

# THE ARTFUL MIND

AUGUST 2010



JO ROESSLER, NOJO DESIGN, FURNITURE MAKER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THADDEUS B. KUBIS



# JO ROESSLER

## NOJO DESIGN Furniture Maker

Interview by Harryet Candee

Photographs of Jo by Thaddeus Kubis

Furniture Images supplied by Jo Roessler

**Harryet Candee: Let's start at a playful age. If you were to build a playground from your fantasies for kids, what would it be like? What kind of wood would you use, and what would the structure be like?**

**Jo Roessler:** Last summer, I did just that for my then three and a half year old twins. Having bought a large pile of very large oak timbers, I took it upon myself to outdo all the neighborhood play structures. Since the timbers were 12-foot long, I decided the height of the play structure should be 12-foot tall. I went from there and ultimately came up with two towers connected by a bridge. There are two slides and a rock climbing wall along with swings and a built-in play house. Part of the fun was reclaiming timber; I also re-sawed cedar boards salvaged from old pickle barrels. The vision for the climber continues and we just might see a third tower later this summer. Leading into the play garden is a custom metal gate that I designed and built. The bright red of the powder coated steel is very playful and I was able to incorporate the same pickle barrel cedar.

**How did you learn to make furniture?**

I can't remember a time when I wasn't building and constructing. Some of my earliest memories are of helping my father work on our house and build furniture for the family. Gaining early confidence made me feel like there was nothing that I couldn't build. In college, I started in photography, but when exposed to others building sculpture as furniture I was first intrigued and then inspired. Seeing others creating this work allowed me to start thinking about furniture design and construction as a career. Although I stayed in the photography department, my thesis ended up being entirely comprised of metal furniture. From there, I went on to graduate studies in furniture and taught myself traditional woodworking techniques and joinery.

**Were you involved in another career at any point that is totally different than what you do now?**

I have always worked in the arts and although I started down the path of photography in art school, what I really gained was a stronger design sense. I found that it doesn't really matter what medium you work in, it is more about the skills and ideas that the medium sparks.

**Did you have to study architecture at all? Maybe you were interested in some historical phase, classic, Renaissance, Japanese ... anything in particular influence you in a specific direction in style?**

Not only was I required to study architecture in college, but as a child I was too. My father is a historical preservationist architect and I became very aware of structure and form at an early age.

I love all architecture and find inspiration in the many periods of buildings and construction. One of my most recent designs (Elaine's bed) was inspired by a tiny and easily overlooked detail in an arts and crafts bungalow. From there, I designed an entire new line of bedroom furniture around that same detail.

**Do you work with a lot of interior designers?**

I am working with interior designers more these days and enjoy collaborating to convey clients' personalities through their space. One of the tenants in my building, Keith Woodruff (KW Home), is very talented interior designer. He and I work together whenever we can.

**Can that be a conflict to your personal artistic choices at times?**

I think that the interior designers that I work with understand that I have a vision and that is why they want to work with me. They know I bring unique skills and they appreciate that. Not to say that at some times there isn't a difference of opinion, but the most successful projects are the ones where we all have a voice.

**What is your most favorite piece you have designed, and why?**

My newest work, the M Series is my favorite body of work to date and I enjoy that the inspiration came from a fleeting vision in a dream. Not only is it a personal design progression, but it is also somewhat of a departure from some of my past work. The M Series is paving the way for far more fluid design, which is exciting.

**Easthampton, Massachusetts is your home base. Are people more conservative in their furniture taste, or do you find them at a point where they are getting more creative, maybe more unconventional?**

While the majority of my clients come from metropolitan areas, the Pioneer Valley is actually very progressive in its taste. I have been delighted to find clients in the area who share my aesthetic and connect with my work. Some of my favorite clients are from the area and in retirement, are now decorating, 'the right way,' the way that they always wanted to. They now have a dining room and a few bedrooms that they love and really connect to.

**Tell me about the wood. What kind do you like, dislike, and so forth...**

I love working with domestic wood and have recently been exploring reclaimed timber. I work with some of the more exotic woods sparingly and have found that I am actually allergic to some.



Nojo Chairs: Top left: Cherry and Walnut

Caroline's Bedside tables: Middle: Cherry and Birdseye Maple

Caroline's Bed: bottom: Mahogany and Elm

Jo's hands, T. Kubis

I find myself enjoying each wood species with every project that comes through the shop; the smell of cherry, the warmth of walnut, the strength of maple. Often I find the design to be the most compelling, and sometimes, the wood is somewhat secondary.

**Why does this natural material take precedence over anything else, and do you ever mix materials? Why and how?**

Wood is a beautiful material to live with and the rich history of joinery is more inspiring to me than any other building material. My preference is to work all in wood. I have mixed materials on occasion; glass and lighting are nice complements for instance, but I don't often mix in metal as a main design component.

**What is your life like outside of work? What do you like to do when you are free?**

I have five-year-old twins, so I spend a lot of time playing complex imagination games. I also walk my dog in the woods every day.

**Have you ever lived anywhere else on this planet?**

I originally came from New York, but chose to move to this area in my 20's. The Valley has a rich arts community that we connected with right away and I also appreciate its beauty.

**What was your most difficult designing job you have been challenged with and have successfully completed?**

My first dining room chair that I ever designed and built still remains the most challenging. I vividly remember working so hard to get the details correct and created more than five prototypes before finalizing the design. I delivered the 12 chairs and a 12-foot table the day before Thanksgiving. The client was thrilled and I was relieved.

**The workshop you have resides in a renovated theater. It really fits in with today's lifestyles and changes that have come through over the years. I admire you and the other business for saving a part of our history. In order for this to occur I know no one sat around. There was a lot of mental and physical work involved. Tell me a little about the way this all happened for you. What ideas did you apply to the renovating that have been especially successful, interesting and inspiring?**

When I was looking for a new space for my business, my wife, Nora and I were very intrigued by the vaudeville theater in the center of town which had been vacant for over 10 years. It was obviously beautiful once upon a time and we were inspired to reclaim a gem. While it would never be a movie theater again, we knew it could be a fabulous shop. After purchasing the building, we worked quickly to get the basic services up to date and my shop running. From there, we moved our attention to the front of the building and started restoring the beautiful facade and making three

different store fronts. We were fortunate in that we received a grant from the state to pay for some of the restoration. The transformation was remarkable and I ended up with a very grand 1-man shop with enormous wide-open space and a tin ceiling. Many of the architectural details from the vaudeville era remain.

One of the most exciting parts of the project was working with my father who flew from Australia to help with the architectural design. Working with him to realize my vision was a remarkable experience. I always get a kick out of sharing the building with my clients.

**What is your turn around time for a client who wants a bedroom set created from scratch?**

Typically, two-three months. However, depending on the design process, which involves hand-drawings and site meetings when possible, it could take longer.

**Is your private home filled with your own furniture/art? I believe, the furniture you make, is your art.**

Thanks, I think of it as art also. My house does have some pieces. It is a real pleasure living with the things I've made. Having my friends and family gather around the dining table that I built is a pleasure.

Of all the pieces in the house, my favorite has to be the beds I made my twins. While they aren't quite art, the 10' fire truck always makes me smile.

**Selling your furniture comes easiest when you go to art fairs, like Paradise City Arts Festival, or, is it better for you by word of mouth?**

The shows I do all along the East coast each year are best way I've found to connect with my clients. It's a wonderful way to present my work to the public. To see and touch my work is by far the best way for people to understand it. While I do get clients from other marketing efforts and my website (NojoDesign.com), the shows are always where the largest amount of my sales are generated.

The Paradise City Arts Festival in Northampton is a very unique show. First, I can walk there from my house, a huge improvement over staying in hotels. But more important is the diversity of work there each year. The promoters do a wonderful job of finding new and interesting work for the show. I particularly enjoy the fine art there and find that it complements my work.

**Where should a young person interested in making furniture should start?**

I believe in a strong design background. As it turns out putting two pieces of wood together is not that hard. Read a few books and take some time with some decent tools and you'll get the hang of it. On the other hand designing takes time and study. There is no short cut to quality design.

**What was the most unique piece of furniture you have made stands out in your mind?**

My line of stepped Tansu type cabinets come to mind. These have been very popular and really fun to build. While stepped cabinets have been around for centuries, I feel I've made them brought them into the 21st century. One of my pleasures in building furniture for people is transforming their spaces and often, these very large step cabinets do that instantly. There is something about the form that draws you in. That and lots of storage. You can never have enough, right?

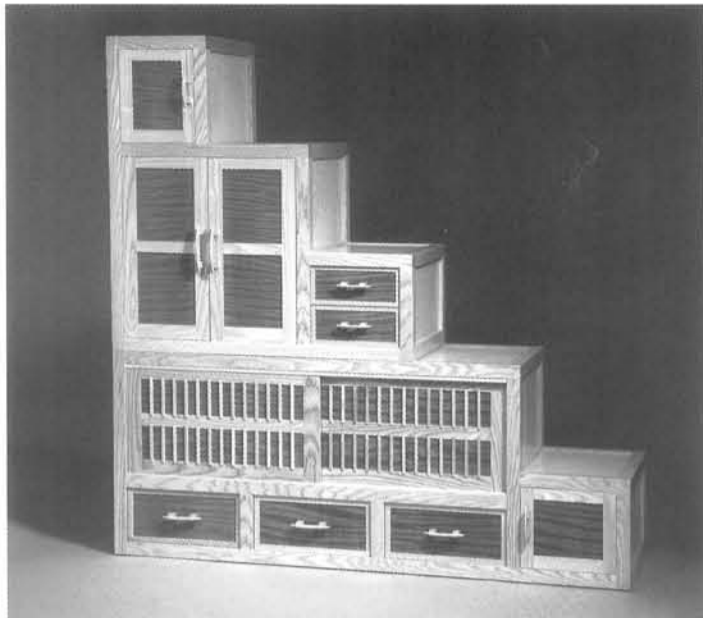
**Have you taken that idea further?**

I think I have. It's difficult to find the time to build speculative work to advance the design ideas of the larger pieces, so I'm bound to the needs and spaces of my clients to some degree. However, with each opportunity, I try to push myself to make each one unique. I recently did a large stepped cabinet that worked as a room divider. It had a lot of glass, lighting and storage on both sides.

**Does your beautiful dog have any furniture you made that makes her?**

No, Suki's a dog. Her life is full of going for walks and taking naps. She doesn't need my furniture to have a wonderful life. Having her along with me does bring pleasure to the shop time. Sitting on the floor petting her and looking at my projects is when some of the best ideas come.

*Continued on next page ...*



Top: Redwood Stepped Cabinet, Ash Redwood, Jo Roessler

Below: Standing Cabinet, Cherry and Birdseye Maple, Jo Roessler



Jo Roessler in Workshop

T. Kubis



**How did your work get noticed by international magazines? That's really neat.**

Over the years I've been lucky to get some very interesting press, including some books, magazines, television, instructional video and lately blogs. Some of it is not luck though; I always try to stand out at shows by showing my work well and having new work each time. Through those opportunities, I have met and talked to many interesting people.

**What are your future plans and goals? Have you come up with a new marketing technique to draw additional attention?**

The most obvious goal is to grow the work. Seeing my body of work change and expand is a thrill. Working with people to complete their spaces in new and interesting ways is also very enriching.

I don't do much marketing, but have been exploring social media. Over the past year, I have been tweeting and posting to my Facebook page. This has been a fun way for me to give people a small glimpse into what happens in the shop from day to day. When I have time, I snap a photo with my iPhone of what I'm working on and pop it up on the web. I've connected with all sorts of people from doing this and garnered some press as well. It is an interesting bridge between such traditional work and modern technology.

**How does European furniture differ from that Made in America style? Ornate, is the key difference, I should think but maybe I am wrong on that. Scandinavian and Japanese furniture is minimal, along with Shaker. Can you elaborate on this trend?**

You are right that different areas of the world have developed different styles and trends. I find inspiration in all of it, from the sleek lines of Italian furniture and furnishings to the spare shaker built-ins.

HC: What is your most down time with your art / furniture making? Frustrations lie in all forms of art, what is specific for you? How have you managed to correct, or alter obstacles, problems, challenges?

JR: Time is the enemy in woodworking. It takes loads of time to build complicated pieces, but a few important things have sped up this process. After almost 20 years of doing this professionally, I have a rhythm to it all and things do move right along. There is also large industrial equipment, which makes a huge difference when handling lots of parts and for keeping things accurate. And then there is my space. As I mentioned, it's huge. So, I can have a seven foot cabinet set up and be working on a king size bed on the other side of the shop and still have plenty of room to move around. This luxury has made a big difference

**How has the economy affected your business? I imagine, since it's your art, you're creating no matter where things may stand.**

I have noticed that people take a little longer to make decisions than they did before the crash, but I am still busy. Between my clients, new design and side projects, there never seems to be a shortage of things to do.

**Who has been your mentor, and what words of wisdom have you learned that you are willing to pass on to beginners in the same field of interest?**

I'm a big fan of woodworker, Sam Maloof. Not only were his designs completely unique and beautiful, but he stayed true to his original vision even with his huge success. That and he bought himself a Porsche when he started making lots of money ... In his autobiography he spoke about the notion of wood telling you what it wants to be. His response to that was that he didn't have time to talk to wood and I agree. I already talk to my dog; I don't need to start talking to trees.

**What other parts of your life that may be totally different and separate still affect your desire to create?**

It's all connected for me and a creative thought can happen anyplace. I've often thought about putting a drafting table in the shower.

**Are you excited about taking part in the Paradise City Arts Festival this year?**

I am excited to be exhibiting my newest work. It is always wonderful to get firsthand feedback. I hope to meet some interesting clients at the show and discuss ideas and design challenges.

**Finally, on that note, I was interested in knowing what is your favorite music to listen to while you work, or do you whistle, sing, take a break to play a musical instrument?**

Like my interest in architecture, I take pleasure in a number of different music styles. My iPod is in charge at work and I listen to everything from Samba to Abba.

**What makes you happiest?**

My wife.

*~ Check out Paradise City Arts Festival in Northampton, MA. on the web - meet Jo this October at his booth.*

*For more information on Jo Roessler's work, call 413-537-9663, or: [nojodesign.com](http://nojodesign.com)*

☆