

Woodworker teaches quiet ways of past

PAMELA McDOWELL
FOR NEIGHBOURS

Wood shavings litter the floor and fresh cut timber perfumes the air in Duncan Robertson's woodworking shop. But the hum of a power sander or scream of a router is absent, replaced by the delicate and sometimes strident tones of Ravel's Bolero.

Robertson's specialty is quiet woodworking.

"I used to be your conventional power-tool junkie, with all the power tools on the planet," Robertson says. "I still have all those, but the satisfaction I get from hand tools is huge."

New Brunswick woodworker Rob Cosman is Robertson's inspiration and mentor. "I don't know of anybody else better in Canada," he says. "I've been lucky enough to assist Rob in teaching these techniques at SAIT for the past two summers."

In that short time, Robertson's focus turned from profit to passion and he now strives to recreate the past in both method and product. He points to a 17th century French-Canadian traveller's chest made of northern white pine. The ends of the chest are round, the sides gently arcing to the curved top, like a horizontal cylinder.

The sides began as three-inch thick lumber that Robertson carefully planed to achieve the arc. "The wood isn't bent or even coopered like in making a barrel, because that wouldn't be authentic to the 17th century," he says.

The ends are joined using true dovetails. The width of the pin (the dovetail's partner) can be cut amazingly thin when done by hand and not restricted by the width of a power bit. This creates a beautiful yet extremely strong joint. As the final touch, metal hinges and clasps have been forged by a blacksmith, hammered to achieve the proper curve, and affixed using long square nails that are clenched (bent) on the in-



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In just three years, Duncan Robertson has developed a passion for woodworking by hand, and has amassed an impressive collection of hand tools. He will be presenting a session on Quiet Woodworking on Oct. 19.

side of the chest.

Robertson estimates he spent 65 hours working on this one piece. The challenge and the thrill of success is more likely payment than the \$15,000 price tag he would put on it in a gallery. As with most hand-wrought products, the craftsman is rarely adequately compensated for his time.

"I believe hand-tool use is increasing because of the satisfaction of doing it yourself, going back to the old ways with new technology," Robertson says.

The tools themselves are functional and beautiful, their weight carefully balanced, handles polished and blades

hand-sharpened. From the tiny squirrel-tailed plane to the hefty joiner plane, each tool has its specific purpose and assigned place in Robertson's toolbox, a nearly five-foot tall, hand-crafted prototype he is set to replicate in solid cherry.

Why make a toolbox out of solid cherry?

"Because I can," he says with a grin. "It's flat-out showing off, but it's also instant credibility for a teacher."

Now Robertson would like to pass on some of what he has learned and perhaps spark a passion for the older, quieter ways in a fellow woodworker. The Southern Alberta Woodworkers Soci-

ety, SAWS, has invited Robertson, who is also a member, to speak during their next meeting at the Calgary Drop-In Centre.

SAWS meets 10 times each year, offering speakers and demonstrations in a variety of woodworking genres. In November, a Cremona luthier will give a demonstration of stringed instrument creation, and December will offer a hands-on finishing workshop.

Robertson's session on Quiet Woodworking is Wednesday, Oct. 19, at 7:30. The Calgary Drop-In Centre Workshop is located at 5513 3rd St. SE. Go to www.saws.ca.