

Issue Date: June 2006



Preparing for a move

Jennifer Hicks

j.hicks@woodshopnews.com

John Geraghty thought of the name for his business, Grain of Thought, while sitting in a traffic jam. The words were later spray-painted graffiti-style on the rolling door to his shop in Brooklyn, N.Y. The artwork makes the self-taught woodworker's space the quintessential inner-city shop, along with the noisy traffic, and hustle and bustle of people outside.

Though Geraghty has a well-established customer base in Manhattan, he's given several grains of thought to relocating out west in a couple years. The process will begin with his debut at the Western Design Conference in September, an annual furniture exhibition in Cody, Wyo. "New York City has been a very good place to get my business on the map, but truth be told I'm a country boy at heart," said Geraghty.

From rough carpentry to timber framing to building 250 pieces of furniture within the past two decades, Geraghty has refined both his work style and designs. Striving for his own signature style, Geraghty uses a synthesis of Japanese, Shaker, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and Organic forms. The combination is liberating, and makes it possible for him to harmoniously place wood like his role model, James Krenov.

A bit of a wood hoarder, Geraghty has about 30,000 bf in 30 species tucked in the nooks and crannies of his loft-style shop. His philosophy is to let the wood dictate the direction of designs, which he says enhances business.

"People are getting to know Grain of Thought for its use of exquisite woods, and it's something that makes me stand apart," he said.

Grab the atlas

Hardly provincial, Geraghty lived in several western states and Hawaii before moving to New York in the late '90s. He grew up in Howell, N.J., and enrolled in the U.S. Army after high school. He later studied history at a community college, but dreamed of becoming a carpenter. He wound up getting a pick-up truck instead of his bachelor's degree, and went into business for himself. Geraghty credits luck, and his Irish background, for what happened next. He was living in Bellingham, Wash., in 1990, working as a carpenter, when he received a job offer from The Cascade Joinery, a local timber framing company.

"It was just an eye-opening experience. That's what made me want to become a woodworker more than a carpenter, because I saw these homes being built like a piece of furniture," he said. He rented a small shop in downtown Bellingham, and started making tables and other small projects. He learned volumes from books, such as Krenov's "A Cabinetmakers Notebook" and "The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections" by George Nakashima. Charles and Henry Greene, Sam Maloof, and John Makepiece also inspire Geraghty.

A simple twist of fate and his love for the scenic beauty of the west took Geraghty to Santa Fe, N.M., where he worked out of a small shop — a converted horse stable — at the ranch where he stayed. By 1998 he was up to 20 orders per year when his sister invited him to be her new roommate in Manhattan. Hoping to better establish his business in the city, Geraghty arrived at her apartment with a truck full of tools and machinery.

"Before I knew it I had my own shop in the Meat Packing District," he said.

Booted to Brooklyn

Located on W. 13th St., Geraghty's 2,000-sq.-ft. shop had a breathtaking view of the Hudson River. He lived and worked there while he built his clientele. In spring 2001 Geraghty's landlord bought him out of his lease in order to build a high rise. With his tasty payoff Geraghty purchased new machinery and rented his current shop in Brooklyn. He now lives in an apartment above it. "I always liked the vibe here. It seemed like all of the artists, writers and tradespeople who got chased out of Manhattan were now in Brooklyn," he said.

Geraghty's shop overhead is \$7,500 a month, including his lease, insurance, and electricity. It took him a month to find a ground floor place suitable for his \$150,000 worth of machinery. His shop staples include a Martin sliding table saw, 20" jointer and 24" thickness planer; Bütfering 54" wide belt sander; SAC 10-hp shaper with sliding table; Novellara 37" band saw, Powermatic 3-hp lathe with a 10' bed and 1957 2-hp hollow chisel mortiser; Belfab 10-hp dust collector with Oneida duct work; and Ingersoll Rand 10-hp 120-gallon air compressor.

As for shop help Geraghty currently has two apprentices, Joshua Corey of Brooklyn and Jude Heslin-di Leo of River Edge, N.J. His one part-time employee, David Hernandez of Brooklyn, is a seasoned woodworker. Former apprentice Daina Platais of Brooklyn helps Geraghty with his Web site. Also part of the company are Geraghty's three Boston terriers, Maggie, Abigail and Melody, who literally bounce on and around the machines, keeping their master company while he's working.

Geraghty's hardwood collection is worth roughly \$70,000. Species are integrated, making the shop interior a virtual melting pot of lumber. Some include East Indian rosewood, bird's-eye maple and tiger-striped walnut. The two gigantic slabs of black walnut sitting in his doorway — 13' long, 44" wide, and 2-1/2" thick — are his most recent purchase at \$4,100.

Wood speaks

Having so much wood around him is inspiring. Often a board that's been lingering around will quietly reveal itself as the missing link to a design.

"I've made a lot of sacrifices to invest in machinery and extraordinary woods, but to be able to flow with a good design with precision and time-saving methods using the finest materials, I find this quite rewarding. With each new design that gets out there, I see the future getting brighter," he said.

Hardwoods are the skeletons to Geraghty's designs, but the veneers he cuts also have a place in his work. Customers love Geraghty's unique chair featuring cantilevered seats. He's made more than 40 and is awaiting a patent on the design. But their favorite pieces are his tables. Whether

they are small kitchen islands, coffee tables or very large tables that constitute 20 percent of his work, Geraghty has a passion for building them. He not only gets to use large slabs of wood, but they remind him of past gatherings he shared with his large family.

"I'm big on tables. There's something about the idea of a large table and a bunch of friends and family sitting around enjoying food and fellowship, and knowing that table might be in their family for generations really makes me feel good," he said.

A style of his own

Geraghty likes to combine Japanese and organic aesthetics, which he's doing for the theme of his showcase at the Western Design Conference. He hopes to make a lasting impression. He'll present several pieces currently in the works: a king-size bed with 9'-long turned single-piece posters made of wenge; a Tansu master cabinet and two Tansu end cabinets made of bookmatched wenge sapwood veneer and fiddleback Swiss pear; a table made of a 12'9"-long, 4'-wide slab of bookmatched wenge with two curved glass legs; a western maple burl table that will sit on a glass ring base on top of a maple shoe; and a redwood bench with thick maple turned legs.

Geraghty strives to smooth out natural edges without compromising how they look. He calls it an "affair of the hand" and will use any tools that get the job done, including detail sanders and grinding wheels. In the case of an unruly edge of western maple burl, the tool called for was a sandblaster. The stubborn edge of the piece made for a two-day project on the roof of his apartment.

On the same piece Geraghty will route out a circle to insert a ring of hand-casted glass. The idea behind glass table bases, which Geraghty has built six of, was to create the illusion of levitating wood, a table that defies gravity. It took him a while to find someone to hand-cast large forms of glass in the United States, and he currently uses John Lewis Glass in Oakland, Calif.

A Texas couple, John and Jo Anne Hamann of Dallas, purchased a figured bubinga dining room table and 10 padauk chairs they saw on Geraghty's Web site. It featured the glass table base, which they admired along with other features. The couple took the trip up to see it in person before purchasing it in 1995.

"We looked at the Web site and, I'm not kidding you, we said that's it," said John Hamann, who'd searched for a table for a year with his wife. "I mean everything about it is just striking and the wood itself looks like it's on fire."

Sales are great

Geraghty hand-delivered that table to Texas, the same as he does with local sales in the city. As frustrating as the traffic can be, Geraghty doesn't trust anyone else to move his work around. Referrals and repeat clients generate about half of Geraghty's sales. Another 30 percent are generated by his presence at national shows, such as the Philadelphia Furniture & Furnishings Show and the Fine Furnishings Providence Show. All other sales come from his Web site and referrals from Christopher Burns Interiors, a New York City design firm.

"The last piece he did for us was a coffee table. It was a huge slab of wood with hand-made glass legs that just went straight up into the slab of wood," said owner Chris Burns. "It's a beautiful table. He did an amazing job. The client was really, really happy."

Geraghty also credits Aero Studios of New York City for supplying him with reproduction orders for Manhattan customers. "If it wasn't for those guys, my business wouldn't have survived 9/11," he said.

Field trips

Have you considered taking your client to the lumberyard? It's worked for Geraghty.

"John has brought a few customers of his out to let them pick the wood. That's nice because there's a lot of input happening there. You know the customer's going to be completely satisfied with the purchase," said Brian Hearne of Hearne Hardwoods, a retailer in Oxford, Pa.

When it comes to choosing stock, Geraghty judges by the merit of each board's unique characteristics rather than the species. Aside from going to his suppliers for commission work, he ventures to lumberyards up to eight times a year at his leisure. He's on their call list when something special comes in.

Scott Roberts of Roberts Plywood Co. in Deer Park, N.Y., remembers the time he called Geraghty at 6 a.m. to tell him about a new shipment of tiger-striped bubinga. Half asleep, Geraghty said he'd be out later in the day to look at it.

"He ended up calling me about 35 minutes later and said 'I can't sleep; I'm so excited. I'm coming out,'" Roberts said.

Geraghty sends a majority of his work to professional finishers, mainly for varnishing. But since he also likes the way wood ages gracefully with oil, he still hand rubs some of it. Occasionally, he sends select items to Howard's Upholstery in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Sentiments to actions

Geraghty feels a responsibility to share his skills with younger generations. He's had eight apprentices who were sincere about learning the craft, mostly from local design schools, and who found Geraghty on their own.

"I enjoy teaching and working with young people. I truly appreciate the enthusiasm they bring into my shop. That light in their eyes as they go on this creative ride, the satisfaction they have felt as they look at a completed piece that they know will be around longer than themselves," he said. Apprentice Joshua Corey, 26, has been there for the past two years while studying industrial design, with an emphasis on furniture, at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute.

"He's taught me a lot of shortcuts. He's so proficient and I'm just absorbing it. Working in the shop, John shows you how to get your imagination going," he said.

Geraghty is currently looking for a seasoned woodworker to help in his shop on a full-time basis. He wants to continue to create thoughtful designs and nurture his business, but never wants to get larger than a six-man shop.

"What the future holds is never certain but one thing that is for certain is that when I wake up tomorrow morning and later find myself in my shop doing what I love to do, I will give thanks and continue to follow my bliss," he said.

Contact: John Geraghty, 408 Park Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11205. Tel: 718-783-7014.

www.grainofthought.com