

Profile: Northern Cal Family Tree



Don Braden
Smiles (1982)
California Walnut, Goncalo Alves
(57" h, 27" w, 23" d)

Northern California has always been fertile ground for nurturing creativity in wood. It offers inspirational forests with local species possessing outstanding grain patterns, a supportive counter-culture offering respite from the monotony of urban life, and an adjacent affluent market with an appreciation of handcrafted products. The woodworking community has grown north through the wine country and along the North Coast, eastward along the American River, and south into the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Just as with any family, the lineages of this expansion can be traced from seeds planted over the past 65 years. The upcoming exhibition, *Family Tree: 65 Years of Woodworking in Northern California*, highlights several of the important figures, and their work, in the heritage of this region's studio wood art movement, along with pieces by those who were influenced.

Contemporary handcrafted woodworking emerged during the housing boom following World War II. Military traveled through the ports of the Bay Area to fight in the Pacific theater and returned to settle around the *City by the Bay*, producing a great demand for housing and furnishings. Woodworkers of all types became very busy making cabinetry, and furniture on the side. Several of these makers—including **Arthur W. Hanna**, a boat builder turned furnituremaker—were showcased in the De Young Museum's *Design in Forty-Nine* exhibition in 1949.

However, the most significant seed was planted by **James Prestini**, even before his ultimate arrival at U.C. Berkeley. His wooden bowl in the *Good Design* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1946 inspired a sailor, who had just returned from serving in the Pacific, to forgo a potential corporate career to, instead, "make something useful and beautiful." **Art Espenet Carpenter** moved to San Francisco to take up woodturning and, later, furnituremaking.



Arthur W. Hanna
Wall Cabinet (1950s)

Griffin Okie
Koa "Bamboo" Campaign Desk (1980s)
Hawaiian Koa
(29" h, 60" w, 32" d)





Robert Erickson
Black Anderson Ranch Occasional Chair (2010)
 Elm, Bubinga
 (40" h, 26" w, 26" d)



Michael Cullen
Neptune Table (2008)
 Gabon Ebony, Ceylon Satinwood
 (40" h, 44" w, 12" d)



David Keller, an apprentice and employee with Art Espenet Carpenter in the early 1970s, developed Art's technique for making dovetail joinery into the Keller Dovetail System in 1976.

J.B. Blunk
 Chair (1978)
 Redwood
 (36" h, 40" w, 40" d)



J.B. Blunk Estate

Besides becoming among America's finest furniture craftsmen, he taught at San Francisco State, where he gained a following of students, and took on more than 130 apprentices/employees in his shop in Bolinas, CA.

His teachings were more than mere technique; he demonstrated a lifestyle of creativity. As his son **Tripp** recounts in the new book *Education of a Woodsmith*, "There was always more apprentices wanting to get in than time in a year. This was a real surprise to Father, because he truly thought no one would bother to come out to the country to learn a 'racket' that made little money...He had an effect on hundreds of people, encouraging them to go out and make their own way outside the corporate world. He set a strong example, showing that with persistence and the right attitude, it could be done." Among those directly influenced by Art have been **Jim Bacigalupi, Don Braden, Bruce McQuilken, David Keller, Tom Saydah, Robert Erickson, and David Marks**, all who have had their own impact on the field.

A former apprentice, **Tom d'Onofrio**, brought to Art, in the early 1970s, the idea of creating a guild of skilled artisans devoted to creative work and the sharing of knowledge, giving birth to the Baulines Craft Guild. Early guild woodworking members included **Roger Heitzman, Dale Holub, Dean Santner, and Grif Okie**, who opened one of the first craft galleries, *Dovetail*, on Fillmore Street in San Francisco. The Baulines Guild's formalized apprenticeship program continues today with such woodworking masters as **Garry Knox Bennett, Michael Cullen, John P. McCormack, and Ron Cook**. And other professional guilds emerged in Sonoma, Mendocino, Humboldt, Santa Cruz, and the Sierra Nevada, providing fellowship and marketing opportunities.

Another great influence on woodworking in Northern California was **James Krenov** and his *Fine Furniture Program*, started in 1980 at College of the Redwoods in Fort Bragg.



Jerry Kermode
Redwood with Stitches (2006)
 Redwood burl, Walnut
 (9½" h, 8½" dia)



Bob Stocksdale
Turned Vessel (1978)
 African Yokewood
 (4" h, 7" w, 6¼" d)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Attracted to the philosophy expounded in his series of books, hundreds of student from around the world have come to learn from the master, and many have stayed in the area to practice their trade. Though Krenov has since passed, the program continues to foster the hand craftsmanship and philosophy that the school's founder embodied. Representing this constituency in the exhibit are **Paul Reiber** and **Ashley Ericksmon**.

Others from the past also made their marks on contemporary makers. Woodturner **Bob Stocksdale** did not take on students, but his work, dating back to the 1940s, pioneered the field that we know today as turned wood. His gracefully shaped vessels moved wooden bowls from being viewed solely in terms of functionality to becoming art objects. He gained the attention of gallery owners and high-end retailers and was among the first to have his wood pieces shown along side crafts from more traditional art media. Many of today's noted turned wood artists, such as **Merryll Saylen** and **Jerry Kermode**, credit Bob as serving as their role model.



Merryll Saylan
Tower (2005)
 Mahogany,
 quarter sawn Oak,
 polychromed
 (52" h, 12" w, 13½" d)

Barbara Holmes
Tacoma
 Reclaimed
 Redwood lath
 (144" h, 480" w 36" d)



In addition, **J.B. Blunk** established a body of work in the 1960s and 70s, which influenced generations of craftsmen. His tool was a chainsaw, and he carved furniture and sculpture from oversized pieces of Redwood and Cypress, finished by texturing rather than polishing. His large-scale seating sculpture for the Oakland Museum, *The Planet*, was crafted in 1969 with apprentice **Bruce Mitchell**, who went on to develop his own outstanding sculptural wood career. Blunk's legacy lives on through a residency program, based at his former home and studio in Inverness, CA.

In recent years, creative approaches to woodworking have been centered in the Furniture Department at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Faculty, such as **Donald Fortescue** and **Russell Baldon**, and graduates, such as **Barbara Holmes** and **Chris Loomis**, have provided fresh approaches to wood art and design.

The exhibition *Family Tree: 65 Years of Woodworking in Northern California* showcases the work of many identified in this overview, as well as showcasing pieces by graduating students as a preview to tomorrow's furniture. The show takes place Jan. 21-Mar. 13 at the Petaluma Arts Center, 230 Lakeville St, in Petaluma, CA. Saturday educational programs are being scheduled. For info, visit the website: www.petalumaartscenter.org or call: (707) 762-5600.

Bruce Mitchell
Twins (2010)
Bay Laurel Burl
(30½" h, 15" w,
9½" d)



Paul Reiber
Day & Night (1994)
Cherry, gold leaf; Walnut, silver leaf
(58" h, 18" w, 18" d)



Ashley Ericksmoen
Fledge Pair of Tables
(2006)
Mahogany
(36" h, 45" w 14" d)
(24" h, 24" w, 11" d)

