



2008 Cartouche Award Recipient

Alf Sharp

Mickey Callahan

After meeting Alfred “Alf” Sharp, SAPFM’s 2008 Cartouche Award recipient, it’s hard to imagine that he once aspired to be a hot-shot lawyer at Vanderbilt University Law School. Despite the imposing stature and sharp intellect that would have made him stand out in a courtroom setting, Alf is entirely down to earth. His warm and gentle personality and sense of humor owe much to his southern roots in Tennessee.

Realizing that law and a white-collar profession were not a good fit for him, Alf spent several years searching for an activity that spoke to his heart. He loved making things out of wood with his hands. In fact, because one of his landlords asked him to do some simple remodeling and repairs in lieu of rent, Alf was inspired to pursue more challenges in carpentry and cabinetry that eventually led him to where he is today.

Alf paid his dues while in pursuit of his dream. It wasn’t always fine furniture that sustained him. All kinds of projects, including playground slides and kitchen cabinets, kept him going until he earned the prized furniture commission.

As Alf explains, at

the beginning of his odyssey, there were very few artisans who passed on their knowledge of fine woodworking. It was becoming a lost art, so Alf was prompted to read books and experiment on his own. In his quest for knowledge and improved skills, it became apparent to him that perhaps the finest furniture ever built, both in terms of artistic style and technical skill, was created in the 18th century and without power tools. With this revelation, Alf started visiting museums and furniture collections to pick the brains of collectors, antique dealers, and scholars of period furniture.

Nearly every struggling artisan inevitably faces the reality that it is difficult to earn a living while pursuing his or her dreams. In Alf’s case, in order to make a living to support his growing family, he created a small business in a 13,500-sq. ft. shop with \$250,000 worth of machinery and 25 employees cranking out low-end furniture. At the peak of his business’ success, Alf found himself sitting behind a desk and talking on the phone most of the time—exactly what he had hoped to avoid earlier in his career. He was also missing out on fine furniture commissions that were being offered to him. After much consideration, he decided to sell his factory and





change the course of his career by building a small workshop next to his home in Woodbury, Tennessee, and focusing on making the work he loved best: museum quality, one-of-a-kind furniture, primarily in the 18th century American style,

Since that change, Alf, along with the energetic and loving help of his wife, Kathy, has emerged as one of America's most sought-after contemporary craftsmen and artisans. Along with his love of period furniture, Alf has embraced a more contemporary feel in some of his work by merging traditional forms and proportions with exotic woods and his own artistic sensibilities.

As a testament to Alf's popularity, his work has been featured in many magazines including *Colonial Homes*, *Southern Living*, *Fine Woodworking*, *Woodwork*,

Historic Preservation, and *Studio Furniture 3*. In addition, his work has been highlighted in *Architecture of the Old South* and *The Tennessee Sampler*. He has also taught a number of courses and seminars related to furniture making and demonstrated his craft at numerous historical festivals across the country.

According to Alf, some of the greatest commissions he has done include a set of 24 dining chairs,





two mantel pieces, six carved Venetian blinds, five faux-grained exterior doors, four Jackson presses, and a replica of George Washington’s swiveling mahogany office chair—all built for The Hermitage, President Andrew Jackson’s Tennessee home. In addition, for the Tennessee State Capitol, he has re-created 24 walnut gentleman’s chairs, the Speaker of the House’s podium, and five Supreme Court Justices’ chairs in the highly-carved Rococo Revival style.

Alf was also commissioned by the governor of Tennessee, Phil Bredesen, to build a desk (above) reflecting the governor’s fondness of grizzly bears and local American Indian lore. Alf designed the desk with carved panels and a carved frieze below the desk’s top with an incised poem written by the governor and translated into Cherokee.

Alf is perhaps best known to members of SAPFM as an exhibitor in *Contemporary Classics: Selections from the Society of American Period Furniture Makers*, at the Telfair Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia during the spring of 2006. Alf showed the magnificent reproduction of McIntire’s Derby chest-on-chest



which also appears on the cover of this journal. More of Alf’s work can be seen at www.alfsharp.com.

Along with his artistic accomplishments, Alf has been active and influential in the arts community as president of the Cumberland Furniture Guild, a member of the Board of Directors for the Cannon County Art Center, a Board of Trustee member for the Furniture Society, instructor at O’More College of Art and Design, and member of the Board of Directors for the Tennessee Association of Craft Arts.

It would be unfair to Alf to neglect mentioning that he has been working vigorously over the last decade to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary furniture makers. He, along with others, has worked to remind contemporary artisans of how much they owe to traditional design and techniques. He has also advocated for similar recognition by traditional furniture makers for the creativity of the last several generations of furniture makers. According to Alf, “I am thoroughly convinced that we are presently living through as fertile a period for furniture design and craftsmanship as was the 18th century.”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mickey Callahan is a co-founder of SAPFM and is its current president.