GWOW!

Hank Gilpin Loves Wood

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Micro-essays by Jonathan Binzen Foreword by Arthur Dion

Gallery NAGA

Love Letters

Arthur Dion

This volume is a testament to the love affair with wood Hank Gilpin has carried on for four decades.

Jonathan Binzen and I look with awe upon the depth and the complexity of his ardor. He adores grain with the tenderness you'd bring to exploring the features of your lover's face.

His mission is to share the love. He conceives original, subtle, and thoroughly companionable furniture that slips smoothly into almost any environment. Every piece is a gem in a setting. It begins with his swooning for the beauty of a board and blossoms with his displaying that gorgeousness in a form that can enter our homes. When it's finished, he writes on the underside GWOW, for Gilpin's World of Wood.

Jon Binzen saw the romance early, reading articles in the 1980s about Hank in several publications, including *Fine Woodworking* magazine, for which he later wrote and of which he eventually became senior editor. "I loved the work right away," he recently recalled. "I loved his commitment to making functional work that's terrific aesthetically."

He also loved talking to Hank about wood, about furniture, and about other furnituremakers. Some of their talks turned into articles, Jon's writing about Hank and his work and Hank's writing on his experiences in and out of the shop. Jon thinks the best may be in *FWW*'s winter, 2000 25th anniversary issue, where Hank wrote about his mentor, Tage Frid.

I was tipped off about Hank's work soon after I began showing studio furniture at Gallery NAGA in the mid-1980s. He was, and still is, rather private about his business, which is built on solid and intimate client relationships, some quite long-term and all keyed to his ability to recognize and solve challenges of function and design.

I visited his studio back then, appreciated the work and him, and invited him to show with us. But making work on spec, as opposed to on commission, and the public splash of galleries aren't his style. I continued to ask for 20 years, and he finally did cave; I think his admiration of Judy McKie's 2006 NAGA show dissolved his reserve. So in 2009, after 35 or so years of supporting himself and his family making furniture and objects, designing with architects and owners

and landscape architects everything from golf tee markers to swimming pools, Hank had his first solo show. It was stunning, it did well, and he wouldn't do it again. Too much money and effort upfront; working with a client suits him better.

And thereby hangs this tale. Chris McKown knows Hank, Hank's work, and studio furniture well, and he was enthusiastic about the project of connecting him with a new audience. The show, titled *New Furniture and a Display of Commissioned Projects*, presented 18 large new pieces, 14 small objects, and a video of hundreds of commissioned works. (25 of these can be seen on Hank Gilpin's page at gallerynaga.com. An archive of Hank's work is kept at hankgilpin.com.)

To extend the idea we scheduled an evening of public conversation at which I questioned Hank about his history and the commissioning process. When we received 40 reservations, we set up a second night. Some 80 people gathered on October 20 and 21, 2009 and heard Hank talk about his work as an army photographer in Vietnam, his furniture revelation in a Rhode Island School of Design course with Tage Frid, his study of architecture, his knowledge of the forest and the trees, his work with clients on their projects, and his recent epiphany that there is no bad wood.

As happy as Chris was to see Hank's passionate embrace of wood shared with two roomfuls, he lamented that a wider audience hadn't witnessed this rare public revealing of Hank's multifarious talents. He wondered whether a small book could give those who weren't present a picture of the delicate design choices and the deep affection that characterize Hank's path.

On the following right-hand pages are reproductions of 12 of the pieces in the show, surrounded by smaller images showing details of their construction and, in some cases, earlier pieces by Hank that were design sources. Facing the images are 12 new short pieces by Jon that sketch a dozen of the dimensions in which Hank's work operates.

Independently, Jon commemorated the show with one of his periodic back-cover pieces for a spring, 2010 issue of *Fine Woodworking*, producing at the same time a video profile that captures Hank's passion so well that we couldn't resist sharing it. A copy is inside the back cover.

So, with the design insight of Vincent-louis Apruzzese, we've tried to craft a correlate, a parallel approach to experiencing Hank's ways with wood. But, if you ever get the chance, you should try it in person.

redwood

Zing

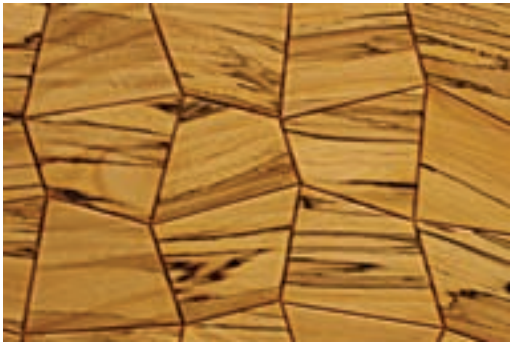
Some of Hank Gilpin's peers have pushed their work in the direction of self-expression, often trading utility for visual or conceptual effects and blurring the line between furniture and sculpture. Gilpin's mantra marks him as quite different: "Practical, practical, practical," he says. "I'm trying to design and make pieces with a familiar quality, so that people don't have to figure them out - even if they're unique. Simple, practical pieces with a little bit of zing." Gilpin's *Bubbly Oak Table* distills this approach. At the level of structure and function, it's all business - a circular slab top supported by saber-shaped legs; cruciform aprons linked to the legs with traditional through-tenons. But with Gilpin, every practicality is mixed with pleasure. First there's the pecky red oak he chose for the top - a rare and delightful variant of a common wood. Then the tenons - not simply exposed where they protrude from the legs, but curved to mirror the circle of the top. And best, bubbling up the inside face of the legs and floating around the rim of the top is the crisp, almost cartoonish series of bumps that give this little table a distinctly Gilpinistic effervescence. Zing, you might call it.

Bubbly Oak Table 2008 pecky red oak 22x16x16"
Private Collection

Hunger

For the first decade of his career, Hank Gilpin says, "The history of furniture just consumed me." And he consumed it, drinking down books and magazines on furniture, and frequently feasting on museum collections. Then, as he began to find his stride as a designer, his autodidact's appetite turned to wood and to the trees themselves. Picking through logpiles at sawmills and walking through the woods with foresters and botanists he discovered a plethora of unexpected species to study - and put to use. Gilpin had always been a gardener, and now, as he explored the forest in person and in print, he examined its understory as well as its trees - everything from the mosses that furred the roots of a towering white pine to the vines that spiraled the branches of its crown - and the whole botanical banquet began to beckon. "The horticultural world," he says, still wide-eyed at the idea, "is a lifetime study. I have a wicked curious streak, and I can chase knowledge for the rest of my life in that field and never finish." By the mid-1990s, while still pursuing furnituremaking at his accustomed breakneck pace, Gilpin began working in landscape design as well. Within several years, he was devoting half his time to landscape. When two roads diverged in the wood, Gilpin took both. In his woodwork these days, Gilpin says, "I try to make people think about trees."

Twisted Crotches 2008 white oak 24x84x9"
Collection of Ward and Lucy Mooney

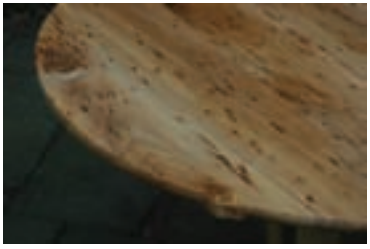


Domestic Exotica

Eucalyptus, curly cherry
Alligator ash and buckeye burl
Dogwood, myrtle, sapodilla
Pecky elm and sycamore

Hank Gilpin has always had a sweet tooth for wild figure - the curlies, the bird's eyes, the burls and the bookmatches - but in recent years he's been seeking out boards with defects so severe they'd be lucky to get made into pallets if he didn't buy them. He's become a connoisseur of overlooked woods of all kinds. By Gilpin's count there are more than 100 tree species in the lower 48 states that produce lumber suitable for furnituremaking. Due to large-scale logging practices and small-bore thinking by manufacturers and consumers, only a handful of species get used for furniture. Gilpin is out to change that, at least in his own practice. Without resorting to true exotics - trees that grow outside the U.S. - Gilpin employs some of the most exotic-looking wood in contemporary furniture. He started out using domestic woods because they were so much cheaper than imports. Then when he began buying at sawmills instead of lumberyards he discovered dozens of species that were cut incidentally during clear-cuts for prime commercial timbers like cherry, oak, and maple. Gilpin found that for a fraction of the cost of the standard hardwoods - let alone the cost of true exotics - he could snap up seductive woods like catalpa, elm, honey locust, Osage orange, and sycamore. He refers to these unfamiliar woods as "species trash" for the way they're disregarded by the logging industry. Most recently he's been pushing his exploration even further, employing what he calls "board trash": boards with defects like extreme warping, discoloration, large cracks, loose knots, and afflictions that distort the normal patterns of grain. For Gilpin, boards like these have the poetry right in the plank.

Pecky Elm Table 2008 pecky elm 29x42x42"
Private Collection, Boston



Firewood

A big black woodstove heats Hank Gilpin's Rhode Island furniture shop, and lumber scraps often go up in smoke. But leftover bits of certain treasured planks get set aside, stacked in corners or squirreled away under the stairs. Too small to use for furniture except as handles, these orphans are optimal for one of Gilpin's favorite endeavors: making what he calls knick-knacks. Usually sawn from a single scrap of wood and unrestrained by much in the way of function, these small works illustrate Gilpin's empathy for his material and accentuate the high level of hand skill deployed in his shop. Drawing them, he says, is "focused doodling," and he'll design scores of potential knick-knacks at a stretch. And making them? "That's the most fun you can have in a wood shop," he says. The knick-knacks demonstrate Gilpin's flair for pure form, which translates fluidly from the sketch to the finished piece. Looking at *Flamin' Ash*, however, you wonder whether any sketch preceded the piece; it appears as though Gilpin, always mesmerized by great wood, let the grain do the designing - to keep these sizzling scraps from going up in smoke.

Flamin' Ash 2009 ash 16x7x3½"
Private Collection, Boston

Links

In 1998 a former software entrepreneur named John Mineck was planning to build a golf club outside Boston. Mineck was an amateur woodworker, and he envisioned a clubhouse filled with great furniture. So as he began to put the pieces of his plan together, he looked up Hank Gilpin. The two met and formed an immediate bond. Boston Golf Club, which would be celebrated as a "modern classic" course when it opened in 2008, was then part woods, part wetlands, and part gravel pit. It would be years before there would be a place to put any furniture. But Mineck quickly discovered something that many of Gilpin's clients have learned over the years - that his skills as a designer reach far beyond furniture. Mineck found myriad ways to put Gilpin's eye and judgment to use, and for the next eight years Gilpin devoted part of each week to the golf course. Along the way, he designed outright or helped guide the design of roads and paths, tunnels and bridges, stonewalls, terraces, building facades and interiors. It was to be a links-style course with a raw, half-wild feeling to the landscape, and Gilpin and his landscaping partner, Ron Byleckie, moved mature trees, and planted trees and shrubs and grasses. When the clubhouse buildings were nearly complete, Gilpin designed and built fittings and cabinets for the pro shop, the dining room, the offices, and the locker rooms - along with scores of pieces of freestanding furniture. Gilpin designed even the tee markers - sinuous wooden stakes much like the legs on his *BGC Table*, which was made for the clubhouse. Reflecting on the eight-year project, which demanded expertise in so many realms he'd never entered before, Gilpin says simply, "I seem to be attracted to problem solving - in anything."

BGC Table 2008 Cuban mahogany 23¼x20x20"
Private Collection

26.4

Some studio furnituremakers relish working with the complete freedom of fine artists. Hank Gilpin prefers working within limitations set by a client. His *Ash Chair* was designed in response to a client's request for a chair to suit a small desk. Constraints of all sorts spur his creativity: limits of time and material, requirements of function and structure, the parameters of a client's aesthetic. "I like to have a person attached to the process," Gilpin says. "I'm working for someone else, not for me." He sees his operation as analogous to any small service business, and knows that the quality of his interactions with clients are in some ways as important as the quality of his furniture. "Twenty-six point four percent of success," Gilpin estimates, with the flourish of an imaginary pencil, "is being personal. Maybe more." Gilpin's presence is electric. He's constantly charged by the dozen creative challenges he's juggling, and also buzzing with ideas and opinions on an assortment of subjects. But it's essential to his process that he absorb as well as generate ideas. He explains that when he meets with clients to discuss a commission, "I listen very, very carefully." The best commissions, he says, are the ones when he feels he has a complete understanding of the clients - and the clients have complete faith in him. "I'm thinking *only* about them when I'm designing," he says, "trying to bring their aesthetic and their practical needs together in my own way." As much as he needs the client's input, however, he also needs it to end at a certain point. Once the designing has begun, he says, "Don't bug me! Tell me what you want, then take a vacation."

Ash Chair 2007 curly ash and yew 31x16x18"
Private Collection, Pittsburgh

Nuts

Hank Gilpin's father, Bill, had a profound impact on Hank's working method. That's in spite of the fact that there was no aesthetic connection between the two of them. Bill was an insurance man, and he hoped Hank would follow him into a similarly secure occupation. The law, maybe. Instead, Gilpin wound up designing custom furniture and making it by hand, a notoriously flimsy excuse for a profession. Most of the best work in the field is supported by grants, teaching jobs, spousal income, or simple suffering. None of that suited Gilpin. From the first day he worked in his shop the urgent issue for him was how to make it pay. Observing the complexity and high cost of his peers' furniture, he headed the other way. "Economic forces dictated simplicity," he says. So he became, in his words, "a niche hunter, a limitation setter." He made hundreds of small tables, straightforward, useful pieces spiced with beautiful wood and graced with a curve or two, pieces small enough to go home in a customer's trunk and modest enough to fit with any style of furniture. Along the way Gilpin also made a range of far more elaborate furniture, but the pragmatism embodied in those small, simple pieces shaped all his work. To explain the fierceness of his drive to extract a solid income from a tenuous profession, Gilpin brings up his father. "He would call me twice or three times a year. He'd say, 'Hank? Dad. Everything okay? Finances in shape? Good. Here's your mother.' It was a pure animal-survival thing. 'You alive and well? Got enough nuts in the nest? Okay, fine. That's all I want to know.'"

Very Difficult Table 2008 figured redwood 40x16x12"
Collection of Abby Johnson and Chris McKown

Object Lesson

This stool, one of Gilpin's landmark pieces, could serve as a partial primer on his approach to working wood. Like so many Gilpin pieces, it's a tour de force of hand shaping and traditional joinery, but it doesn't raise its voice to announce that fact. You notice only slowly that there is hardly a flat plane on the piece, and that not one of its 10 mortise-and-tenon joints meets at right angles - making it extremely challenging to build. The shaping of the legs is subtle: long, shallow curves and gently pillowed faces, all faired and smoothed with hand planes. The seat alone would consume nearly half a week of handwork and bring out a panoply of tools: rasps and files, scrapers and Surforms, spokeshaves and sandpaper. The stool's composition is all curves, but it doesn't feel like there's a surfeit of them. The slow sweep of the legs leads to the splendid recurved seat the way the swell of a wave leads to the crest of a breaker. As nearly all Gilpin's pieces are, the stool is eminently practical. The seat's deep contour makes it comfortable for a long sit, and the footrest's broad, domed top surface makes it inviting even for unshod feet. "Ever climb a ladder barefoot?" Gilpin asks, apropos of this detail. "Cannot be done." In a piece with so many parts, continuity of grain and color are paramount. Gilpin designed the stool so its parts could all be cut from a single board 8 inches wide, 2 inches thick and 8 feet long - a size readily available in most species. The piece also contains a trace of Gilpin's training. His mentor, the charismatic Danish-born master craftsman Tage Frid, made a stool that might have been at the back of Gilpin's mind as he designed this one. The triangulated stance and the minimal seat and the complete practicality of the teacher's stool find echoes in the student's. But the sensuousness of Gilpin's piece marks it out as entirely his own.

Seating Object 2008 blister big leaf maple 27x18x16"
Collection of John and Rose Evans

Tail Fin

Gilpin grew up drawing all the time, but he had little interest in art. His notebooks were bursting with headlights and tail fins, hoods and bumpers, hot rods and customized cars. The idea of designing an actual car, that was a complete fantasy - something guys in California might get to do. Looking through Gilpin's current furniture sketchbooks you can feel the full-throttle freedom of adolescent invention - this guy is still noodling and doodling, staying up late to see what flows from his pen. It looks like the high school gearhead might have found his own California. If so, he took a circuitous route. Gilpin never gave a thought to furniture until he was 25 years old. His high school art teacher, who had gone to the Rhode Island School of Design, encouraged him to apply there. But Gilpin didn't see himself as an artist; he couldn't imagine being in the same league as the serious art students in his class. Instead he went on to Boston University, where he flailed around for several years before entering a photojournalism program there. Along the way he applied several times to studio art classes, but each time was turned away for lack of experience. After college he was drafted and sent to Vietnam, where he took pictures for the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. To get out of Vietnam early, he finally took his teacher's advice and applied to RISD as a photography student. To his great surprise, he got in. His photography career ended within a couple of months at RISD, when he took an elective in wood and found himself instantly under the spell of the teacher Tage Frid. Gilpin thinks the combination of Frid's powerful personality and his own receptivity were such that, if Frid had been a painter instead of a furnituremaker, Gilpin would now be a painter himself. Of course, if Frid had been a car designer, you might well be driving a Gilpin.

Flying Wing Table 2009 curly white oak 16x60x36"
Collection of Hank Gilpin

Torn and Tethered

One day in 1973, in the woodshop at RISD, where he was studying under Tage Frid, Hank Gilpin was using hand tools to shape the legs of a desk he had designed. The legs were tapered and curved and had crowned faces - not a straight line or a flat plane to be found. Gilpin had carefully made a series of cardboard templates so he could check his progress and be sure that all the legs were shaped identically. Frid watched him work from across the shop. Then he walked over to Gilpin's bench, picked up the templates and ripped them to pieces. "Train the eye," Frid said. "If the eye says it's right, then it's right." Gilpin looked on and listened, feeling shredded himself. Today he says that traumatic minute delivered a lifetime's liberation. It taught him to tether his eye and hands together and trust the result. "It gave me a freedom I exercise every day I'm in the shop."

Blister Tulip Table 2009 blister tulip poplar and blue butt tulip poplar 36x32x19"
Private Collection, Boston

Concept

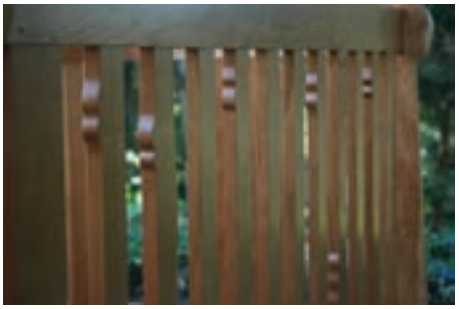
Gilpin made *Curiously Red…* for the 2006 exhibition *Inspired by China* at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The piece is a compound of some strategies familiar in his oeuvre and others utterly atypical. Gilpin made the piece with wood from an old elm tree that died as a result of construction on the campus of Brown University. Elm is a favorite wood of Gilpin's, and it has also long been favored by Chinese furnituremakers. Gilpin let one thin board of elm dry unweighted and made his table an altar to the swooping, twisting plank that resulted. In recent years, Gilpin has been increasingly drawn to untamed wood - whether for its defects or its drying patterns - making benches with unflattened seats and tables with wavy tops. Here, though, the contours of the top are so extreme they render *Curiously Red…* more conceptual than functional, a situation virtually unprecedented in Gilpin's work. In the finish, too, Gilpin departs from his customary practice. Typically preferring to pick astounding planks and let their color and grain speak for themselves, Gilpin sometimes applies no finish at all, and if he does use a finish, it is always clear. Here, invoking a color prevalent in Chinese furnishings - and connected as well with Chinese Communism - Gilpin treats the table with a livid red stain. And, in a touch that evokes both the untimely end of the elm tree and the suffering of Chinese under an oppressive government, he drips the stain at the feet of the sacrificial table.

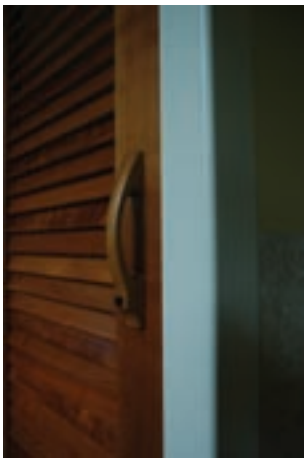
Curiously Red… 2006 stained elm 36x74x15"

Yew is Very Good

What can you make with solid yew wood? Planks of yew are typically short and narrow - often only a few inches wide - and commonly beset with every defect in the lumberman's lexicon: ingrown bark, wind shake, checks and twist, waney edges, profuse knots and turbulent grain. A furnituremaker is lucky to salvage half of what he buys. But wood that scares off most other makers is, for Gilpin, a bit of a briar patch. "I like restraints," he says. "The limitations the wood establishes fuel my thinking." In the case of yew wood, Gilpin says he's particularly happy to accept its afflictions, "because this is the most sensuous wood you'll ever find." In his standing screen, with its aromas of the East - in the slightly canted stance and the backflipped top rail - and of the Cotswolds - in the exposed joinery and the deftly articulated sled feet - Gilpin turns the narrowness of yew boards to his advantage, creating a novel step-planked central panel and demonstrating that what he can make with solid yew wood is masterful.

Screen 2009 English yew 52x48x12"
Collection of Ward and Lucy Mooney





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cover Hank Gilpin with a plank of meronti in his studio, 2006

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design Behemoth media

Jonathan Binzen is a writer and editor in based in New Milford, Connecticut. Co-author of *Arts and Crafts Furniture*, a history tracing the international scope of that movement, he has also written about furniture for *American Craft*, *This Old House* magazine, and *Home Furniture*. He is Consulting Editor to *Fine Woodworking* magazine, where he has been a contributor since 1993.

Arthur Dion has enjoyed directing Gallery NAGA since 1982. Since 1999 he has worked collaboratively with Meg White, who became his partner in the business in 2011. Suzanne Fraelick, their associate since 2007, was a prime mover and presenter of the Gilpin show.


red oak