

RONALD YOUNG—2016 CARTOUCHE RECIPIENT

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Ronald Young, Tennessee
Period Furniture Maker
2016 SAPFM
Cartouche recipient

Ronnie Young says “I am just the average amateur furniture maker working in the garage or basement like a thousand others.” Average? Hardly!

Young is the 2016 Cartouche award winner for lifetime achievement in period furniture, SAPFM’s highest honor.

Young comes from a family of mechanics, so building things runs in his blood. He himself became a mechanical field engineer with the Tennessee Valley Authority. As he puts it, a person “that actually builds the design at the work site. I wanted to be the builder.”

His inspiration for building furniture will be familiar to many SAPFM members. “I married soon after college, and we started to furnish our home with hand-me-down furniture and a few new items. Looking at the construction, materials, and cost of new furniture, I thought that I could make furniture that was much better.”

Armed with a few basic tools, pine from some packing cases, and plans from *Popular Mechanics* magazine, he started building. “I learned pretty quickly that to do good work you needed good tools and materials.”

He saw a newspaper ad for walnut lumber for sale. That led him to a man named James R. Carden, a NASA engi-

from the walnut, cherry, and poplar that we cut and stacked in barns to dry all those years ago. It’s the best wood in the country, we always said.”

Along the way, he learned from the best. Courses with Sam Maloof, and Bob Flexner at Highland Woodworking in Atlanta. Seminars at Colonial Williamsburg. Studying with Mickey Callahan, Jeff Headley, Phil Lowe, Allan Breed, and Steve Latta through his membership in the Peach State Chapter of SAPFM.

His particular interest is in furniture from what was then called the West Country: Tennessee and Kentucky. “The cabinetmakers...who moved out to the West Country were not bound by the strict laws and customs of the East Coast. They could do whatever they wanted. It’s a different form of furniture.”

One of his favorite pieces is a reproduction of a secretary that’s in the Ten-



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neer, and to a friendship that lasted for the next 35 years.

“Jim and I cut, stacked, and dried hardwood lumber from all around the area while buying and selling used woodworking tools and looking at hundreds of pieces of the best antique furniture we could find. I still make all my furniture

nessee State Museum in Nashville, dating back to about 1810. He calls it “a quintessential piece of Tennessee furniture,” with unique inlay, including a twelve-point star.

Young says he’s built a couple of hundred pieces of furniture. Most has gone to his two daughters. He built almost all



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RONALD YOUNG



Chronicles (continued-2)

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of the furniture in his home for his wife, Marcia. When she became ill, he became her caregiver. "Being her caregiver for the last several years of her life required me to be at home, and being able to work at home, often with her in the shop while I worked, was something that helped both of us. I produced the majority of my furniture pieces during those years."

Young's shop takes up the entire basement of his home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He bought many of his machines used and rebuilt. "If anyone had any used woodworking equipment for sale, I'd go buy it. If it was better than what I had, I sold what I had and kept it. Every time I would upgrade a little bit." It's still a hobby today.

He says his approach to building is always the same: view the original, or if that's not possible, study books and photographs. Then make a full-size drawing.

"Having been an engineer, this is to me just the natural thing to do. You actually build the piece in your mind while producing the drawing, and you are able to judge proportions of the finished piece

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better than on a smaller 'to-scale' drawing. Cut lists are then prepared right off the finished drawing.

"I use power tools to plane and cut lumber to size, but all joinery is in keeping with techniques used for the last 200 years."

Young says he's "still overcome" by the Cartouche award. "I still don't think my work is as good as others' I've seen. I have built a lot of different things. I have a pretty broad knowledge of different styles. But I'm actually embarrassed, really."

He shouldn't be, because it takes



more than just skill to win the Cartouche award. In the words of the SAPFM selection committee: "It is his sincere love for his craft and desire to pass on the legacy that set him apart. Ronnie is passionate concerning period furniture and highly skilled at passing on his knowledge to others, including novices. Those of us who know Ronnie know what a generous, true southern gentleman he is."

Young agrees that he is "very interested in passing along what I have learned to other people. I enjoy that as much as building the furniture, maybe even more sometimes."

He explains, "I have been given help by some great cabinetmakers, some famous, some not so famous. A lot of my hand tools, lumber, and knowledge were given to me by friends who refused payment but asked that someday I pass on those items and skills without payment, to another person interested in cabinetmaking. I have made that my lifetime commitment."





Chronicles (continued-3)

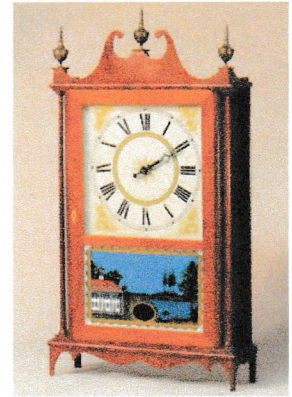
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Most of his teaching is one-on-one with fellow SAPFM members. But he's also taught at SAPFM chapters, Woodcraft stores, and meetings of other woodworking groups. Then there are people who find their way to his shop.

"I have had a fairly steady stream of

other woodworkers, both young and old, visiting me at the shop over the years for help with woodworking problems. Most of the visits start off with: 'How do you do this?' or 'Do you have any idea how to make this?'"

He tells new and inexperienced woodworkers that "you don't need every new tool that comes out to be a good furniture maker; learn the basics first. Remember that all those beautiful pieces of antique furniture you see in museums and books were built with hand tools



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from air-dried lumber!"

When we spoke, Young was just finishing the dovetails on his latest project, a walnut Pennsylvania style double chest of drawers. He says he has a long list of furniture yet to build and new skills to learn. "I always strive to build things that at first look impossible, but once you get started you find that they are not impossible at all."

Just as winning a Cartouche award might seem impossible, until you actually do it. —JB

