

DECOR MAINE

| ARCHITECTURE ART DESIGN LIFE STYLE TRAVEL FOOD |

ESSAY BY
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MADE IN MAINE

A GENERATION OF ARTISANS WITH
FRESH SKILLS AND A TIMELESS WORK
ETHIC BREATHES SOUL INTO THE LABEL
"MADE IN MAINE"

Words: BRIAN SHUFF Photos: MICHAEL WILSON



A table in Chilton's
Freeport showroom drinks
in the August sunlight.



left Jennifer and Jared Levin have worked to maintain an aesthetic that is both airy and light, keeping close to the traditions and methods of Shaker furniture makers.

opposite page “For the past forty years, it seems the goal has been to get what you want as quickly and cheaply as possible,” Jared says, “but our customers want something that is going to last. Our grandparents would never have bought something that wouldn’t last. To say nothing of being more aware of the environment.”



Call it a rejection of convenience over quality. Call it an inevitable counter-swing to the Instagramming and Twitterizing that bring to each aspect of life the obligation of a press release. Call it hipsterism gone airborne. Across the country, handcrafted, single-function items are having their day. Artisanal is in. No longer is it unthinkable to support oneself baking cupcakes, tanning leather, turning canoe paddles from blocks of pine, slinging soba noodles from a jerry-rigged delivery truck. The public—and younger public, in particular—is reeducating itself, both as makers and consumers, in the value of time-and-skill-intensive products. In the process, they’re getting a taste for Maine.

“Customers ask daily which of our pieces are made in Maine,” says Jared Levin. Since 2014, he and his wife, Jennifer, have owned and operated Chilton Furniture in

Freeport, working with furniture makers from all over the state. “When we first took over, 27 percent of our furniture was made in Maine. Now we’re pushing 60 percent. It’s the demand.”

A demand, to be sure, that has spread—is spreading—beyond the forestry products of our heritage (i.e., furniture making since forever, and shipbuilding before that). Maine breweries now have national reputations. World-class artists in a variety of mediums are coming to paint, to sculpt, to photograph, to write. *Bon Appétit*, in August, named Portland the Restaurant City of 2018. The words “Made in Maine” have acquired a newfound cachet, and crackling in the air is a (cautiously optimistic) sense that if you want to make a go of it here, working with your hands, you can. In a state with little centralized industry, makers are becoming the industry.

No day job required.



The Messler Gallery at the Center for Furniture Craftmanship holds four shows a year, open to the public. Seen here is a collection of faculty work.



Simplicity and reliable function seem to run through much of the “Made in Maine” label. As Jared Levin puts it: “Made in Maine” is a broad assertion of quality, no matter what you are in the market for. It isn’t product specific, i.e. cowboy boots from Texas or bourbon from Tennessee. It’s everything.”

To be clear: it takes work—profound quantities of it. No one splays out his or her wares and kicks back to a bonanza of compensation. New or established, the craftspeople who thrive here are hustling, to serve a receptive (enough) community, yes, but also because they see in Maine a chance to use their talents for sustenance on their own terms. This is the real payoff, the *soul* payoff, if you like. No superior, no clock, no deadlines but those self-imposed. It’s a shot at the self-reliance cooked into our region’s—and country’s—mythology. “It’s a privileged life,” says Peter Korn, author of *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters*. “Though I don’t necessarily mean privileged economically.”

Freedom is the privilege. Maine’s makers are a fiercely independent bunch—pragmatic, problem-solving, protectors and trusters of reputation and word, and devoted, most crucially, to bringing the fullness of their abilities to the completion of each task, whether honing the ratio of bitters in a cocktail recipe or throwing another

bowl to get the order shipped inside of contract. For these people, fulfillment springs less from commercial excess and more from a certain autonomy, work done well for work done well’s sake. It’s an ethos that perhaps delivers some account as to the swelling manna afforded the “Made in Maine” label. The qualities that define the craftspeople—and in turn the objects she creates—are qualities echoed by Maine itself.

In their sun-warmed Freeport showroom, Jennifer runs a hand up the back of an authentic Shaker chair. “The

spacing in the slats is one of the things that’s so special,” she says. Much of Chilton’s inventory is based on original Shaker designs, many from Sabbathday Lake near Poland, the world’s last active Shaker community. “There is a very

deliberate, very precise spacing of the slats. Each one is adjusted again and again until they follow right up along the spine.” This insistence on getting it right—not almost right, but right—is Maine to the core. One thing

One thing Mainers are not is corner cutters, and while “handcrafted” might feel like a craze elsewhere, in Maine it feels like confirmation.



above Peter Korn surveys one of the Center's multiple workshops. "The nature of focus has changed," he has noticed. "The students who come here now take time to learn how to focus on top of learning to cut a dovetail joint."

left Wood selection depends on weight, strength, grain, heartwood v. sapwood, coloration, pliability, availability, and numerous other considerations that require an intimate relationship with—or at least great knowledge of—the region's forests.

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As more artisans, chefs, jewelry makers, poets, chocolatiers, etc. set up shop in this northern place, there is much grumbling (some of it just) about the rate and reach of so much change. To whom does this new Maine belong? But with old mills becoming artist studios, it is impossible not to at least recognize a generational handoff. The original makers of shoes and paper and ships are indeed gone, but this new class of makers is participating in that which Peter claims all craftspeople participate: "a conversation flowing through time." Peter himself came to Rockport in 1993 to found the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship, a school that now sees more than 400 students a year, who come to Maine from all over the world to study a trade as ageless as man's desire to sit. "The things one seeks in craft are similar to the things people seek here," Peter says. "A more natural way of living you could call it. They come to it

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opposite page One of the Center for Furniture Craftmanship’s many clapboard buildings. “There’s less artifice here [in Maine],” Peter says. “I’m not living in an urban environment. It’s an environment in which nature is still at the fore. The water I drink, how fast the wood on my house rots, the quiet at night. There’s something more authentic about life when you’re living close to nature.” *above* A student listens to direction by Peter. As to the notion of security in furniture making, Peter reflects: “I moved to Maine in ‘93 and met an auto mechanic making more than anyone I knew. Those jobs stay. No one off shore is going to make the custom cabinets for your kitchen.” *right* In his 2013 book, *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters*, Peter writes thoroughly about the “luxury of interpretation” afforded the arts. Furniture making, in contrast, has a decidedly utilitarian component. The table stands or it doesn’t. The chair is comfortable or it isn’t. Peter is more blunt: “You can’t bullshit a chisel.”



opposite page, left Again and again, the students at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship speak unprompted of a deep satisfaction that arrives when one has made from nothing an object that truly works, and it seems impossible that this satisfaction is not, in big part, what drives these people to Maine to do their work.

opposite page, right It is not uncommon for veterans of the tech industry to come and study at the Center. Peter doesn't see this as a coincidence. "Tech is insubstantial. I mean that in the true sense of the word. It's ethereal. There's nothing substantive about it. We get a lot of surgeons, too."



now more hungry than ever." From the Center's library where he sits, one can see a slice of the Messler Gallery, enough to glimpse a sampling of the current show—a mounted trio of otter-tail oars, a gorgeous glass-top coffee table, a violin. Peter holds up his smartphone but leaves the screen black. "The attention this object demands is the exact opposite of the attention required to practice a craft."

It's a lifestyle as much as a career, and very likely this is the draw. Again, Jennifer Levin invokes the Shakers: "They believed in perfecting life on earth," she says, "'Hands to work; hearts to God.' It's not just for making lots of money. Maine is for people who want to have a balanced life." The Levins would know. They traded New York for Scarborough in this very spirit.

It isn't for everyone. But it can be done—is being done, all over the state. For Maine, this cultural tilt towards a more symbiotic relationship between life and work is perhaps a realm in which old meets new more plainly than might be evident elsewhere. In the coming installments of "Made in Maine," we'll turn to a variety of makers working today in this space of change, those inventing the state anew while inescapably participating in its past. Are there cheaper ways to do what they're doing? Certainly. Are there faster ways? God, yes. Are there better ways? It depends on what you consider "better." Let's ask them. ■



After writing this story, I off-handedly told a friend in Arizona about the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship. I must have thoroughly gushed because last week she called me again for the name. Maine might have another furniture maker.

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