



The Art



PROFILE Thomas Moser
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Photography Darren Setlow

Creativity depends on small leaps of courage. Whether painters are making their first brush strokes upon a blank canvas or writers scrawling their first lines onto crisp white sheets of paper, their creations require willful acts of letting go. In the case of the 72-year-old master furniture designer and craftsman Tom Moser, when he picks up a slab of raw wood, even after 35 years in the business, success requires that he accept the possibility of failure.

If the French chemist Louis Pasteur was right when he said, “chance favors the prepared mind,” then it should be no surprise that inspiration has struck so often in the workshop of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers—for Moser is a man who not only has immersed himself in the traditions and rigors of his craft but has also remained open to its endless possibilities. On the eve of his company’s 35th anniversary, a time when Moser could sit back and reflect on his past success, he is instead continuing his tireless pursuit of furniture design—and he is doing so with more exuberance than ever.

The “Moser Style”

Tom Moser is many things. He is a businessman, designer, master craftsman, and the visionary at the helm of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers. Yet he is also a student and historian of furniture, an artist, a dreamer, and something of a philosopher.

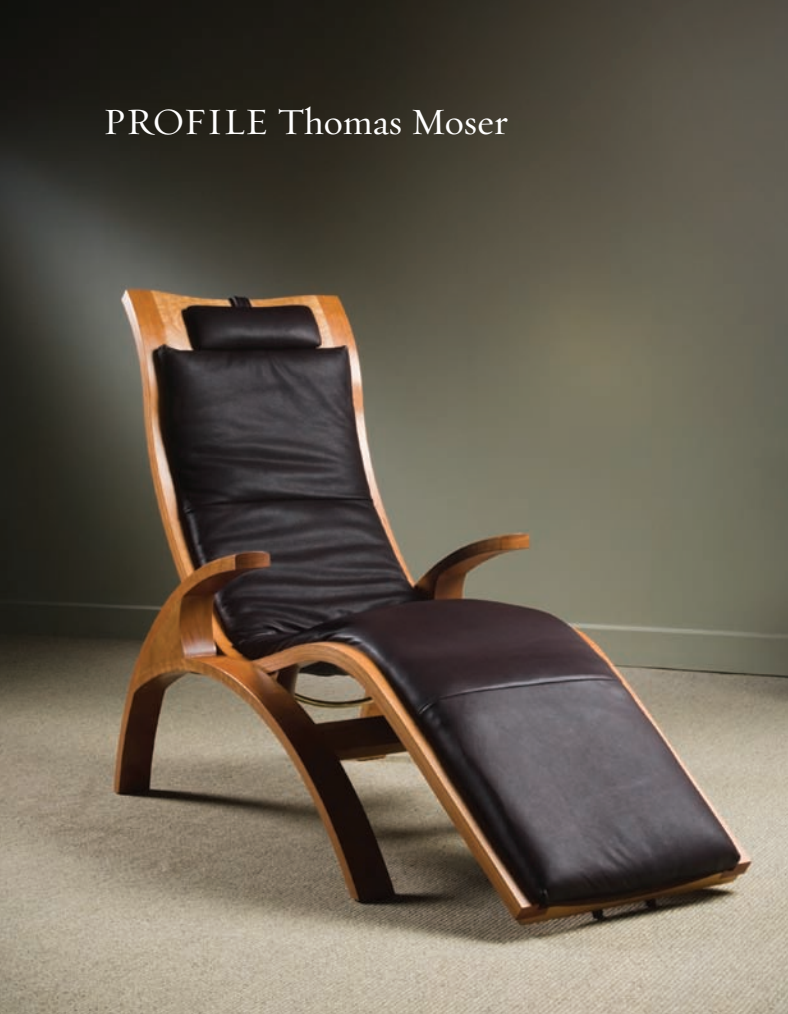
As a young designer and craftsman, Moser made furniture that reflected a strong influence by sparse Shaker designs. But over the years, he has continually evolved and refused to let his work grow stale. Moser’s pieces have hinted at the design ideals of the Scandinavians, the Germans, and the Japanese, while at other times it has shown an appreciation for the Windsor and Arts and Crafts forms. These days, however, Moser says he is determined to cast off the shackles of tradition.

Moser’s newest designs distill all that he has absorbed in a lifetime into contemporary forms that seem to have no obvious point of reference.

of Endless Discovery

Breaking free from the tyranny
of right angles

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"It's a little scary, sure," he says, "a bit like being in a rowboat without oars. But for 35 years I have designed furniture that is highly disciplined. From Shaker to Bauhaus, I have avoided ornament. I have focused on economy of material and form. I have focused on utility. I've been incredibly aesthetically disciplined, and at this juncture I'm finding it very important to be more expansive."

Moser describes his new chairs, tables, and sofas—many of which are still in the prototype phase—as more "fluid and feminine" than anything he has previously done. "So many of the design traditions I've worked in are very austere. I'm at a point where I want to be more exuberant with my work—so I'm breaking free from the tyranny of right angles."

The Art of Business

Moser is an artist who takes pleasure in working with both his hands and his head. While he is internationally feted for his woodworking prowess, he is always ready to engage in a discussion about the complex sociologies associated with his craft, such as humanity's perpetual fascination with wood. "I think our attraction to wood has to do with the strong spiritual depth of trees," Moser muses, saying that he sees furniture as "the second life of a tree." This sort of proclivity for introspection makes it even more impressive that Moser has retained a passion for the artistry of his furniture while at the same time strategically marketing his work in ways that have made his company phenomenally successful.

For many years now, the high demand for his designs has not allowed Moser to build every piece of furniture that bears his name. Instead, he has assembled nearly 100 woodworkers who

oversee the phases of furniture construction and economize the building process, while still creating pieces of the same quality and integrity. Moser has become known for. "This is not a factory," Moser says, walking the floor of his company's 81,000-square-foot headquarters in Auburn. "I just call it 'the Shop.' Sure it's big, but it's still just a workshop." There is no way, he says, to simply twist a knob and begin stamping out more hand-joined, mortise-and-tenon furniture as though they were widgets. Though more electric tools are employed today than when Moser first began his company, he says that his furniture is still built in much the same way as he did more than three decades ago.

Moser does not equivocate when describing his ability to blend the artistic and commercial side of furniture design. "It's a duality," he says, "and I feel fortunate to have it because, for most people, such a thing is a dichotomy." It seems fair to say that, when an artist stands up and proclaims that it is not shameful to make a living from one's art—but rather, something to be proud of—it is a particularly rebellious act these days.

Around the time Moser established his Auburn shop in 1987, he hired several people more business minded than himself to handle those elements of the financial and commercial puzzle he knew were not his forte. "I didn't even have a time clock for my employees back then," Moser laughs. By surrendering many of the day-to-day business responsibilities of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers, Moser was able to surrender himself to the pursuit of furniture design. It proved to be a wise decision that not only led to the company's tremendous growth in recent years but has also made an incalculable difference in the quality of Moser's creative life.

The Moser Chaise (opposite, left), a collaborative design between Tom Moser and his youngest son, David. Made of American black cherry, the chaise was influenced by the work of French master designer La Corbusier. These days, the father-and-son team are perpetually drawing upon each other for inspiration around the design shop of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers. Tom Moser's New Gloucester Rocker (opposite, right) was designed more than 20 years ago with ash spindles and a sculpted cherry seat. Pictured here with a walnut seat, the chair looks as fresh as ever.

The Design Shop

Ever since he let go of the commercial reigns, Moser has spent the majority of his time crafting furniture prototypes. These days, his youngest son, David, works alongside him. "Drawing things on paper is not designing," Moser says. "We do it experientially here: we build. We get our hands on the wood and we make something." But there is no easily definable formula when it comes to designing a new piece of furniture, Moser says; it could take just a few days or it could take a few years.

The average Moser chair is likely to go through seven or more iterations before it is pared down to a design he feels is worth producing. Moser applies the scientific method to his furniture designs. "It's all trial and error," he says. "We test and retest, knowing there is no absolute answer. A piece is never truly done, not even once it's in the catalog." Moser goes on to say, without the slightest trace of regret, that a majority of what he and David create never sees the light of day.

Dusty and unfinished "failed" chairs hang on high hooks around the walls of the design workshop. "It's very hard to discard what you've created," Moser says. "I think those failures remind us that the path to creativity is not an easy path." Yet, even with all those reminders of disappointment and missed opportunities encircling him, Moser seems to have no fear of taking another leap and falling, perhaps because he knows that he will just get back up and leap again. Moser continues to leap because what he is seeking, as so many great artisans and artists have before him, is the lofty goal of building something that is transcendent—a work of art that exists outside any period or fashion.



Tom and David Moser (above) do not believe in designing furniture from behind a desk; they develop their designs by getting out the tools and getting to work.



“You can’t draw this!” Moser says emphatically of a prototype chair arm. He rarely makes sketches for his furniture designs, preferring instead to build first and draw later (left).

The first step of future furniture: This crucial preliminary step of washing down raw wood with an acetone-based solution (above) helps the Thos. Moser craftsmen as they select pieces of wood for furniture that requires the precise alignment of wood grain, such as on a tabletop. The solution, which simply evaporates, accentuates the wood’s grain and mimics the eventual oil and wax finish it will receive.

While Moser spends much of his time creating the pieces that will eventually show up on the pages of the company’s catalogs and on the floors of its six Thos. Moser showrooms around the country, he is quick to share the credit for the business’s success. Because, while it may be easy to confuse the man Tom Moser with the entity that is Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers, Moser won’t let anyone believe for a minute that he built the company alone.

Moser is generous in his praise of both current and former employees. He even still talks with admiration of several woodworkers who labored beside him in the 1970s, and who have since become master furniture designers in their own right. It’s a list that includes Chris Becksvoort in New Gloucester, Douglas Green of Green Design Furniture in Portland, and Bill Huston of Huston & Company in Kennebunkport. “They each, in their own way, built this company with their intelligence and creativity,” Moser says. “Huston’s understanding of Scandinavian furniture was amazing even then, and Becksvoort’s ability to simply sharpen a tool is astounding.”

He doesn’t know who among his current ranks will become the next great Maine furniture designer or craftsman, but Moser appears intent on showing his appreciation while they are still with him. “More important than profit, efficiency, and even customers,”

he says, “is the quality of life inside this shop.” It is the rewards of working with, and caring for, so many talented people over the years that has validated the decision Moser made many years ago to trade the classroom for the woodshop.

Beauty

Much has been made over the years of how Moser left a teaching job at Bates College in order to delve full-time into woodworking. The story has even taken on a somewhat mythical quality: It was 1972, and Moser, then in his mid-30s, purchased a small grange hall in New Gloucester with a woodstove in the corner. There were curls of wood shavings on the worn pine floors and the smell of sawdust scenting the air. His wife, Mary, handled the business’s sales and finances, and their four young boys scampered about. Moser put his hands and heart to the work, and prayed that the orders would arrive. The orders did arrive, quite quickly and in droves, but Moser’s initial leap was still one that required utter faith.

Today, Moser merely shrugs off the life-changing career switch he made 35 years ago and the fact that he leapt into the unknown to chase a dream at a time when others might not have dared. “So many of us college professors believed that through academia we could somehow improve the human condition,” Moser says,

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with a hint of wryness, of his career in education. Ironically, what Moser has found is that, while furniture itself might not dramatically improve the human condition, the enterprise he has created to build that furniture certainly has.

With nearly 200 employees working at Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers, Moser estimates that his business supports some 500 people, if you count the husbands, wives, and children of his workers. “People sat down this morning and ate breakfast bought with money made from the construction of furniture...imagine that. It’s remarkable!” he says. His eyes shine with pride, even a touch of awe, as he contemplates the implications of his statement. “The people here are making things that will last,” he says. “They’re making things that will live on long after they’re gone, and that’s important. You don’t want to come to the end of your life and take your foot out of the big bucket and see that the water level doesn’t go down. Each of us in our lifetime, if we are fortunate enough, may create something that is intergenerational.”

Moser says, of the hundreds of pieces of furniture he has designed and built in his life, he believes that only perhaps 30 or so are “really good.” And of those thirty he hopes that maybe a handful will transcend his lifetime and live on after he is gone. Moser makes the assessment without a boastful tone in his voice, as though he is surprised at the realization. Moser seems humbled that he has been able, in some small but meaningful way, to add to the beauty he so appreciates in the world around him.

“I often wonder if man is hardwired to see beauty, or if it is learned,” Moser says. It’s a question that he has been pondering for years. “I don’t have an answer to that,” he says, his voice trailing off. But after a moment he adds: “I think it may be learned—though maybe some of us are hardwired to learn quicker than others.” **MH+D**