

Jenny Alexander and Peter Follansbee, *Make a Joint Stool from a Tree: An Introduction to 17th Century Joinery*

Lost Art Press: Fort Mitchell (2012), 115 pp., with many colour and b & w illus. ISBN 978-0-9850777-0-9 \$43

I have made a joint stool, but it would have been a much better stool, and taken me considerably less time, had I read this book. The authors, the late Jenny (formerly John) Alexander and Peter Follansbee, are both experienced practitioners, having for many years researched and made replicas of historic furniture using authentic materials, tools and methods. The book describes how a 17th-century oak joint stool is made, from the selection of the log, splitting and riving the stock, the shaping and cutting of parts, turning, decoration, assembly and finish. This is done with a deft economy of words and pictures which only long experience and profound thought can produce.

It has long been my impression that the overriding quality of all good furniture-makers is pragmatism. It's about getting the job done in the simplest, most efficient way possible. This is a quality that the authors possess in abundance. They use wooden planes, not for their old-world quaintness, but because iron and steel do not mix well with green oak and tannin. Follansbee uses a pole lathe, Alexander an electric one, according to their preference. A brace and piercer bit are used instead of a modern twist-drill because only this tool exactly replicates the slight ovality seen in the peg holes of 17th-century furniture. Where close scrutiny of contemporary sources (Moxon and Randle Holme figure largely) fails to reveal the exact nature of a particular process or tool, they apply whatever works, because that is what joiners do. Some processes are inferred, because that is the logic of the construction. For instance, many English and American joint stools have a small bevel planed on the inner corners of the legs. Its purpose is nowhere explained in contemporary texts, but the authors suggest it allows the joiner instantly to orientate his parts, so he knows which are the two outside, true, faces of the legs. A similarly pragmatic approach is taken with measurement, where the awl or scribe takes precedence over the ruler. Mortise gauges are home-made, and mortises and tenons are measured by the width of the mortise chisel. Straightness is checked with winding sticks or just with the eye; 'If you can't see a problem by eye here, then there's no problem. Don't go looking for trouble.'

One of the most striking aspects of the book is its emphasis on the use of green and part-seasoned oak. In

Britain we are taught that seasoned wood is a prerequisite for good furniture, but Alexander and Follansbee demonstrate the opposite; that it is essential to start with green wood, because working it is so much easier. As the work progresses, so different levels of greenness are important, because accurate jointing and a clean finish requires dryer wood, but not so dry that it becomes difficult to work. Pegs should be as dry and straight-grained as possible. So the joiner requires a nice appreciation, not only of wood in general, but of each component – rail, stretcher, leg, seat and peg – of his stool.

Of course, such an approach only works if one has top quality timber to work with. Only straight, slow-grown wood will produce good results, and whereas 17th-century settlers in North America had this in abundance, this was not the case in Britain. In inland Britain, in the mountainous parts of Wales, or in the Pennines, joiners had to work with some very poor oak; often hard, knotty and unstable. This is one of the reasons why we used a much higher proportion of sawn rather than riven wood in Britain, and why our furniture-makers preferred to use imported wainscot if they could get it, despite the higher cost. It means that the methods used by Alexander and Follansbee do not necessarily translate directly to a British context, but the differences are fundamentally immaterial. What Alexander and Follansbee have done is recreate, not just a piece of furniture, but the spirit and understanding behind it.

Anyone who loves historic furniture should buy this book. It should also be mandatory reading for furniture academics and museum curators.

Note: Peter Follansbee is the American Secretary of the Regional Furniture Society

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