

# SWITCHED-ON WOODWORKING

**JULIEN HARDY** SPENT 25 YEARS LIVING AND WORKING IN EASTERN CANADA BEFORE RETURNING TO MONTAUBAN IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE, WHERE HE MAKES ECLECTIC AND BEAUTIFUL FURNITURE THAT COMBINES CONTEMPORARY DESIGN WITH TRADITIONAL JOINERY



## **Tell us about your background and training.**

After 20 years as an art director in advertising I was starving for meaning, but I still needed a creative field to play with. A bit by fluke I took an evening class in woodworking, just to try it – and I caught the bug. I was living in downtown Montreal, Canada, and had no space for a workshop with machines, which I didn't like much anyway. So I decided to go unplugged. There were no classes at the time, so I basically trained with books – mostly by Lost Art Press and a few others. Reading Krenov was the final nail in the coffin of my old career. Then I built firewood for years.

## **How did you first get interested in furniture making?**

It was an accident. If you had asked me before which manual craft I would pick, I would probably have said pottery. But when I took this evening class, I saw an idea becoming concrete in real time and was seduced. It was only after that, while I was educating myself in the craft, that the choice confirmed itself in my mind.

## **How did you train?**

By trial and error, with the emphasis on error. Looking back, I realise how much I missed having a mentor, and how long I kept repeating mistakes. But I am amazed how much you can learn from books, and how much they teach you – not just techniques, but the meaning and philosophy of craft. My thanks go in particular to Christopher Schwarz, Roy Underhill and, of course, The Krenov.

PHOTOGRAPH: CAROLINA PERRIN ESTELLES



**What was the first project you completed?**

The heaviest jewellery box on Earth. Let's talk about something else. Please.

**What made you decide to set up your own furniture business?**

Pfffff. It just happened. After making quite a few things for myself, friends started to place orders. I started a blog and it slowly started to grow. When you turn a passion into a living, there's often a lot of disillusionment – it just isn't the same. But in this case, I pushed myself to take every opportunity to learn something, and even the projects that weren't fascinating taught me something, gave me vocabulary to solve future problems. I had also made myself a promise as I was leaving advertising to only do what I loved – so basically I had no choice and no room for hesitation.

**How did you go about it?**

I followed the flow. I am the victim here.

**What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?**

That's a tough one. I'm going to give you the mystical answer: I think it's a place. A place outside you that is everywhere at once. Instead of trying to force a shape out of brain-crunches, you put yourself into an open state of mind and don't think about it – and then it pops up. Or maybe it's in the coffee. The hell if I know.

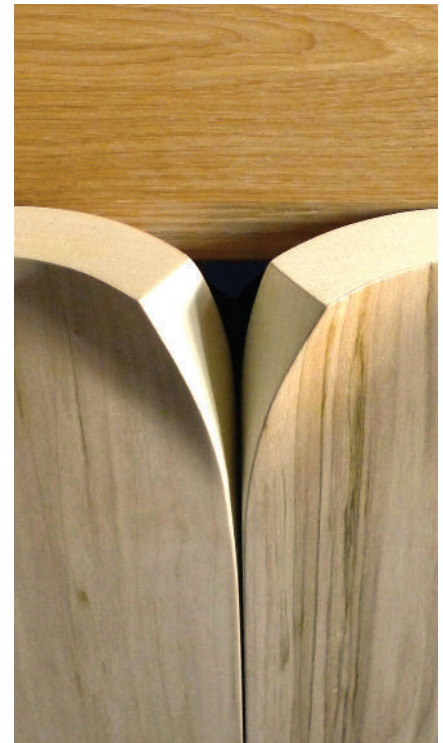
**Tell us about your main stylistic influences.**

When I was trying to train myself with hand-tools-only books, the most important thing to me was joints: joints influence the piece if you want to build it right, although most people see that the other way around. The writers who taught me the joints left their stylistic marks: like the Shakers or Krenov's injection of craftsmanship into Mid-Century Modern and how that changed it stylistically. I was also influenced by what the Americans and Japanese did with the Arts & Crafts movement, and all the guys from the American Studio Craft movement. Now I try hard to leave the influences behind, while thanking them for the vocabulary they gave us all.









**Is there an ethos or a guiding principle behind your style?**

I try to reconcile frame and freedom. Man has a general obsession with control, which I see embodied in the reassuring 90° angle. On the other side, nature goes crazy, fractal-like, and has the hardest time creating a straight line. I find that duality interesting. It's a fight that's inside us too, and I try more and more to show it in my pieces. I'm hoping one day I'll be able to fuse them into one or balance them. But that might change next month. Also, I try not to have a style. I build bespoke one-offs, not a catalogue. So I can explore, go here and there. Not repeat or adapt or force a design into every piece of furniture available. I guess eclectic is the word. You learn more that way.

**Tell us about how you work – what type of tools do you like to use?**

I practised the hand-tools-only religion for many years. Then tendons started to tell me things because I planed with my arms instead of my hips for too long. Thanks to the welfare state of France, I was offered subsidies to mechanise the shop. I'm now hybrid. I dimension wood with a bandsaw and jointer-planer. After that, it's a free-for-all. I grab a plane, a chisel, a router or even a Domino,

depending on the task at hand. Very often a hand tool is the quickest way, once you know how to talk to them. I still use wooden moulding planes. It also depends on the look you want to end up with: factory perfect or human handmade, and it's a question of choice and pleasure. I love to cut dovetails by hand, even when there's a big batch of them. That is the one thing on which I refuse to compromise.

**Are there any tools you avoid?**

Shaper and chainsaw. They terrify me.

**Tell us about your workshop.**

My workshop. My refuge. My mess. The set-up is always the same: what is the best way to position machines and their clearances in the space you have. So I made little scaled paper models and put them on the technical drawing. and here you go. As for the hand tools, they're at arm-distance from the bench. Each one in its place, otherwise you literally spend hours looking for them in the shavings. I've been here five years now. Once you

get machines, moving becomes a very expensive proposition. So chances are I'll stay where I am if summer temperatures don't get to near to 50°C – it's a very nice landscape with hills and ripe fruits.

**Which woods do you most like working with?**

Oak, walnut and cherry are my besties. I use many more, like wild cherry, ash, beech, boxwood and others. But for the carcass or any piece that will receive a joint, these three, I find, are solid. They don't split too much and it's a joy to cut dovetails in them.

**What sort of finishes do you prefer?**

Until recently I only used natural finishes like oil, wax and lacquer gum. But I met a colleague who is one of the best finishers in the country. He can pistol poly on walnut and your eye thinks it's oiled, even in the pores, so I'm less and less fundamentalist about it. And, (unfortunately) (most) clients ask you for a child-proof finish rather than a non-toxic one.

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**What impact has your time in Canada had on your work?**

It made me learn my trade in English rather than French, my mother tongue. That is funny now, when I give hand-tool woodworking classes to French students. If I were doing it in English it would sound like: 'Now you take the bouvet and make a feuillure.' I pass as a total hack. There is also an enormous difference in terms of influences. The styles that influenced me are almost unknown in France, which makes me a black sheep here. And I wouldn't have learned with hand tools in France – very few use or know them here. That trend comes from the US.

**Do your surroundings in the south of France affect your work?**

Nature being closer and always looking at trees has an impact, and I have ready access to felled garden trees, pieces you cannot find in lumberyards.

**What is your favourite project you have worked on?**

The classic answer would be to say the next one, and that's true in a way. But to my surprise, the projects I remember best are not the ones I find most beautiful or that had the most success, but the most complex or original joints. That's my pride talking.

**What is the most challenging project you have worked on?**

Every project that uses a technique, a joint or something else I've never made. It's scary, and I try to repeat that in every project.



**What proportion of your business is commission-based?**

Before and during Covid, my work was 100% bespoke. When the lockdown ended, business dropped catastrophically – I mean zippo, nada for way too long. I was lucky enough to meet a colleague who had only business clients and needed help. That saved me from bankruptcy. Giving hand-tool classes to keep the knowledge alive is good for the soul and helps diversify my portfolio (pardon my language).

**What are you working on now and next?**

Right now, the frailest tall side-table (sellette) ever made. It's a fun challenge, with an interesting structure, and I love the skinny look and sliding dovetail top.

**Where do you see your work going in the future?**

I hope I can find ways to reduce commissions or subcontracting to focus more on constraint-free creation – and maybe more crazy, sculptural work.

**What do you do when you're not working?**

What do you mean?

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