



HOGBIN REFLECTING

BY MARK SFIRRI

Imagine that you're several years into your woodworking career and you have a brilliant idea to turn a piece of wood that's 77" in diameter by 14" thick, over 450 board feet of lumber. Then imagine actually doing it! And doing it over thirty years ago, when variable speed woodturning lathes were still in their infancy and were hardly sufficient for a turning of this magnitude. But that's what Stephen Hogbin did, and while his accomplishment doesn't begin to define him, this feat of engineering and personal bravery resonates with me. At about the same time, I was turning a piece 36" in diameter and 1-1/2" thick, feeling that I was taking my life into my hands. What Hogbin turned was nearly twenty times the mass of my effort. He went on to cut it up into pieces and created two chairs, a table, and a shelf, a concept that he had worked out in miniature as a maquette before taking on the full-sized version. This work served as the centerpiece for an exhibition in Toronto in 1974 that gained Stephen Hogbin international recognition. It announced his arrival on the woodturning scene and on the furniture scene, in one fell swoop.

Stephen Hogbin was born in England in 1942. In the late 1950s he studied woodworking at Rycotewood College and later studied industrial design at the Royal College of Art. One of his professors there was David Pye, an important maker whose distinctive work features intricately carved details accomplished with a carving

machine that he invented. He also wrote the seminal books, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* and *The Nature and Aesthetics of Design*. Hogbin was impressed with Pye's design insight, that "he engaged the whole mind in looking at workmanship, objects, and quality." In 1968 Hogbin moved to Canada to teach at Sheridan College School of Design, where he taught full-time until 1972. He decided to stay in Canada, living first in Toronto and later settling in Lake Charles, about three hours north. He lives and works there still.

Until 1970, woodturning was nearly exclusively used in the making of utilitarian objects. Bob Stocksdale's vessels, or bowl forms, were the first to elevate the status of this work through his high level of craftsmanship, careful wood selection, and attention to detail. But in the early 1970s, Stephen Hogbin was developing vessels in a different way.

He turned a bowl that had some honeycombing in the middle of it. He saw several options: throw it away, fill in the blemish, or remove the defect. He decided on the last and cut the bowl in half. He looked at the cross-section and considered different ways of recombining the halves, beginning a series of explorations into cut and reassembled pieces that he called "fragmentals." "Initially I was attracted by the conceptual possibilities of the process and not too worried about function or beauty. I was rebelling against my industrial design background, maybe even the Establishment.

Clearly, the impulse of the times was to deconstruct established ideas."

Cross-sections are interesting phenomena. If you are designing an object in advance of turning it, you need to draw the cross-section, but you usually never see it in the finished work. In most vessels, the line of the interior and exterior are parallel, maintaining uniform wall thickness. Hogbin intentionally made the interior and exterior contours different in order to create graphic effects with the exposed cross-sections of the finished pieces. "Space for a Bowl," made in 1972, is a good example. A bowl form was turned with a large uvula-like protuberance emerging in the middle of the inside. The bowl was cut in half and glued along what had been the top rim of the bowl, creating a form similar to a half walnut. A series of pieces exploring these ideas was featured in a solo exhibition at a gallery in Toronto in 1972, but the show came and went without much notice; as Hogbin said, "...like a tree falling in the forest."

Hogbin next turned his attention to the question of scale. "The size of the turnings was being determined by the size of a board, which was limiting, and gluing two boards together always looked to me like I couldn't find a board big enough. But many boards might be different. Then the questions: how big might a piece be? What is the best and proper scale to be working at? Some of my forms would work as a button and also, if scaled up, become big enough to be a large sculpture on a wall.



ALL PHOTOS BY STEPHEN HOGBIN EXCEPT AS NOTED

“At this point I don’t recall exactly how the chair and table idea developed. As part of form exploration I thought about the toroid, or a doughnut with a hole in the middle. Cut up, it would make book-ends or a coat hook, and I think I extrapolated the idea to taking a quarter of a turning, removing a section, and so making it possible to sit on the quarter turning. From one turning I could make four chairs. Neat idea, and all I needed was a lathe big enough to turn about 7' in diameter.”

Bud Thomas, his then father-in-law, helped him to engineer the enormous lathe required by suggesting using a truck axle and differential as the mechanism for a home-made variable speed lathe, which would provide the slowness necessary to turn the large forms. The lathe was stabilized by house jacks that wedged the bed between the floor and ceiling, to keep the lathe from dancing all over the place. The most impressive results from this machine were the Western red cedar chairs mentioned earlier.

Donald Lloyd McKinley, a noted Canadian furnituremaker and a mentor of Hogbin’s, wrote a feature article about Hogbin that appeared in the April 1974 issue of *Craft Horizons* (the forerunner of *American Craft*) and included images of the work produced on this lathe. This exposure is particularly noteworthy because, until the mid-1970s, there was little published about contemporary woodworking, turning, or furniture, in *Craft Horizons* or anywhere else. At about the same time, John Kelsey, a Cleveland newspaper reporter with a strong interest in woodworking, came to visit Hogbin. That meeting influenced Kelsey to go to school to study woodworking, and he eventually became editor-in-chief of the fledgling magazine *Fine Woodworking*. “It’d be easy to say that Stephen Hogbin has given me more breakthrough thinking and directional insight that anyone else I ever met. I think he is a rare intelligence bordering on genius, and a man of towering intellectual integrity.” Their association resulted in a number of articles written by Hogbin for the magazine in the late seventies and early eighties.

Clockwise from upper left:

“Space for a Bowl” (1972); Western red cedar; 4¼" x 10" x 10".

“Egg Cup” (1975); Silky brown oak; 4⅝" x 8¼" x 2".

Stephen Hogbin in 1975 making an off-center cut through a large turning of white ash to create a headboard and footboard for a bed.



The work Hogbin produced during the mid-70s was made using a large variable speed lathe shop-built from a truck differential and axle. **At the upper left** the lathe is set for turning between centers. One of the more remarkable projects from this period are his table and two chairs cut and shaped from an enormous laminated red cedar turning 77" in diameter and 14" thick. **Above**, one of the completed chairs. **At near left**, the work-in-progress after the first cut. **At far left** is a poster from Hogbin's 1974 show at the Aggregation Gallery in Toronto. Each of the six images could be removed by tearing along a perforated line to create postcards.

PHOTO BY MARK SPIRRI

Given the lack of response to his 1972 show, Hogbin decided to make his next venture more noticeable. Looking back, he described the sequence of events in a way that sounds like an alignment of the stars, but it was a combination of luck, careful planning, and cutting edge creative work on a grand scale. He secured a bigger, more important venue, Aggregation Gallery, and timed the show to coincide with the World Craft Conference in Toronto in 1974.

He also employed a clever marketing strategy: "The poster for my show could be made into a series of postcards by tearing along perforated lines. Each card had a different image of my work with the inscription 'Having a good time at the World Crafts Conference—wish you were here...'

and then some space for a short message from the person sending it. The postcards were picked up for free at the conference and sent around the globe!" His show was a resounding success.

A group of Australians attending the conference encouraged him to apply for a residency that was in the offing at Melbourne State College. Hogbin said about this, "Carpe diem...which originally meant 'gather the day,' a term that I prefer to 'seize the day.' It is as if the fragments of the day are brought together, prioritized, put in relationship, and acted upon." He was selected for a one-year residency for 1975-1976. Residencies are more plentiful now, but they were rare then, and this one was particularly prestigious.

Few people had any idea what Hogbin was up to half way around the world, and, if it weren't for the book he wrote chronicling his experience, it would have been difficult to appreciate the scope of his efforts. *Wood Turning: The Purpose of the Object* was published in 1980. It didn't follow the "how-to" approach, common then and now, but was based on concept and design. Hogbin described his approach to design: sketching forms, reworking those ideas on a larger scale, incorporating the functional aspects of the work before making the final object. There's an ingenious chart that describes categories of objects that humans need, classified according to the purpose of the object and the way the object is designed and produced, and by what categories of craftsman or designer.



The heart of the book, however, is the gallery section that contains over fifty images of the work produced during his residency. There is some furniture, most notably “Bird Table,” intended to suggest the range of motion of a bird in flight. The technique borrows from German ring turning of the late 1800s, in which a ring was turned with a cross-section that looked like an animal, and the ring was sliced into multiples of identical toys. Hogbin turned one large disc and then sliced it in half, exposing the entire cross-section, in the shape of a bird. Many of the objects are “bowl investigations,” but there’s also an assortment of

Above, left: “Bird Table” (1976); Australian yellow walnut; 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ ” deep x 3 $\frac{5}{8}$ ” in diameter.

Above, right: A section of the 200’-long screen (1977) enclosing the Toronto Reference Library.

Below: Hogbin designed and built a variable-arm milling machine to fabricate such work. He continues to use it for both large and small projects.

other functional pieces including racks, spoons, scoops, whisks, bookends, and a series of salad servers that he still revisits on occasion. These are simple spindle turnings intended to be inexpensive production items that have been split in half and carved into the bowl end, leaving the tool marks.

The most remarkable object in the book, though, is the “Egg Cup.” I remember the first time I flipped through the book and came upon the image of it. I froze. While it clearly contained turned elements, it transcended my usual inquisitiveness as to how it was made. To this day, it remains my favorite turned object. It was made by working from a block of wood about 8” square by about 1” thick, turning only the two faces. It was then cut into four pieces and glued face-to-face and edge-to-edge. The entire contents of the book seemed to me to be twenty years ahead of its time. Now, nearly thirty years later, it is still twenty years ahead of its time.



Top: A maquette for a large-scale architectural installation from 1981 called “Calibrated Earth,” made using the variable-arm milling machine.

Middle, left: “Salad Servers” (1986); various woods and sizes.

Middle, right: “Balancing Bowl” (1985); zebrawood; 11" high.

Bottom, left: “Mending” (1993); painted wood; 13" x 23" x 15". The pattern carved on the pad is a reproduction of Hogbin’s fingerprint.

Bottom, right: “Fifth Season Cycle Center” (1994); an outdoor installation in Owen Sound, Ontario, involving Hogbin and four other artists from the region.

A new chapter in Hogbin’s career opened in the mid-1970s as a result of a faceplate turning that he sliced into strips, rotating each strip 90° to create a small screen. An architect approached him about making something similar on a larger scale. Hogbin was game, even when he realized that the plan called for a wall over 200' long and 7' tall!

Undeterred, he once again invented a machine to make it possible. He called it a variable arm milling machine. He thought that by moving the tool instead of the wood, he could expand the size of the object that he could produce. “The milling started with the library screen in 1976. I see my work as developing a vocabulary of techniques, forms and ideas that may be returned to or will set about thinking up a new idea. It was a difficult choice, back in the late seventies, between the turning activity and the potential of the milling machine. Spending the rest of my life exploring turning was too single technique focused. Exploring the milling machine had the same potential as the turned work. So I did both while trying to sort out what the content was about in my work.” He used the machine in a number of projects into the eighties and later when the design required it.

In the early 1980s, Hogbin revisited the vessel form in his “Walking Bowl” series. Unlike the experiments in the early 1970s, this work abandons symmetry. Like the “Space for a Bowl,” the form is turned, this time with long flanges, and then cut in half. The top edge is glued together, but the halves are shifted so that it is no longer symmetrical and the flanges act as vertical supports to elevate the bowl form. This work is more organic than his earlier, more graphic bowls, and has a sense of motion by having one of the “legs” sit flat, while the other rests on one point, and has actual motion, since the bowls can be rocked. As sculptor and



collector Robyn Horn observes, “Stephen’s work is far-reaching. His concept of reworking the turned piece, of cutting segments apart and reassembling them, started many of us looking at the lathe in a different way. Rather than limiting process, the lathe could be used as an avenue toward sculpture.”

But Hogbin’s direction was about to change yet again, as he explains: “In the early eighties I resolved to back away from the turning field. Many wonderful people, highly skilled and imaginative, were taking the domain forward...It also felt too competitive and that is not a good environment for me to work in.” Hogbin now had a desire to act locally with an eye toward conservation. “I was always interested in regional

activity. It is essentially a craft attitude. It was interesting that the position in Australia opened for me because I wanted to work with the local woods. It seemed so obvious to me back then but it was not the prevalent attitude in Australia except by the conservationists. The Australians were simultaneously on a leading edge and way ahead of many in an appreciation for the local qualities of place, conserving native species and, in the arts, how that attitude may influence the work. When we returned from Australia in 1976 it was to get involved with a local community, though that did not really gel until moving in 1979 to the region in which I now live. It seemed timely to focus on my own place as the public art installations

started in earnest with government, corporations and community projects.”

He branched out to collaborate on designs for outdoor public spaces. This work is particularly satisfying for him because many more people can experience the finished product. It allowed for the creation of larger volumes of space and for the use of other materials, such as concrete, steel, and paint. The public installations, beginning with the 200' library wall, made him well known in his community in Toronto and in the Lake Charles area, introducing him to a clientele for custom residential work. These projects are combinations of built-in and free-standing furniture, cabinetry, and staircases. One of his recent projects lasted three years, providing him with income over an extended period

of time, which Hogbin understandably finds preferable to speculative gallery work.

After the furniture made from the large turnings in the 1970s, he did not return to making individual furniture pieces again until 2001. Since then he has produced a number of chair designs and an ongoing series of pedestal tables made of wood and glass. Many of these pieces include turned elements, but they are not the “tour de force” turnings of the 1970s. The turned parts are much more conservative in both design and use of material but contain carefully considered detailing that is uniquely Hogbin’s. His “DAC Nomad Chair” was designed so that he could pack up six chairs in his luggage and assemble them in England for a client there. They have no glued joints and are tensioned together with cable and toggle fasteners.

An aspect of Hogbin’s work is contemplative and philosophical. There is a body of work that he calls “Sacred Secular,” including face mirrors, a series of later “Walking Bowls” with descriptive titles and with portraits drawn on them in pencil, as well as realistically rendered still-lives of oversized sewing needles combined with comparatively under-sized books and thimbles. Here he again explores questions of scale and asks the viewer to reconsider the objects in this context.

In 2000 Hogbin published his second book, *Appearance & Reality: A Visual Handbook for Artists, Designers and Makers*, written as a resource for designing in general and expanding on the ideas and categories in his first book. Unlike his first book, the objects shown, ranging from two-dimensional works to a small pot to sculptures,





Opposite page, clockwise from upper left:

“Totem Table” (2002); Sheteak, glass; 55" x 12" x 12".

“Collector’s Cabinet” (2004); cherry, holly, maple; 50" x 15" x 15".

“Set Up” (2006); wood, mirror, glass.

“DAC Nomad Chair” (2006); Baltic birch, ash, steel, paint.

Spiral staircase (2003), part of a large residential project that occupied Hogbin for three years.

This page: In 2005 Hogbin designed, fabricated, and installed these floors in the same house. At top is “Connections and Transitions” (ebonized ash carved to reveal Baltic birch lamination underneath). At right is “Mandala Wheels” (painted and carved oak).

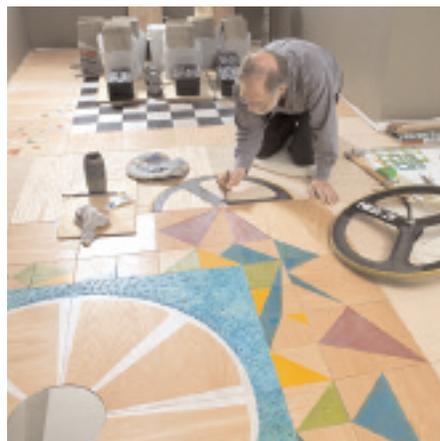


PHOTO BY MICHAEL MC LUHAN

buildings and landscapes, were mostly not made by Hogbin. Instead, they were chosen to give the reader the broadest context in which to consider design. He is currently working on a new book, titled *Evaluating: the critique in the studio workshop*.

If you read his essays, his books, or speak with him, you get a greater understanding of the depth of thought that goes into the objects that Hogbin makes. For example, here he considers the relationship of commerce and art: “In Jane Jacobs’ book *Systems of Survival*, there is a distinction made between the guardian moral syndrome and the commercial moral syndrome. Simply put, these are our social values of caring and the values of utility and what do I get out of it. I don’t like these options, which force an either-or discussion,

but I find it interesting that Jane Jacobs thinks it’s important they don’t get mixed up—that our commercial values are not applied to our humanity. In my practice as a maker, the distinction is not always clear. Perhaps others see my activity as nothing more than a utilitarian product, whereas I see what I make as a set of human values with a story. The object is the outcome, the physical manifestation, of the story, or as I prefer, the song.”

If Hogbin’s early work emerged on the scene today, it seems to me that it would have an even greater impact than it did then, because the field is so much larger and has a higher profile. Thirty years later, the work is still completely on the cutting edge. I asked him if he would make the large Western red cedar chairs again and he gave the answer that

I expected, which was no. The reason, however, was a surprise. I assumed that it was physical self-preservation that stopped him, because it’s such a dangerous undertaking. But his concern now is conservation: he could build six chairs with the wood he used to make one of those chairs. He assured me that he had no fear of the physical risk at all. Perhaps it’s the same fearlessness that has allowed him to thrive as a creative designer and maker for all of these years, never letting what seem to be insurmountable obstacles get in his way.

POSTSCRIPT

In 2007, Hogbin (along with Giles Gilson and Mark Lindquist) was an inaugural recipient of the American Association of Woodturners’ Professional Outreach Program Merit Award for his lifetime achievements and the influence he’s had on contemporary woodturning.

Appearance & Reality was originally produced and distributed by Cambium Press, but is now available from The Ginger Press [848 Second Avenue East, Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada N4K 2H3; www.gingerpress.com; (800) 463-9937]. *Evaluating* is also available from The Ginger Press.

Mark Sfirri is a woodworker and turner who lives in New Hope, Pennsylvania. He is the coordinator and professor in the Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania.

An extract from *Evaluating: the critique in the studio workshop*. Chapter 3: The Creative Tool Box

FOR A MAKER, the toolbox is a familiar place for the tools of the trade. Mine includes several kinds of saws, planes, hammers, drivers, abrasives, and so on—some are hand tools and some are powered. What does the creative toolbox contain? When did you last sharpen your creative tools?

Your creative toolbox starts with the mind; it contains most of the motivational stuff needed to get up and running. Assuming you are a self-starter, you are able to reflect on what you want to do and respond to problems, whether they are self-made or constructed by circumstance. Making decisions is making the piece. The simplest model for creativity is first to analyze by thinking and then synthesize by doing.

WHAT TO THINK ABOUT AND THEN WHAT TO DO

There are many strategies for designing an object. Although they all follow a similar format, makers start with different methods or approaches. For example, this work of Michael Hosaluk or Mark Sfirri demonstrates a concern for material and form, while the designs of Judy Kensley McKie and Gord Peteran explore narrative or concept.

The model I shall look at first relates to the designer who is often solving problems through commissions. Materials are central to the solution of the studio workshop maker and functional requirements are layered on top; these have to come together in a form that is aesthetically appropriate.

Use all your senses and intellect to sort through the essentials. Experience and memory play an important role at this stage, but sometimes it is necessary to go a step further. Collect all the facts about the situation that will help define the problem. If a question can be formulated at this point that addresses the issues, so much the better. Now sit back and let the pre-conscious work. More often than not, an idea

will appear from nowhere when you are relaxed but attentive. Taking a walk, driving the car, washing dishes, or sanding mindlessly on another project often starts the ideas to flow or at least pop into the mind unexpectedly.

Even with a busy schedule it is necessary to take some time to meditate on the situation. Nothing happens unless opportunity is given some space from all the other pressures surrounding you.

Next, it's important to capture these first responses by writing—and certainly sketching—while continuing to mull the project over in your mind. Ideas come from different parts of the brain; depending on which part of your creative brain is dominant, you may get concepts or words rather than forms and shapes. Getting these ideas together does take practice and requires a balanced frame of mind. One idea may keep returning and often it's the best one; however, always take note of the quiet, tentative, cautious whisper that tries to come into focus. With



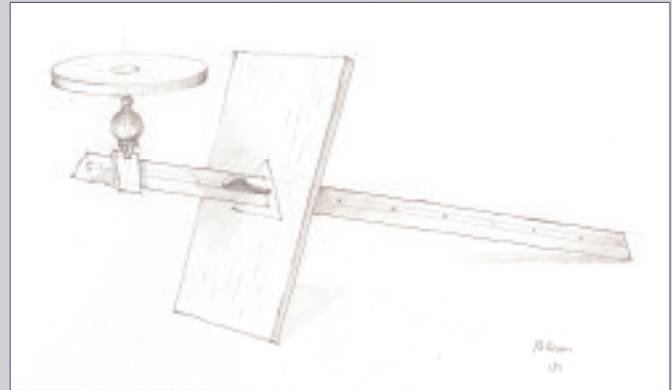
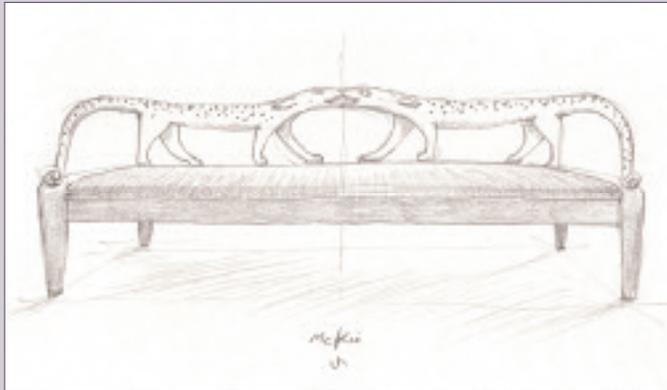
many ideas generated, it becomes easier to select which one works best in relationship to the question or problem statement. What to think about moves on to what to do or, as the saying goes, "what you think about comes about."

Once you have selected the best idea, secondary planning may begin. It's not that you stop thinking; rather, your activity becomes more physical: drawing the idea, measuring for accuracy, searching for good proportions and quality of line, meeting the functional requirements, and making models, mock-ups and prototypes. All the time, you are assessing how well the chosen idea is working against the original question or problem statement. It is possible that other ideas of a secondary nature come into play during this process. Designing never really stops. Refinement is essential at all stages of making.

Finally, the design is finished and so is the object. Stand back and take a look with a critical eye. Start the process again. What if this was changed a little here? What if that was adjusted a little there? Most objects are the result of an evolutionary process. What seemed like a good idea may well change over time as refinements are made. This process of sensing the issue, activating memory, incubating ideas, and finally modeling the solution should be a well-used part of your creative toolbox. There is, however, no single correct method of making. I will now fill in and around the process described above with four further creativity-generating investigations: 1) looking and seeing; 2) making and experimenting; 3) stories and precedence; and 4) concept and subject.

1. LOOKING AND SEEING

I always wanted to draw. Being able to make a likeness on paper was as magical as the best trick from a talented conjuror. I wasn't much good at drawing until I went to art school and was put in front of a still life with twenty other students. "Look at the spaces between the objects, and draw them as much as the actual object," the instructor said. This was a fascinating idea that I had not heard before. Thanks to some beginner's luck, praise was heaped on my earliest student work. I was a short-lived savant: my next drawings were pretty bad and it became a struggle to regain what I had done intuitively. The



most important part of the experience was the looking and seeing. It took time to develop a consistent standard with the nuance of each curve and transition in the plants, ceramic pots, and chair backs. I needed to learn to see each object I was drawing as if for the first time: sharp, in focus, and as a heightened experience.

Imagination develops slowly. First ideas are not always brilliant but they contain the sense of something new happening. Combining that with a developing drawing skill and the experience of seeing one's own ideas evolve was a back-of-the-neck tingling experience for me as a student. I discovered the "oh wow" adrenaline rush that, for the creative person, leads to the absolute need to make it! Although the translation from drawing to making is slow to learn, it carries a different magic to the making of ideas.

It does not always help to draw before making. Although a vague idea of what may happen is useful, the quality of line on a sheet of paper says more about drawing and not so much about a cylindrical form with subtle curves. Some objects, especially woodturnings, are best put on the lathe and shaped directly.

Drawing aids the senses. It slows down the process of looking and naming essential aspects. Some drawings are diagrammatic and symbolic, appealing to the intellect rather than the senses. Drawing also carries an emotional aspect. The quality of line may change our perception or understanding of the object: the soft black graphite lines of a 6B pencil can be perceived as more erotic than a 2H drafting lead. Although the emotional quality adds to the accurate representation, realism cannot exist in a drawing

Evaluating is illustrated with 49 drawings that Stephen Hogbin made of different objects by various artists. At far left is Mark Sfirri's "Candle Holder"; above are (left to right) Judy McKie's "Leopard Couch" and Gord Peteran's "Beam Table"; below is Michael Hosaluk's "Box."



because it is flat and life is round. Drawing from nature is in itself an act of creation. It brings us closer to god. "Realism" has to be modified by the imagination of the artist. Judy McKie may possibly draw from life but the animal forms in her furniture are always from the imagination. The experience of seeing it for the first time—the artist's vision—has to be carried forward into the finished piece.

Drawing includes everything from the quick sketch to the measured drawing where proportions and the relationship of the parts are worked out. It is dangerous to design furniture in elevation since that's not the way we see the finished work. We never see a dining chair in elevation unless perhaps we need to crawl on the floor to pick up a spoon. Most often a dining chair is approached from the back and that is the point of view that the sketch should articulate: the three-quarter view of the chair back.

If I can draw it with thoughtful sketches and carefully measured details, I can probably make it. The architect and furniture designer Edward Godwin points out that "a piece of furniture cannot be artistic by any happy-go-lucky process. Little things of this kind, to be artistic, imperatively demand no inconsiderable amount of thought and much careful sized drawing." (Hugh Honour quoting Godwin in *Cabinet Makers and Furniture Designers*, page 257)

Another reason for drawing first is to save huge amounts of material from being wasted. Also, the designer has to be able to communicate, whether to the client, the sales office of a manufacturer, or an artisan at the bench. The designer has to make sure others too see the vision for the piece. Does the drawing show the look of the piece? Does it show how the piece is made?

But where do ideas come from? Look and see what is around you. It helps to have a wide range of experience that has been deeply felt and clearly seen. Ideas come from nature, making things, precedence of the discipline and intellectual constructs. The imagination gets better at juxtaposing new ways of seeing when this is practiced on a regular basis. Staying fit through exercise is important physically and equally for the imagination. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice talking with the Queen says, "One can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," responds the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

—SH