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James Whyte

Principles of Furniture and Joinery Design

Coursework 3: Research Designer.

Sam Maloof

(1916- 2009)

Word Count: 1909

Table of Contents

Introduction:	1
History:	1
Timber preferences:.....	4
Where is his furniture today?	7
Opinion:	10
References:	12

Introduction:

This report is part of the Principles of Furniture design Module in which we were asked to give a brief description and summary of the life and work of a designer of our choice. This report will focus on the designer Sam Maloof. The report will briefly outline his early life, his wood preferences, sketches, and images of his work throughout his career, including his more famous pieces and his affiliations and accolades he has been awarded by his peers. It will also note where his work can be found today. For the conclusion of the report, I will give my opinion on whether I liked his work and if it influenced me to study more of him and use his style in my own future projects.

History:

- Early life

Sam was born in Chino, California in 1916. His parents were Lebanese immigrants who arrived in America in 1905, first passing through Ellis Island and then making their way Westwards towards California because they had family who were already settled there. Chino was a small farming community at this point in time, and his father made a living selling vegetables out of a horse drawn cart and his mother sold her handmade lace, embroidered linen, and Crochet work from the cart also (The Guardian, 2009). Sam's appreciation for handcrafted goods came from his admiration of his mother's work. He too made himself useful in the community and to his family, helping and fixing things for others. This is how they survived and got by during the Depression. In the 1930's when Sam was in high School, he became a talented cartoonist and calligrapher and did a lot of the shop's signage around the town for paid work. Upon leaving school according to (The Guardian, 2009) he did graphic work for the engine air filters produced by the Vortox Manufacturing company, took night classes, and gained more experience by working with the industrial designer Harold E Graham.

- Adult life:

When Sam was 25, he was drafted into the US Army and there he rose in rank quickly from a Private to a Master Sergeant doing display work in Alaska. When he returned after his time in the army he began working with California's most prolific artist of the time, Millard Sheets. His position with Millard was producing coloured silkscreen prints from his

watercolours. Sam stayed in Sheets' studio near Padua hills and here Sam's outlook on the world of art was influenced heavily by everything he experienced there.

- Sam the Woodworker.

In 1948 Sam met and married Alfreda Ward, who remained his wife for 50 years until her death in 1998, ten years before Sam's passing. Newly married Sam could no longer give his full attention to Sheets, so he finished working for him and went out working on his own. Out of necessity he began building furniture for himself and Alfreda's house because they were short on money to purchase some new. He built the furniture out of discarded plywood and materials found on local building sites. As well as the furniture he built a workshop beside his home and fitted it with basic tools to begin with. Later their house and adjoining grounds and workshops would become a visitor centre and museum showcasing Sam's work "the house that Sam built". By 1950 he was earning a decent living and getting noticed for his style of workmanship. He preferred the handcrafted method of furniture making in comparison to using mostly machines, it meant his pieces were always unique and had a personal touch to them. The Sunday Home magazine of the Los Angeles Times featured his works and later a known industrial Designer Henry Dreyfuss commissioned Sam to produce twenty pieces of furniture for his home. This was the kickstart and notoriety Sam needed, and his career took off dramatically from this point.



Figure 1: Sam handcrafting a piece of furniture

He's been described as a genius and an artist but preferred to be known as a craftsman and is quoted saying "I'm a woodworker, I think woodworker's a very good word, I like the word, it's honest, and that's what I am."

Another quote directly from Sam is “when you design for the individual, you have a free hand. When you design from a machine you design for the machine. A machine doesn’t have any soul!” (Youtube, The Taunton press, 1989). He turned down offers to have his furniture mass produced because he didn’t want the craftsmanship of his work altered by machines. This meant he could alter designs and change plans he wished and as the furniture was being made. His hand was present in all the pieces made in his workshop. He once explained how the shape and proportions of his chairs came from what he found comfortable to his own body.



Sketch 1: sketch of Lowback chair. Sam thought this was his best designed chair ergonomically. It remains one of the most popular pieces with customers.



Sketch 2: Hornback chair, also known as the Texas chair. it was called this because the first customer that enquired about it was from Texas and as a selling point Sam said it was his Texas chair to try increase his chances of selling it.

Timber preferences:

Most of the furniture in Sam's collection is made from Walnut, he preferred Walnut because he felt it was a mellow wood and friendly to work with compared to other harsher woods like Oak which isn't so easy to hand craft. He also liked to use Maple. What also influenced his designs was the Organic flow of wood in Nature and he tried to replicate that natural flow in his furniture.



Sketch 3: Walnut side table. The legs look organic and resemble roots which give the table a natural look.

Sam's work was not confined to tables and chairs only, he produced many kinds of miscellaneous pieces. In the 1970s according to (The Guardian, 2009) with the help of three assistants, Sam, at one point, was making as many as 300 pieces of furniture each year. Those numbers decreased over the next decade as he developed complex designs for special commissions and works for public exhibitions. Towards the end of his life, he was making about 60 pieces of furniture per year.



Sketch 4: Cradle made by Sam, showcasing his talent at making any type of furniture piece.



Figure 2: Drop leaf table showcasing a "continuous hinge" that inspires many other furniture makers in making similar designs

Most notable of his commissioned work was for two presidents Of the United States, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan. They both commissioned Sam to produce rocking chairs for the White house. John F Kennedy started the trend for personalised rocking chairs because he needed one to help relieve pain in his back from a wartime injury.



Figure 3: Sam and President Reagan in the White house with Sam's rocking chair.

Another high-profile acknowledgment of his work came from the world-renowned artist Ray Charles and although he was obviously blind and couldn't see the piece, he could feel Sam's work and said he could feel the Soul of the furniture.

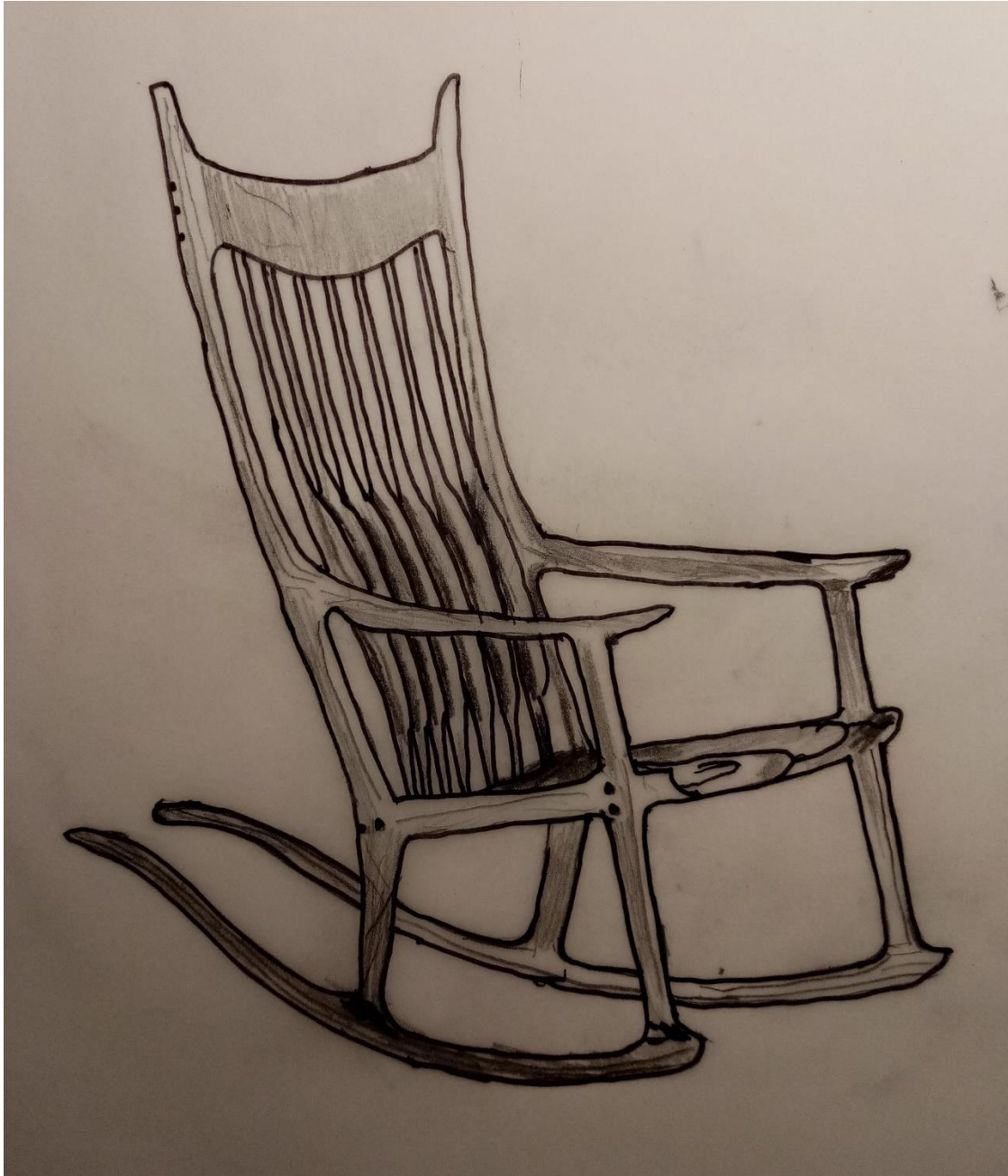
Where is his furniture today?

Maloof's work was the subject of a prestigious retrospective at the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery in 2001 and is part of their permanent collection. His furniture is in some of the most important private collections in the nation and the permanent collections of the Boston Museum of Art, the New York Metropolitan Museum

of Art, and many other fine museums. (Maloof foundation, 2021). His own home is open to the public and his work can be viewed here also. His workshop is still up and running so his pieces are still being produced by workers who have worked alongside Sam for decades and are still using pieces of wood that Sam handpicked himself and kept in his collection. Sam was involved in the day-to-day operations in the workshop up until his death in 2009 at the age of 93. Sam left the workshop to be inherited by his workers because they were as good as family to him, and he appreciated their loyalty and wanted them to continue having a career for their future and their family's future.



Figure 4: Craftsman Mike Johnson who inherited the Workshop from Sam and continues to produce Sam Maloof designs to this day.



Sketch 5: Sketch of Rocking chair like the one President Reagan commissioned for his office in the White house.



Figure 5: Live edge Coffee table, another of Sam's pieces.

Opinion:

In my opinion I really like the work that Sam Maloof has created over his lifetime and the work that his employees continue to produce today. What I like the most is his motto of wanting the furniture to have soul and for every piece to be unique and a piece of art in comparison to being mass produced and in effect "soul less". His passion for his work was evident and what was very fortunate for me doing my research on him is there are several videos and interviews of him online talking and going about his daily routine in his workshop, so I could physically hear and watch him in person as opposed to a designer who was alive hundreds of years ago. I really liked the fact he wanted to have his hand in every piece of furniture produced in his shop, he delegated work obviously amongst his employees, but his hand was still on every piece. I think this shows immense pride and love for the wood and what he created. That to me is very inspiring and is a trait I would like to

think most craftspeople would share. I personally would like to have this attitude when I am creating woodworking projects in the future so I can confidently say that his designs have influenced me and how I will tackle future designs. I would also like to have a more hands on approach and less machine orientated. I like the organic, natural element of woodworking. A nice quote that I read of Sam was when asked What's his favourite piece of furniture, his response was "whatever piece I'm working on". That to me is the true essence of a craftsman and doing what you love.

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- Works cited

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<https://www.malooffoundation.org/about>

- Sketches

Sketches 1-5 own work

- Images

Figure 1:

<https://www.ragoarts.com/artists/sam-maloof/about>

Figure 2:

<http://www.artnet.com/WebServices/images/II00067IIdeERJFgYiY42CfDrCWvaHBOcUxGF/sam-maloof-drop-leaf-table.jpg>

Figure 3:

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Figure 4:

<https://www.sammaloofwoodworker.com/sam-maloof-woodworker-today?lightbox=dataItem-kjbxta8x>

Figure 5:

https://d7hftxdivxxvm.cloudfront.net/?resize_to=fit&width=640&height=426&quality=80&src=https%3A%2F%2Fd32dm0rphc51dk.cloudfront.net%2FBq9MQdZH8weAsVnirD1x2A%2FImage.jpg