



Mark Sfirri
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Creativity

Alphonse Mattia was a very inspirational woodworker to me when he was in graduate school and I was just embarking on my woodworking education in my sophomore year. He went on to teach at the BU program in artisanry, he told me that when students would come to him with the problem of not being able to come up with a chair design (after spending a lot of time looking at chair designs), he would tell them to go the junkyard for inspiration. I think that that was a great suggestion. Being mired in looking at so many examples of the type of object that you want to make will lead to a stale interpretation of what has already been done. I read an article about Paul Simon and how songs came to him. He said that he would, out of the blue, get a small musical coupling of notes, and then he'd get a few more, then he would start to combine them, and it would lead to a song and then snowball into an album. He also said that once, toward the end of a long concert tour, it started. While he was excited about that, he was also very tired and trying to finish up the final concerts and that he would deal with it right after he was done with the tour. Funny thing though, it just stopped. He called that the missing album. He was not open to it when it presented itself and it vanished.

My take (which sort of follows Paul Simon), is that I think that one needs to be ready to accept an idea when it starts to surface and deal with it in some way. Maybe it's a sketch or maybe a three-dimensional sketch (I do a lot of these). After that, it can be developed either right then or down the road. I have numerous examples of these sketches that have sat around for, in some cases, five years or more before I decide to flesh them out. Designing, engineering, making, and surface ornamentation are all very different activities. Flipping the switch on design (creativity) is the hardest of these to just turn on, like flipping on a switch. Thinking that first thing tomorrow morning I am going to design something never seems to work out. When I sketch, I sketch with an open mind about form and don't really think about the application of it until later. It leaves that activity as a more open exploration. Engineering is very separate from making but they do go together. I try not to go back to design once I start making as it more often than not gets me in trouble. I'll often do a series of objects and then later deal with surface ornamentation if they are to be painted.

Having said all of that, when I do a series of objects that are related to one another, I regiment myself to make one completely before even thinking about the next one. Each builds itself from the object before and the spontaneity of design positions itself to be much closer to the making of it. There is a huge satisfaction for me to be able to work this way. These pieces are generally smaller sculptures and after completing them, I can't imagine that I would have been able to design them beforehand and come up with results that would have been as pleasing to me as they would be doing them the method that I did.