



## MIKE MASCELLI — LIVELY LOOK AT A DYING ART

*He says “[Don] Williams took a leap of faith and gave me a chance...”*

**“In the Rock-‘n’-Roll world, the guy who gets the girls is Mick Jagger. In the furniture world, the guy who got the girls was the cabinetmaker. It was never the upholsterer,” says Mike Mascelli with a laugh. “We were always the guys in the back, in the rhythm section.”**

Pretty busy rhythm section, though. Like the Rolling Stones, Mascelli has been doing what he loves for decades. He’s been providing conservation and restoration services for both antique furniture and classic cars for 40 years now.

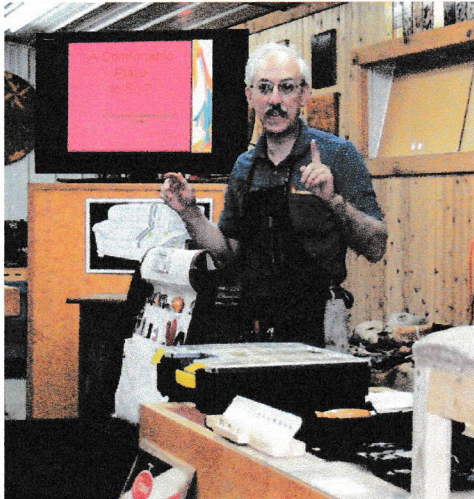
He operates his company, Michael Mascelli Upholsterer, out of his home in Latham, New York, just outside Albany. There’s a basement workshop “full to the rafters with antique tools and equipment.” A sewing loft over the garage, with big tables and sewing machines. And a separate building big enough to handle a car project or a large furniture job.

If upholstery doesn’t get the same respect as furniture making, maybe it’s the nature of the beast. “All of the best work I do, all of the

most incredible hand-sewing and stuff is covered. Nobody sees it,” says Mascelli.

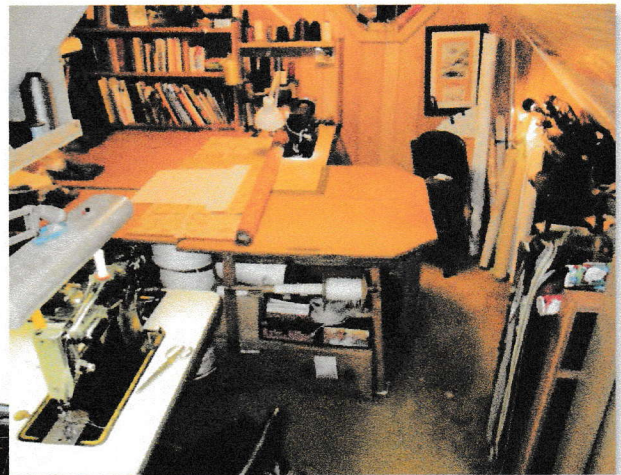
So I ask the obvious question: if no one can see it, what difference does it make if your period chair is upholstered with foam and other modern materials, instead of horsehair and coil springs?

“It’s the same thing as saying, ‘Why should I use mortise-and-tenon and hot hide glue when I could put a chair together with Elmer’s glue and drywall screws?’ The answer is, because that construction can make the piece survive for generations. And so can properly done upholstery.”

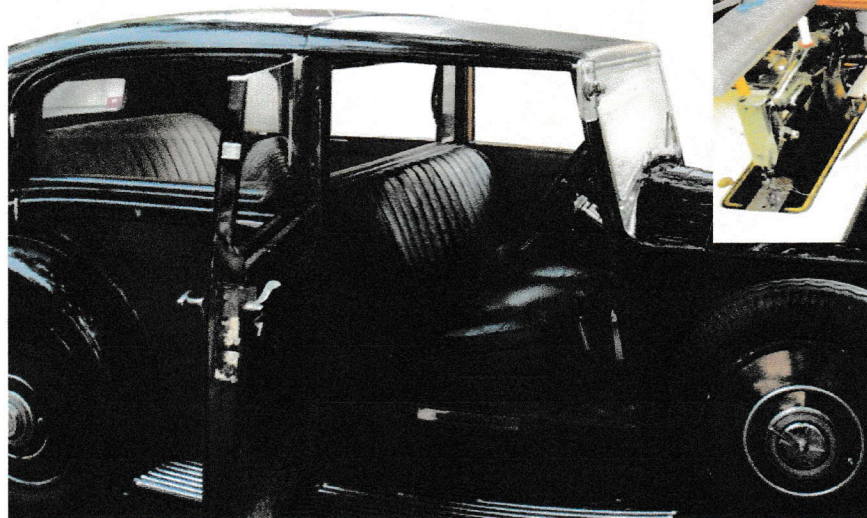


Michael Mascelli, upholsterer, teacher

Mike’s sewing area in the loft

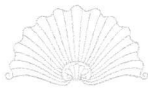


Restoration upholstery of a Rolls Royce interior



More than that, Mascelli says, “I define how the chair is going to look.” For example, consider what he calls “those legendary Philadelphia wing chairs. You take a bare wing-chair frame, it doesn’t look like a whole lot. Once you put all the padding and the show cover

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MIKE MASCELLI



# SAPFM Chronicles (continued-2)

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Toolbox stuffed with the tools of his trade

on, now all of a sudden it's that unmistakable look, that everybody says, 'Oh wow, that's a Philadelphia wing chair.' My part of that is

That's where he met his first mentors, the craftsmen who did convertible tops and interior work. And he says, "That was my destiny." In later years, some of the antique cars he worked on won national championships.

Along the way, he developed an interest in "the other side of the business." With no formal training programs available, and few mentors, he set out to teach himself. He was fortunate to find a shop of Italian immigrant upholsterers, who were willing to show him the basic techniques of classic furniture upholstery. But he adds, "My greatest teachers were old chairs. Both upholsterers and furniture makers really can benefit from deconstructing the work of masters."

He also studied books and videos by British expert David James, who he calls the "James Krenov" of upholstery. He joined the Early American Industries Association to learn about antique tools and trades. He's also the co-director and trustee of the Professional Refinishers Group, a national network of professionals in the furniture restoration and conservation trades.

One of his biggest breaks came when he met SAPFM member Don Williams, who was senior furniture conservator at the Smithsonian Institution. He says Williams "took a leap of faith and gave me a chance to work on an upholstery project for a national treasure." Mascelli is particularly proud of his work on an original 1840s "Walter" chair, with a goatskin morocco cover.

The tacking rails were badly damaged from age and improper re-

**"Why should I use mortise and tenon and hot hide glue when I could put a chair together with Elmer's glue and drywall screws?"**

upholstering, the frames looking like "shredded wheat." So he helped devise ways of doing a "minimally intrusive" repair that used no tacks at all. The chair is now on display in the House of Representatives.

Today, Mascelli says 80% of his work is furniture. "Furniture work is more interesting and challenging, but less physically demanding." (No contorting yourself under the dash of a tiny British sports car.)

Car and chair upholstery projects have a lot in common, by the way. A lot of the techniques used in both fields were developed by coach builders from

that chair look like that chair."

Mascelli didn't necessarily see himself becoming an upholsterer. He has a master's degree in education and was a teacher for a few years. But as a teenager, he discovered foreign cars, especially little MG sports cars from Britain. He started working on them at gas stations and an MG dealership.



Walter Chair, ca. 1840



an earlier era. But there are differences. Mascelli says on the car side, you must use materials and techniques to deal with weather and much heavier use.

While he always has projects going on, Mascelli freely admits that he's part of a "dying and aging" industry. That's why, "My interest in the last few years, and going forward, is teaching. My hope is I can do more of the local chapter teaching for SAPFM, as I do other groups."

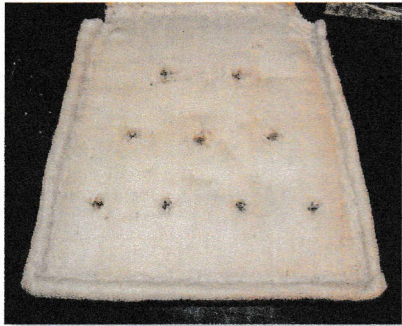


# SAPFM Chronicles (continued-3)

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First stuffing



Hand sewn foundation

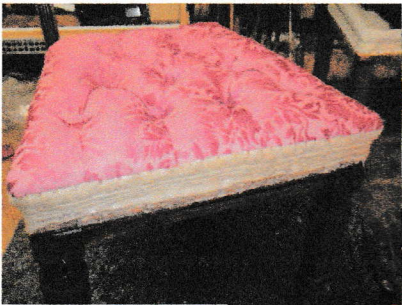
He's a regular at the Marc Adams School of Woodworking. (One of his classes there was called "A Lively Look at a Dying Art.") He says his "mission" now is to promote the traditional skills. "My work is a necessary and important component, often misunderstood and rarely appreciated. That's my goal, to try to raise awareness of the art."

He also writes for a variety of publications, including three articles in the SAPFM Journal. Membership in SAPFM gives him not only interaction with other professionals but also a chance to "enjoy the passion of hobbyists." Which leads to another obvious question: can the average hobbyist do this sort of work? Mascelli says yes and no. Basic "pull and tack" work, absolutely. But if the piece involves a loose cushion or has elaborate coil springs, "You will

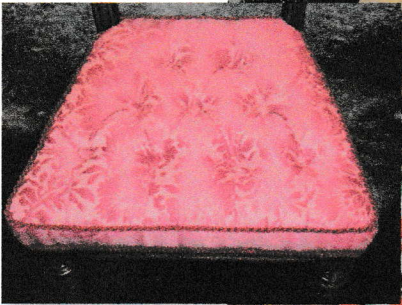
likely need a pro." Either that, or spend a lot of hours learning from one. "I always say, 'If you don't like the feel of a chisel in your hand, you're probably not going to like doing hand-cut dovetails. And if you don't like the feel of a needle in your fingers, you're probably not going to like advanced upholstery.'"

After doing this for some 40 years, Mascelli is still looking for new challenges. "I don't really have any interest in doing mundane furniture or production work. What really appeals to me now at this stage of my life is that I like the challenging, really difficult projects. If somebody brings me an antique piece and says 'This is a 1725 original Period piece, it's historic, it's falling apart, and we have to be able to sit on it,' that's the one I want." —JB

Mike's bench top looks different than most furniture makers' benches—lots of scissors and tack hammers



Hand sewn show cover



Hand sewn trim

