastery program are doing their chair projects now.

AP: Ah that's the best. So many different things to think about besides design and how each thing correlates to the other as far as angles and comfort. And it really works your brain.

GR: It's astonishing how interconnected everything is in shared design. You change one thing to make it easier to build? And now it looks completely different. And who knows how they're going to sit? I mean, that's got to wait till the end to find that out. But yeah, it's a really fascinating project. And some people are running with it and others are.

AP: Yeah, there's a reason that chairmakers focus on chair making, I think, and the rest of us kind of check in and out from the process.

GR: Absolutely. It's very different than being a cabinet maker. It's so, it's so different. It's a it's a different world. And so you arrange your shop. Well, let's get into questions. Let me let me first say thank you for joining us again. And thank you for Highland Woodworking for partnering with us on this educational journey. Please send in your questions to me at studio@northwestwoodworking.com. But go to Highland's site, <https://highlandwoodworking.com> and check out their font of information called Woodworking Wisdom. They got all sorts of articles and interviews and stuff there. So check that out. What else? I think we should get on to questions. What do we have?

AP: Okay, so our first question is from Franklin in Chicago, Illinois. And he says, "I'm a new woodworker. What kind of hand tools should I buy first?"

GR: Go ahead.

AP: I was stewing on this one. I like these kinds of questions because it makes you reflect on your former self and the questions you made and how overinvested you get in tooling. And the truth is, you know, it depends on where you think you want to go. But the basics as far as hand tools, I would go with a low angle jack. I think it's a very versatile plane. I think it's also easy to segue into hand tool use. Then I would definitely invest in a good set of chisels. I think that's a big mistake a lot of people make. They buy cheap chisels thinking, "Oh, I have to learn how to sharpen and I don't want to mess them up." And I think you make it harder for yourself because you're fighting against the odds of a junky chisel. So I would say, you know, invest in the best chisels you can get and a low angle jack and go from there.

GR: Uh-huh. Well, that's fascinating. So I'm doing this class now called 'Setting Up Shop' where we're addressing this issue. And this is what I really think Franklin needs to do. Franklin needs to sit down in his space, if he has a space. And he needs to imagine what he's going to be doing. I think that's really important. If you're a new woodworker, and you are starting to learn how vast a field it is, it's overwhelming. Are you going to be a chair maker? You're going to be a cabinet maker. You're going to be a wood carver, a wood burner, marquetry. There's so much. And one size doesn't fit all. So on my walk this morning, I was thinking, think about where you want to be in five years with your woodworking, where would you like to be? I know when I started, I wanted to have a suite of furniture. I wanted to have five, four or five pieces that I could say, and this is what I make. You know, I don't remember exactly what they might have been, but I've never built that suite. Fortunately, but the idea was there of where I wanted to get to. And I think that's really important. And yeah, it sounds like a business plan, and it kind of is, but it's, it's more of a vision, I think. Where do you want to be in a year's time, in three years time, in five years time? And I would make those kinds of promises and never kept them. But they helped me kind of navigate things because it's tough to know. It's really tough to know. And having some idea of where you want to be is, is a good way to help guide yourself.

GR: I think you need to go to tools again. I think a low angle block plane is my first tool. It's just so valuable. And I use it in so many spots. And I disagree. I think you should get a set of okay chisels, you know, decent chisels. So when I started, I got a set of Marples, not a set, but I would buy one at a time because I couldn't afford a whole set. And then I got a good chisel. So one good chisel and a bunch of mediocre chisels allows you to balance that. And it gives you time to

practice your sharpening on your cheaper chisels rather than on the good ones. So that's what I think. I agree with you that it's really important. I asked my students, was it yesterday? I think you have to leave your shop. You can take three tools with you. What do you take?

AP: Oh, I'm so emotionally connected. That's like leaving children behind. Oh gosh.

GR: I'm sorry. You got to leave a couple of them behind. Sophie's choice.

AP: You know, actually, if you think about it, the things that are hanging out on your bench the most that are in that proximity around your bench really give you a clue of what you're reaching for all the time. So it would probably be a dovetail saw, a #102, a block plane, marking knife, and out the door I'd go.

GR: Interesting. Yeah, I'd grab a half inch chisel. I'd grab my half inch Lie-Nelson chisel because I use that. It seems like every day. Everywhere.

AP: Yeah, that's the same for me. I think it's like $\frac{3}{8}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch are the two that I feel like I use the most.

GR: Yeah. Of course, when I'm cutting dovetails, I have the whole setup. So, oh, I need this big one for chopping. I need to do three quarter. I better get a half, you know, for this. And then a $\frac{3}{8}$ ths. Oh, I need that quarter inch to get into those tight spots. And then I got to dig something out. So you end up having them all on the bench. Look forward. Try to imagine yourself as still building. What will you be building in five years? An interesting question.

AP: It is more multifaceted, than it seems at first.

GR: Well, it's, yeah, you can't predict the future, but you can look forward to it and try and, I don't know, I think it's subconscious, as well as conscious, to just push yourself in the right direction. This is what I need to be doing. And it'll affect your decisions.

AP: Want to go to the next question?

GR: Yeah, let's go on.

AP: OK. The next question is, what's the best way to clean up glue in a box corner? Wash it, scrape, or cut it away?

GR: Well, how do you clean out glue? I'll ask you, Ashley.

AP: I like to take care of it immediately. I don't want it to sit on the surface and cause more issues. Depending on how much space I have to get into that corner, sometimes I'll use that little straw trick where you have a cut straw and it kind of forms into the corner and you can just slide it down and kind of scoop most of the glue out. And then I'll take it with a damp rag and kind of go over that and wipe it away. I guess it also depends on if it's a box that's pre-finished or not.

But I'm just going to assume it's unfinished, and that's how I'd approach it.

GR: Yeah, if you can pre-finish your parts, that solves the problem. You can clean things up with a wet rag and don't have to worry about pushing glue into pores or anything like that, which is the concern I have with washing away glue. So my approach is to wait five minutes and let the glue first, it'll skin over. And, you know, it depends on your environment, humidity, all this stuff, and the type of glue you use. But if you wait five or 10 minutes, you can come in with your sharpest chisel, your best chisel, and pop that glue off. And I'm going bevel side down with the chisel, just kind of lift it from one direction, then lift it from another direction, and then come down from the top. And usually that just pulls it away. If I've left a mark behind, I'll still take my sharpest chisel and cut that away. Seems to work, seems to work. But scraping, no, never.

GR: Rogelio and I glued up a bookcase project he was working on last weekend. And I remembered a bookcase. Yeah, probably the first bookcase I ever did. And it was a big one. And it was in oak. And it was probably five feet tall and had all these shelves that I glued in. And I glued it all in at once. What a scarred memory. What a terrible thing that was. I had glue everywhere. And then I was so new to this stuff. I let it all dry. Oh, God. Oh, no. I spent days cleaning up dried hot glue.

GR: You know, I was at a gallery once. And I saw Krenov piece for the very first time. And on the backside, I saw some dried up glue and I went, oh, I wouldn't do that, but it's very interesting. I mean, yeah. Well, you have to decide. I mean, but if it's in a box corner, it's going to be visible. So I want to clean that up. I do want to say this, a couple of things. I don't sand the insides of my pieces. I hand plane them. And if there's tear out, I don't care. I try not to get tear out by choosing reasonably grained wood or checking the grain carefully or using a high angle tool in order to minimize that. But with that kind of cut surface, coming back with the chisel to clean away the glue means I've just got another cut in the wood. It's no big deal. We as makers get so well, probably not you, but me get so close to the piece. You know, you're like, Oh, well, look at that thing. It's terrible. That's the worst mistake ever. And it's not. It's really not. And no one's really going to see it down the road. Now you want to do your best work, but that's not always perfect. So learn to cut yourself some slack on the insides of things. But I cut it. And but last week, Rogelio had pre-finished the cherry. So it was great. We could just wash it away. That was really nice to be able to do that.

AP: I feel like that's nice when you have a small box too, something where it's going to be difficult to get into or even just scraping it without trouble. Yeah, pre-finishing's like a secret weapon.

GR: Yeah, I don't ever do it, though.

AP: Too invested in moving along until you get to that point.

GR: I don't have many flush surfaces in my design. So everything's got to be pre, you know, the surfaces have to be done before I glue up. And so, you know, so if I do dovetails, the dovetails are, you know, a little bit proud. So there's long grain surfaces leading up to them has to be

cleaned up. Everything's pretty much got to be ready to go. So yes, by the time it's time for glue up, oh, do I want to stop and mask off all my joints and put on shellac and spend a day doing that? It's a really good idea. No, I don't want to do it. Let's go. So yeah, I think part of it also stems from another bad experience, which was I was I was building some drawer boxes and I said and all my drawer boxes were sliding dovetails back then. And I said, okay, I've heard about this this great new finish called shellac. It's supposed to be tremendous. So I bought a quart, I guess, of of Seal Coat, which at the time was a 3 lb. cut. And I brushed it on. And it was a disaster. It was terrible. And I said, this shellac stuff sucks. This is awful.

AP: It's so sticky.

GR: Oh, it was just awful. And I'm never doing that again. So it took me a few years to get over that hump and say, well, maybe I should try mixing my own. Maybe that's different. But I've never gone back to prefinishing my parts because of that experience. So I should get over that hump. One of these days, one of these days.

AP: Impressionable moment in your career as a furniture maker.

GR: I'm a piece of soft clay, you know? Well, that's in there. Yeah. That's never going to come out. What else we got?

AP: Okay, so I think that this question is definitely from Maurice from Pocatello, Idaho. The question is, I set some newly bought and flat boards on my concrete floor, but just overnight. Next day, I saw that one of the bottom had cupped. What happened?

GR: Maurice, Maurice. Well, it's a good lesson. It got wet. Moisture came out through the floor. And that's, that's what happened. So I'm a huge proponent of stickers. I wouldn't sticker anything and put it on the floor, though. I mean, I would, I suppose, if I don't expect to use it anytime soon, I've done that. But anytime you get one side of a board wetter than the other, it will cup. You can do it with a simple piece of paper, wet down one side of a piece of paper, and the wet side becomes convex because it's stretching, it's expanding. And the bottom side, which is dry, becomes concave. And that's what happens. It's almost automatic. I was doing a some tabletops. They were half inch thick maple, 20 by 20 inch square, completely done, sanded, edged, everything was great. I said, you know, I'm going to wet down the surface to just make sure that there's no grain raising later on down the road. And I wet down the top and the whole thing went wink and cupped. I was like, oh no, I didn't panic. I flipped it over and went down the bottom face and it cupped back to flat. But it moved that fast. It's crazy. It moved that fast. So yeah, newly bought boards, old boards. Oh, this wood is seasoned. Doesn't matter. You stick it in a spot where it's going to get really wet on one side more than the other, and it's going to cup. Same thing's true. You set it next to your wood stove and crank up the heat on that. One side is going to dry out one side's not and it's going to it's going to cup there too. So make some stickers for yourself. I still have my original stickers. There's probably, I don't know, two dozen of them. They're about an inch square, 7/8" square, 16 inches long in alder. And they're right under my bench. So whenever there's a project going on, everything gets stickered. Everything gets stickered. So it's a hard lesson, but that's how it goes.

AP: Yeah, I assume it matters like where your shop is too. Like if your concrete is down somewhere in a basement or you have, you know, a barn or somewhere else that your workshop is in, and your concrete's there and it just is exposed to more moisture or stays more humid, it's probably going to give off even more. And so yeah, you're probably going to experience more of that than maybe somewhere where another shop could get away with it being closer to the concrete than another. But I guess if you didn't have somewhere else to set stuff, should they put it up on saw horses and then sticker from there? Or where would be a way for them to elevate it kind of off of that moisture?

GR: Yeah, saw horses are one or on top of your bench if you're just setting it up for the night before you start to cut it up. But yeah, get it off the floor. If it's on the floor, leaning up against the wall, I still sticker it if it's concrete. Unless you know that there's a moisture barrier there. And even if there is, it's still going to be sucking up moisture. So my woodworking career has been in the Pacific Northwest. And this is what happens with 99.9% of the lumber that you cut up. It bows towards the middle. Why is that? Well, the lumber is kiln dried to 7 to 9%, somewhere in there. And it sits out in a yard. It can even be off the floor, but it sits out in the yard with a concrete floor and sucks up all this moisture on the outer shell. And then you resaw it or rip it, do whatever you're going to do to it. It always bows. I've had boards explode on me before I finished the cut because of all the tension built up. And because of the difference in moisture, it's drier on the inside than it is on the outside. And it causes wood to move. Get it off the floor, you know, and sticker it.

GR: Now, if you go to a big, I remember going to a big cabinet shop once. Charlie Grants, you know, there were probably 20 people working in there. And I walked in once to get something, buy something or talk to somebody. And, you know, big projects would roll by on these carts. And there would be all these pieces. They didn't have stickers. And I thought, hmm, but the top of the stack had a piece of plywood on top of that. So that the top layer didn't come. If only one side is exposed to the air, there's a risk that it's going to move because of the moisture imbalance. But you stack them all up. Well, everything is, you know, going to stay pretty much the same. And you've got all that weight. So you'll be fine. But that top layer, they had a piece of plywood on top. They knew.

AP: Yeah, that's interesting. That's a neat approach.

GR: Stickers take up space. That's why bigger shops don't use them. They just take up space. You know, you've got 100 board feet of material you need to move across the shop. Well, you don't want to have that on stickers. And I never used to worry about it just storing my lumber. And my last studio, the big studio, was the wettest shop I've ever been in, because we were over a creek. I'm convinced we were over a creek. And so I would have tools rusting that I never saw rust before. I treated them exactly the same. What's different? Well, I figured it had to be the amount of moisture coming up through that basement. And so I was up on a wood floor on the first floor of the basement was concrete. But I would, you know, I would just lean that stuff up against the wall. As soon as I started to cut it up, though, everything was on stickers. So until the piece was assembled, every day, every night, everything was on stickers.

AP: Yeah, that's kind of how I operate in my shop, too, for as far as like lumber storage and stuff. I have a concrete floor. So I'll usually stand stuff up against the wall, but then once I start working stuff, it stays on stickers on part of like my assembly bench and comes and goes from those because otherwise I'll struggle with all kinds of movement, especially maple.

GR: Yeah. Soft or sugar?

AP: Soft.

GR: Yeah, soft maple moves. That stuff moves. So yeah, it's a moisture imbalance. You could flip it over the next night and see if it straightens itself out.

AP: OK. Are you ready for our last question?

GR: Sure.

AP: OK, our last question is from Leah. I read somewhere that you give your students a reading list. Would you be willing to share it or talk about your favorite books on the podcast? I'm an amateur and metalsmith, but have found your insights into craft helpful.

GR: Well, yes, I'd be happy to talk about the reading list. I love reading lists. I looked at my reading list that I give my students and divided it up some. And I don't know, there's 25, 30 books on this list.

AP: This is a loaded question. She's brave.

GR: Yeah. God, could I, I've got furniture making techniques, design books, inspiration books, and craft books.

AP: Drawing books.

GR: Yep. Yeah, there's, well, I didn't separate drawing books. Favorite books. All right, here are my favorite books. Tools of the trade by Jeff Taylor is one of my favorite books. It's a wonderful book. It's a book about carpentry. And each chapter is about a tool. But he relates a story about working with this old master carpenter. It's a wonderful book. That's a favorite. Have you read that, Ash?

AP: No, I don't think I did read that one. Out of all the books I've read from the list. That's one I don't think I have.

GR: Yeah, it's absolutely worth it. All right, I will send you a copy. Yes. Yeah, I like sharing that. That's a great one. I also think that Bird by Bird is a wonderful book. And it's not at all about woodworking. It's about writing, but it's also about taking it easy on yourself. Accepting challenges. The title comes from a story and told about her brother who was in grade school or something. And he had to do a book report on birds. And you know it was that broad, you know.

And he didn't start until the night before. And he was lamenting how many birds there were. And his father, his father turned to him and said, "Bird by bird, buddy, bird by bird." You know, one at a time. You can't do it all. You want to do it all. You can't do it all. And so I think that's a wonderful book. This is those are both in the inspiration pile for me. And I think those are those are really good. God, I should include one more favorite. How to Wrap Five More Eggs. Hideyuki Oka. It's a design book. And it's about traditional Japanese packaging. And Asian design has always influenced my work. But it's a beautiful book. It's where the sushi box idea came from. So those would be my top three. The list goes on. It's a big, long list. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, The Craftsman, Richard Sennett. Anyway, Ash, you got any?

AP: What are your top three books? Oh, my top three. I feel like it's hard for me to answer probably in the same way that it is for you as far as it seems like topic specific, because each book seems to have a part of it that's engaging or interesting or just new. And like you said, inspirational in whatever avenue it is, whether it's a technique focused book or it is something about another craftsman and their experience getting to where they get to and how they navigate, navigate that. So it's always so hard for me because I have an entire bookcase of books.

GR: Well, you could limit it to 17.

AP: 17? Well, my current read right now is actually a Nancy Hiller book. And that falls into, I think, inspiration and just a walk through the craft. And I like to put those books in the mix of other things that I may get into because it's humbling. You know, there's that grounding aspect to hearing somebody else who've gone down the same kind of career path that you have and realizing that same thing that you need to zoom out on yourself quite a bit. So I've been reading that. And I'd have to say it's really great so far. I've been invested in that. I really love your book. That's one of my favorites as far as that same inspiration and honesty and authenticity. That's really great to hear from someone that you look up to, that you want to learn things from. My gosh. I really love David Savage's book, I think, as far as inspiration for design. That one's probably one of my favorites.

GR: I'm laughing. Yeah, it's a very interesting book.

AP: My newest book is from 1877. I've also been looking at. I should have brought it down to show you the cover of it. I posted it even on my Instagram because I'm just so smitten with how lovely just the book is in itself from the visual aspect of it. But it's about The Art of Decoration is the name of it. And it's from 1877. It's just so fascinating because it's talking about technique, but also the same thing about perspective. And it breaks down each genre of furniture. And it's fascinating to hear like Gothic considered modern and some of those time stamps. So I'm enjoying that one as well.

GR: So it's Victorian in interest.

AP: Yep. So my books are all over the place.

GR: I've got another one that just popped to mind, and that is Dutch Expressionism. What's it

called? Exact title.

AP: Yeah, this question is almost like what tools do you buy first kind of question? Because it's difficult. I think comprehensive books are tricky. So some of them, I feel like there's so much information in there and you don't really absorb all of it at one time and you kind of forget that there's parts of it in there. So there's very few of those that I feel like I really love, although they're really marketed to beginning woodworkers. Yeah.

GR: Yeah. Inspiration is very personal. And so it can come from any direction. And so this book is called 'The Amsterdam School, Dutch Expressionism'. And I've been studying this recently because it's fascinating to me to see how, just like in that design book from 1877, how much stuff is occurring back in the late 1800s, early 1900s. This was 1920 or so, which helped start Bauhaus. And Mackintosh was doing his work in 1910. And Greene and Greene were doing their stuff at the same time. And Frank Lloyd Wright was in his Arts and Crafts phase. There was just all of these things bubbling around in the in the design world. And I think it's fascinating to try and look in at that at that time period and say, wow.

AP: Oh, it's like holding a little piece of time. And it's so interesting to compare what was trending at that point and what was impactful. And then looking at how that has done that now for current furniture makers. I think there's inspiration just in that longevity and how those perspectives are shaped. And so I get hooked into that as well.

GR: Well, it's interesting. Leah's perspective is also as a metalsmith. And so you know I think these books are all general enough, except for the David Savage book. But it's that you can you can pull some stuff from all of them. And I would be remiss if I did not mention the Betty Edwards book as well, 'Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.' I think that's a huge book.

AP: Yeah, I really like that book. I was skeptical at first when it was on your list. And I was like, oh, what is this? You know And then I started getting into it and I'm like, you know, this is kind of strange how right she really is. And when you kind of invest in that and you see it's a simple thing, but once you've changed that perspective, how much easier it is in that approach to being able to sketch things out, it's wild.

GR: I was terrible at sketching. I was just terrible at it. To give you an example, I took a one-day calligraphy class, you know, one day. Nothing like crunchy time. And, and it was just, you know, to sample it. It was at some event I was at. And so you got a pen and a piece of paper, and you got to draw one letter. And the teacher came by and he said, "You have a very firm grip," which is not a compliment, but I tried to take it as well. So, you know, that really hard fist approach to design. And now I can do stuff I just couldn't, I couldn't dream of. Here, make this symmetrical. Draw, draw a circle. I actually did that recently, and I drew a circle and then did a spiral inside the circle. And it's all freehand. And it's like, this is really fun.

AP: Mm-hmm.

GR: And what that allows me to do is to talk to myself or to talk to a client. This is what I'm thinking. And that's, I think, really valuable. You know, I have enough of a battle with technology that learning how to do that on whatever platform just has no appeal. But I love to draw and I never could. And the Betty Edwards book was a big, big help, huge help.

AP: Yeah, I second that.

GR: Well, thank you, everyone, for joining us today. Ashley, thank you for joining me.

AP: Of course. Thank you.

GR: Yeah, this is fun. Please support Splinters on coffee, <https://kofi.com>. Always good to get a \$5 coffee. And please send questions into studio@northwestwoodworking.com. Check out the Highland Woodworking site. <https://Shallowcreekwoodcraft.com>. Is that it?

AP: Yep, that would be it. That's me.

GR: Check out Ashley's work. That'd be great. All right. Adios, everyone. Take care of yourselves. We're out.