

# Maker's Mark

**Mark Levin traded his parent's pre-med dreams for a life of sawdust and calluses. It's a good job he did. The creator of original and beautiful furniture speaks to Miriam Bentham about women, wood and Wendell**

**M**ark Levin's work is strongly influenced by "nature's small wonders." Leaves, flowers, fruit, seashells and nuts afford him the intimacy of hand-held curiosity, whereas, according to Mark, "mountains and oceans overwhelm; I don't stand a chance."

Mark is a furniture maker genuinely enthralled by the staggering beauty of the natural world, selecting choice elements of these organic miniatures and applying them to his compositions; the curve of a pear or the fluttering movement of a leaf's trajectory. This is not to say that Mark isn't equally intrigued with the manmade world of materialism; as a teenage *Playboy* reader he was equally charmed by the

"cars, stereos and other wonderful things" as he was by the women gracing its glossy pages. One day his father, tired of magazines as his son's sole literary consumption, thrust a copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* upon him. "Now," Mark states, "I had the gospel to go with the toys." Thus began his 25 year-long affair with objectivism, which although now outgrown, its tenets can still be detected in some of his work.

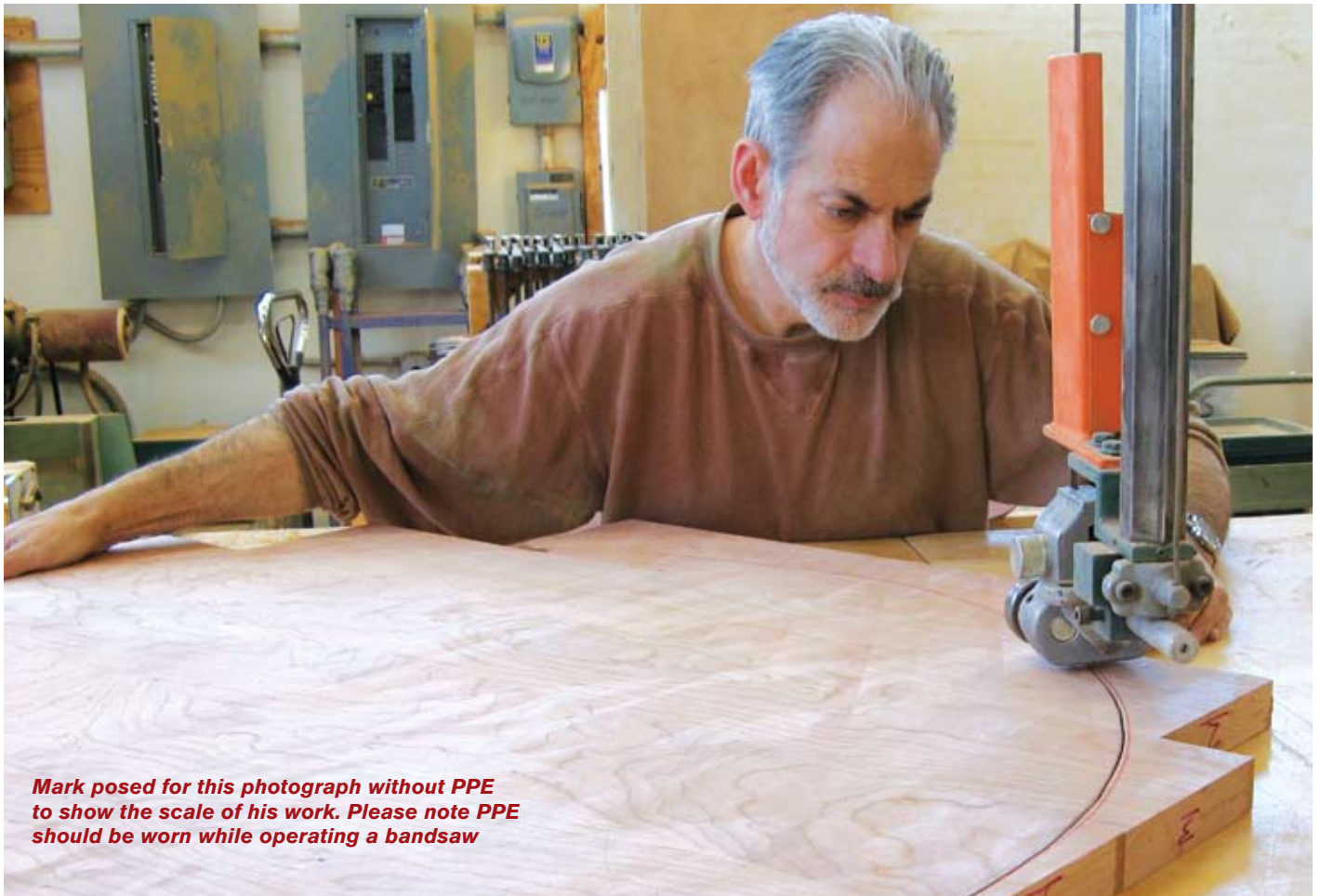
## **Working in solid wood**

Mark works primarily in cherry (*Prunus spp.*), maple (*Acer campestre*), walnut (*Juglans regia*) and mahogany (*Khaya ivornesis*) and doesn't use veneers in any of his work. They lack the

"virility and intrinsic value" working in solid wood affords his sculptural process and design approach. The only drawback to this is that the value and beauty of the wood plus the time consuming nature of working in solid pieces leaves very little margin for error.

The stack lamination process Mark uses is the most problematic side effect of working in solid wood. It is an incredibly labour intensive process, requiring many mating surfaces to be carefully machined and then stuck together with lots of glue and secured with many clamps. The end result is huge pieces of wood that can weigh up to 192lbs. Wendell Castle, the man whose appearance in

**Mark bandsawing his 'Apple Table'**



**Mark posed for this photograph without PPE to show the scale of his work. Please note PPE should be worn while operating a bandsaw**



Although 'Hair Pin Coffee Table' is one of Mark's less-feminine pieces it was inspired by a break-up

*Craft Horizon* inspired Mark's sudden career change, was a proponent of the stack lamination technique, originally inspired by Isamu Noguchi's use of the method in the 1940s.

Woods like white oak (*Quercus alba*) are avoided altogether due to their density and extreme care has to be taken over humidity levels. Shipping to places like New Orleans or Miami is off-limits due to the dramatic difference in humidity compared with Mark's Santa Fe base.

### Leaves, flowers and fruit

Falling in love with Mark's work is easy; the curvaceous, sculptural quality captivates and the nature-inspired forms satisfy. I challenge anyone not to take pleasure in Mark's 'Fruit' series; there is fun, beauty, originality and practicality all contained in the shape of a giant pear or set of matching apples. Of the pieces Mark is most proud of, his 'Pear Coffee Table' holds a special place. He never intended it to be a semi-production piece, but it took on a life of its own. With over 50 sold it is his best selling item and luckily is fun to build.

The 'Leaf and Flower' series is more complex, though equally enjoyable. The tables and shelves featured are more sculptural, suggesting movement within the curl of their undulating edges. They are delicate and feminine compared with the more robust 'Fruit' series.

Examining the intricacy of the 'Leaf

and Flower' series you could be forgiven for thinking that Mark relies on steam-bending techniques and hand tools to achieve the effects. In fact Mark uses bandsaws, specially-adapted chainsaws, disc-grinders and other power tools to sculpt the wood into the raw table tops and shelves. Next he sketches the delicate folds and curves into the wood and then refines them with chisels, rasps and

files, later repeating the process onto the other side. Mark estimates the leaf tables take him around 150 hours to complete, though the edges have to be so thin that there are a few of them that don't survive the carving process and instead face the fire.

Mark refers to the 'Fruit' series as his "wham-bam pieces" adding, "where the 'Leaf Tables' are very demanding like a very long and



Mark sanding a 'Blonde Marilyn Monroe Shelf'





Mark's 'Georgi Mav Leaf Table' was named after a school friend who passed away



'Leaf Table No. 21' opened up endless possibilities to Mark



► intricate love affair, the 'Fruit' series are voluptuous, carnal and brief like one night stands."

In 2002 Mark took first place in the prestigious NICHE awards with his 'Leaf Table No. 21'. He describes 'Leaf Table' as a "game changer"; "Everything just came into place with that table. I received tons of press, started getting into the best shows in the U.S. and winning many awards."

### Style

Mark has no qualms about the feminine quality his work possesses. In fact he believes that it is incredibly beneficial to the commercial reception of his work: "Women make the purchasing decisions about 90% of the time and once they locked onto one of my pieces, the husbands and partners didn't have a chance!"

It wasn't only customers that were

entranced by the sensual quality of Mark's work; many of the women he loved were attracted by the femininity of his furniture. "They confused my work with me," he says, "thinking I possessed the same softness and sensitivity that my work often evokes. At that time, they couldn't have been more wrong."

Among the things that inspire him, women are pretty high up on Mark's list. Although 'Hair Pin Coffee Table' is one of his less-feminine pieces, it was inspired by the break-up of a relationship. "I came home and she had taken everything of hers out of the apartment. I'm walking around the apartment and found a hairpin she had left. That was it; I turned into a puddle of mush. I kept that hairpin in a box for years. Out of the event came various iterations of the 'Hair Pin' shelves and coffee tables."

### The philosophy dichotomy

There is a dichotomy within Mark's work that makes it all the more fascinating. This dichotomy arises from our need – as an audience – to offset our definition of an artist against our own myopic view of what inspires them. Mark is keen to divorce his work from any official philosophical or academic polemic in favour of a businessman's approach, and what could seem more at odds with the delicate up-turned edges of 'Leaf Table No. 21' than business?

Far from detracting from the impact of Mark's furniture, this preference for business over art protects his working ethos from what he deems the inaccessible pretensions of academia that are neither useful or intelligent ways to understand his working practice. "I tend to gravitate to business people more than artists."



“A piece should provoke or evoke the intended emotions without any prompts on how to get there”

## “I decided if I’m going to be an artist, that was how I was going to roll. I’ve always seen myself more as a businessman who made his living from woodworking than an artist”

Most of my close friends and almost all the women I’ve been involved with have been in the business world. The business world is black-and-white to me; either you’re making money or you’re not. If you aren’t, it’s not that difficult to put a marketing programme together and make it work.”

Around the time that Mark was dog-eared the pages of *Craft Horizon*, the Italian design magazine *Abitare* was also at hand and from its pages pictures of architects and designers in beautiful suits called out to him. “I decided if I’m going to be an artist,

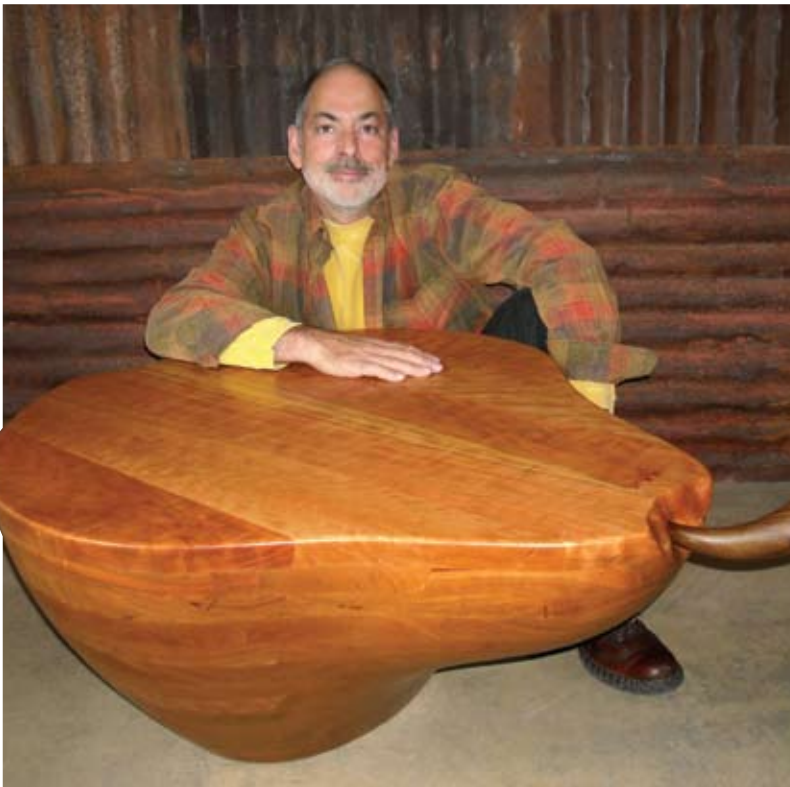
that was how I was going to roll. I’ve always seen myself more as a businessman who made his living from woodworking than an artist. Besides, who wants to look like they evolved from a spittoon?”

Whereas a craftsperson or artist talking about money is often taboo – as if the concept of profit magically diminishes the integrity of art – in Mark’s instance, it seems to have the opposite effect. Mark’s work has a universal appeal; forcing it into an unnecessarily academic mould it doesn’t fit detracts from the initial

impact of its simplicity. And that is what this sort of furniture is about; an impact that lingers and pretty much stays the same. There are no hidden elements, nothing to trip you up, just some very well executed techniques and ideas that come together to form an object of considerable beauty.

### “Those things beautiful”

It’s amazing how liberating Mark’s philosophy of no philosophy is in terms of trying to write about his work. So often the experience of looking at art is a process of ticking off the



**Mark with his 'Pear Coffee Table' – a piece that is enjoyable to make**

► academic checklist as we go. We look for that little white plaque that tells us what the artist wanted us to think, often before we've made up our own minds about how what we're seeing. Mark's active discouragement of the clinical and exacting way we are used to processing our interpretations of art actually reinforces the core beauty at play in his work.

"I came to woodworking because I simply enjoyed making things. There was no desire to be an artist. I'm put off when I go to a gallery and the artist has a page of copy explaining what their piece is about. I feel that if you need instructions to explain the visual phenomenon you created, somewhere the piece has large gaps. A piece should provoke or evoke the intended emotions without any prompts on how to get there. It's like needing a manual on how to masturbate."

As far as my philosophy, I'm enamoured by beautiful objects, from manmade to nature's creations. I wanted my work to rank up there with those things beautiful, not only materialistically but emotionally. The pianist and conductor, Leon Fleisher, plays with an incredible lightness and I find it more powerful and lingering than those who play with more force. When a person sees one of my pieces, I want them to feel a gentle touch across their cheek rather than an aggressive kiss." This last sentence is where I still detect a lingering precept of Rand's

Objectivism – art's purpose is to evoke emotional responses.

**The future**

Two years ago Mark's 'Leaf Table' was permanently inducted into the Mint Museum's collection of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina – the most recent of a decade of accolades that honour this highly original, critically and commercially successful maker.

He is also one of the furniture designer/makers to be featured in David Savage's *Furniture with Soul* a beautifully illustrated publication exploring the philosophies, careers, and inspiration among some of today's most talented and influential woodworkers.

It's been almost three years since Mark has put his hand to a piece of wood and I can't help hoping that he'll make something very soon for us to marvel at anew. Though he may try his utmost to shrug off the artist mantle that is often forced upon him, I'm sure he enjoys producing work that startles people with its innovation and beauty. Mark compares the motivations behind his furniture making to a Beethoven passage in that it "weaves melodic filigree out of molten steel." He feels he's come close to achieving this with his 'Leaf and Flower' series, "but," he adds, "these are the sonatas, I'm still working on the symphony." *F&C*

**See more of Mark's work at [www.marklevin.com](http://www.marklevin.com)**

**Maker's maker: Mark Levin on Wendell Castle**

Some 40 years ago, sitting in the college library, I had an epiphany. I no longer wanted to be a doctor – my expected path as chiselled in stone by my parents. There was simply not enough money on earth to limit myself to a lifetime discussing bowel movements.

In the library, I picked up a copy of *Craft Horizon* magazine – now *American Craft* – and came across the work of Wendell Castle.

That was it; I knew that was what I wanted to do.

I admired the range and depth of imagination his work evinced, but equally important was his business acumen. In reading his interviews and hearing him talk, he was always aware of the business end of the process from day one of his career. He mentions how he would make work he knew would garner attention, but would not necessarily sell; though ultimately they did. He understood the importance of self-promotion in the arts and realised it is as much about the business of the business as it is the art.

I was aware that I would have get into a college that taught furniture design. I was rejected from Rochester Institute of Technology. My portfolio was so horrendous, the R.I.T. art department head at the time, William Keyser no less, wrote a personal note on the boilerplate rejection letter: "Mr. Levin, I would consider another career." I was annoyed, but highly motivated nonetheless.

I discovered Bobby Falwell teaching at Northern Illinois University in the cornfields of DeKalb, Illinois. Bobby had done his studies at R.I.T. as a graduate student under Wendell Castle. Working with Bobby, I learned the gospel according to Wendell and the rest, as they say, was history.



**Mark in his Brioni suit**



**Mark's maker of choice – Wendell Castle**