

March-April, 2003

# Woodworker WEST



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# Profile: Michael Cullen



Michael Cullen paints the door for one of a set of *Tea Cabinets*.

*All the King's Men*  
Maple, Pear, paint, glass  
(90" h, 96" w, 20" d)

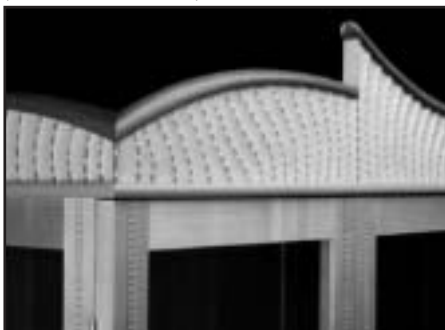


Photo: John McDonald

**Michael Cullen** of Petaluma, CA exemplifies the maxim that happiness can be found by following the heart. He forgone a promising career in engineering to assume an artistic lifestyle and has since become among America's finest furniture craftsmen.

"I always found the arts as a counterbalance to my heavy course load in science and math," recounts Michael. "At U.C. Santa Barbara, there were periods that I spent more time in the sculpture studio than I did in my engineering classes." So it was natural that when he found no passion for his engineering job, he turned to artistic pursuits.

In a way, sawdust was always in Michael's blood. Both his grandfather and great grandfathers had been cabinet-makers and furniture makers, and as a kid in Oakland, he hung around woodshops and collected wood samples from MacBeath Hardwood.

Around 1983, his interest in woodworking was rekindled. "Seeing pictures of the artistic pieces of **Judy Kensley McKie** and **Wendell Castle** made me realize that furniture was merely functional sculpture. I could combine my love for working with my hands, my engineering background, and my interest in art." When he found that his creativity was limited by his technical knowledge, he entered the two-year program at the Leeds Design Workshop in Easthampton, MA to learn the skills of a craftsman.

Headed by **David Powell**, a graduate of the Barnsley Workshops and the Royal College of Art in England, Leeds emphasized traditional methods and design. "It gave me the techniques to go anywhere in terms of design. At the same time, I was exposed to other woodworkers on the East Coast, who were employing paint, dyes, and texture.

These methods and ideas were infectious. I soon started experimenting with the use of bleach and color, and it made sense. If done correctly, color can set off wood like nothing else." He further expanded his skill repertoire working two years with **Jamie Robertson** of the Emily Street Workshop, who utilized bent laminations and veneers.

When Michael returned to California, he brought together all these influences in formulating his own style. Solidly constructed, he utilized color to enhance the natural wood. The *Moon Desk* (1991) demonstrates his early approach to the use of paint and carving in the adaptation of a traditional form.

As his work matured, mixing natural woods with surface treatments became important elements. The *Chest of Drawers* (right) illustrates embellishment that carving and paint adds to an ordinary rectangular form. On the *Leaf Chest* (cover), he went through a series of hand carvings, paint, and sanding to create a sense of animation. "Carving adds a dynamic element to the highly organized nature of a furniture piece. Irregular patterns create not only a rhythm, but reminds the viewer that this was made by hand."

However, his engineering knowledge still plays an important role. "Woodworking is all about engineering, as functional design needs to be structurally sound. Woodworkers have a tendency to overbuild with material. Many thought that *All the King's Men* (left) would never work, saying the frame was too light for the glass doors. Yet, proper engineering allows the piece to be sturdy, while maintaining a delicate quality."

In the early days, his shop was heavily supported by subcontract work. "I had an opportunity to buy an Oliver lathe, and other woodworkers naturally assumed that I was a turner. Work started coming in, and I hadn't a clue what to do. I have since become rather proficient at turning." This talent is well demonstrated in the *Tea with the Mad Hatter* side table (upper right), composed of a stack of plates created by multi-axis, multi-centered turning.

Today, his work is divided between commissions and speculative pieces, depending on the economic climate. "During the high-flying 90's, I sold well in the galleries, but as the recession began, I have relied more on commissions." Commissions provide a healthy challenge, according to Michael. "It's demanding to meet the functional and visual requirements of a client. Unlike speculative work where I have complete free reign, with commissions I need to intimately understand the needs of my client, bringing their ideas together with my own, and ultimately, creating a piece that works for both of us." His speculative work is shown regularly at such galleries as Tercera in the Bay Area and Pritam and Eames in New York and in such books as Taunton's *The Custom Furniture Source Book: A Guide to 125 Craftsmen*.

Teaching is another passion for Michael. "It keeps me on my toes, as well as maintaining my fundamental skills. It's probably the only time that I flatten a board

*Tea with the Mad Hatter*  
Redwood, Maple,  
Mahogany, paint  
(26" h, 10" dia.)

*Silver Cup* by  
Laurie Marson

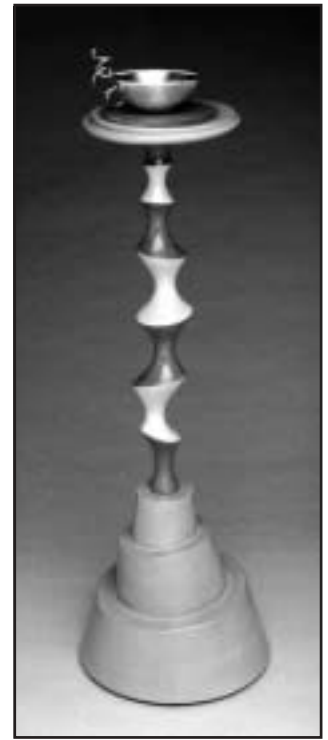


Photo: George Post

by hand these days." For four years, he led the woodworking program at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, where he re-invigorated the program. Only demands on his furniture production made him step down, replaced by **John Grew-Sheridan** who "is taking the program to the next level."

Michael continues to accept apprentices into his shop, as part of the Baulines Craft Guild program. "I take my apprentices through the same rigorous and demanding training that I received at Leeds." His relationship with his current apprentice, **David Hirsch**, was the subject of a recent feature in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. In addition, Michael enjoys writing and is a frequent contributor of technical and design articles for *Woodwork* magazine.

More of Michael's work can be seen at his web site: [www.michaelcullendesign.com](http://www.michaelcullendesign.com).



*Moon Desk*  
Pernambulo, Satin-  
wood, Ebony, paint,  
Fimo  
(37" h, 24 1/2" w, 20" d)



*Chest of Drawers*  
Cherry, paint  
(48" h, 38" w, 21" d)

Photo: Don Russel



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