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Making Meaning



Guild member, Mike Korsak designs and builds furniture in Pittsburgh, PA. Previously, he lived in Enfield, NH and hopes to one day return to New England. To see more of Mike's work, visit his website at mikekorsak.com, or visit him on Instagram at [mikekorsakfurniture](https://www.instagram.com/mikekorsakfurniture).

A few years ago, I designed and built a small wall cabinet and matching mirror. It was a fun little ensemble with some interesting details, like curved doors with diamond-pattern veneer, a column of tiny drawers inside the cabinet and a curved veneered crown on the mirror that matched the pattern on the doors.

Initially, I felt the piece (counting both as one piece now) was a success. It was well made, functional, visually interesting and an original design. In the right house, I thought it would make a wonderful addition to an entry foyer.

In an effort to sell the piece, I took it to a local gallery to have it displayed in their store. A few weeks after dropping it off, my wife and I were in the same part of Pittsburgh as the gallery, and decided to stop in to see the piece on display. Upon entering the gallery, I immediately noticed something was amiss with one of the cabinet doors—the reveal around the left door was off, as if the door had shifted in the opening.

After some discussion with the manager, I learned that they often had issues with humidity in winter (this was winter, January or February), and all of the stiles of their office doors



had bowed to the point that the door latches no longer engaged the catches. I'm hinting at an excuse here, but the fact of the matter was that the door issue was my responsibility. Perhaps it was super-low humidity levels in the gallery that caused the door to warp, but I'm guessing it was probably some internal stress built into the door when it was made that was simply exacerbated by low humidity.

The doors were made of Douglas-Fir face veneers pressed over a five-layer core of cherry laminations laid up perpendicular to each other over a curved form (essentially shop-made curved plywood). The five-layer core was made first, solid wood edging was then applied to the core and then the inside and outside face veneers were pressed to the core.

I think it's realistic to think that perhaps uneven clamping pressure could have induced some stress in the door, or maybe tilted clamps had caused laminations to shift slightly, relative to one another. I also suspect that the water in PVA glue could have played a part—laminations had expanded when in contact with the water-based glue. Upon drying, the contraction caused some internal stresses that would normally be balanced, but for some reason weren't in this one door.

I couldn't pinpoint the actual issue, but at the time I was really torn up about the problem. First, it was embarrassing to have work move like that. Second, it was extremely frustrating to put so much effort into a piece, only to have a major flaw develop. Mixed together, the embarrassment and frustration reacted to form something else, something much stronger—anger.

The cabinet came home with me that day, with a promise to the gallery manager to fix the issue and reunite it with the mirror as soon as possible. What I didn't mention to the manager was the thought that had been creeping into my mind after the fact of the flaw had set in—this piece must be destroyed. It seems a little drastic in hindsight, but my



thinking was somewhat rational—how could a furniture maker, someone who supposedly knows how to work with wood, in good conscience, send work out into the world that was flawed?

This idea of destroying work wasn't new to me. In the past I had come up with more than a few ways to destructively modify designs that never made it beyond a thought. In thinking back on those ideas, I'm fuzzy about the intention—was I trying to say something about a particular issue, or (more likely) were those thoughts a resurfacing of a teenage interest in “busting stuff up”? Regardless, I had never followed through on those thoughts before, probably because I couldn't get past the sound logic that it made no sense to build something beautiful and then destroy it.

With the cabinet back in my shop, I set out to try to fix the door. After inspection, it seemed that a bit of adjustment to one of the hinge mortises could bring the door back into place. The screw holes for that particular hinge were offset toward the back of the mortise (center of the door) far enough that I could still remove some material from the back of the mortise and still have the screws push the long edge of the leaf to the back of the mortise. In other words, I just needed to remove a bit of material, no need to even patch and re-drill new holes for the hinge screws. Easy. So I made the little tune-up and the fit of the door was restored.

Fortunately, the story doesn't end there. As I was working on the fix, the initial thoughts of total destruction waned. But something still felt wrong about the cabinet, despite the fact that a workable solution was found. As I continued to think about the piece and the flaw, it occurred to me that this was an opportunity to turn this piece into something different,

something that expressed the anger and frustration that I felt about the flaw.

Expressing emotion in work is not a novel idea in the furniture world. One example that I'm aware of is the Nail Cabinet by Gary Knox Bennett. In person and through the internet and social media, I see a fair amount of hand crafted wood furniture. Some of this work is genuinely stunning, exquisitely crafted, really amazing work. But it is not often that I see a piece of furniture that expresses emotion or makes me feel something that was bigger than the piece itself. I'm certain there are other examples, but perhaps this is one aspect of our craft that is under-explored.

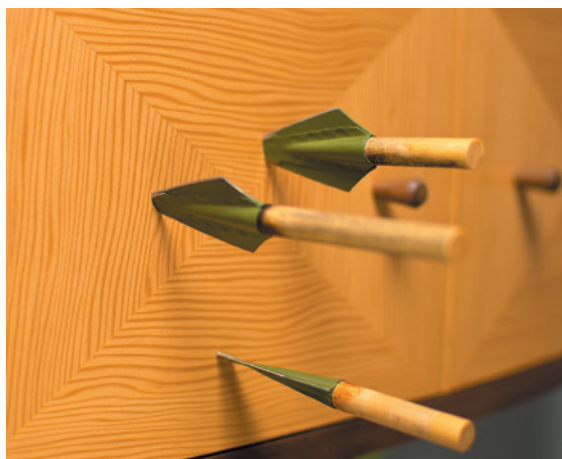
And why is that? Furniture makers are artists just like painters and sculptors and musicians. In the fine art world, there are countless examples of amazing artwork whose meaning goes far deeper than brush technique, or choice of marble, or use of alliteration. So why isn't there protest furniture, or furniture that, for example, elicits the struggle for worker's rights in America?

I can't answer those questions, but I can say that exploring the idea of meaning in that wall cabinet unlocked a door in the way I think about my work. There are issues in our society that make me angry. Rather, I'm angered by the fact that these issues are still issues, still being debated. So how do I reflect that in my work? I'm not sure yet, but I'm definitely thinking about it.

The wall cabinet was a good first step in exploring deeper meaning in my work. After much internal debate, I ultimately decided that I would forever regret passing on the opportunity to turn the piece into something more meaningful. To that end, I decided to express my anger and frustration with arrows.

I've been asked many times about the method used to "place" the arrows in the cabinet door. Did I actually shoot the door with a bow and arrows? My response to this question is that I do own a longbow and know how to shoot it, but prefer to let the viewer complete the story in her or his own mind.

Was the experiment a success? At the very least, the arrows add a great amount of visual interest, and make a cool conversation piece. But I think they go a little farther than mere visual interest and do actually convey a sense of frustration. And the fletched ends of the arrows, sticking out of the top of the cabinet, could be interpreted as a bouquet of flowers, a sort of peace offering. That was not my intention, but I like the interpretation that I was asking for forgiveness



for taking such a risk with the cabinet, as I had no idea if the arrows would ruin it.

In the end, I would say that the experiment was a success. Not just because I find the final result to be expressive, attractive and visually interesting. But also because unlocking that door to deeper thinking about my work, and how it could or should be influenced by what is going on in the world around me, has led to some exciting ideas that I hope will one day find their way into my work. ■