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LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE LADIES WHO LATHE

As contemporary woodworking loses its macho edge, it gains a whole new dimension.

By Diana Budds
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The artist Wendy Maruyama's boldly shaped boxes, which she began making in the 1980s, are sometimes referred to as "modesty boxes" on auction sites; she designed them to hold tampons, maxi pads and sex toys.

This article is part of our [Design special section](#) about the reverence for handmade objects.

It often starts with a box. These utilitarian objects are expressions of a woodworker's technical rigor and style. But for Wendy Maruyama, who earned a master's degree in furniture design from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1980, boxes were also political statements. Early in her career, she created boxes awash in vivid color, perched atop 4-foot-tall stands with spiked handles on their lids. Auction sites frequently describe these pieces as "[modesty boxes](#)," but they started out with a specific use: to hold an 18-pack of tampons.

"I loved the idea of gender-specific furniture — making something that men could not possibly grasp or experience," Ms. Maruyama, 73, recently said in an email interview. One of the few women in the American studio furniture movement, a cohort that combined fine woodworking skills with artistic expression, she went on to build larger versions that held menstrual pads and sex toys.

Last year, the Fresno Art Museum handed Ms. Maruyama its Distinguished Woman Artist award and hosted her first career survey. No furniture maker before her has received the honor, which has previously gone to the sculptor Ruth Asawa, the assemblage artist Betye Saar and the weaver Kay Sekimachi. In November, the Manhattan gallery Superhouse exhibited her prismatic tambour cabinets in "[Colorama](#)," a show that also included furniture by her friend and fellow woodworker Tom Loeser.

Ms. Maruyama is not alone in stepping into a gender-specific spotlight. With boundaries dissolving between craft and high art, and women in both areas enjoying a new wave of appreciation, woodworking — which has long been and still remains a male-dominated field — has become more interesting. It is filled with narrative content, social commentary and visually daring forms courtesy of its female makers. Path breakers of the American studio furniture movement who are now in their 70s and 80s are still creating new work, while younger generations of women who learned from them continue to advance the medium.



Side Table 1, designed by Rosanne Somerson, former president of the Rhode Island School of Design.

“Over the years, women are much more likely to be woodworkers or furniture makers or designers,” said Rosanne Somerson, 70, a woodworker who co-founded the Rhode Island School of Design’s furniture design department in 1995 and later became the institution’s [president](#). “With every generation, interests change. My generation had more of a lineage from high-level decorative arts, but women now are bringing in a lot more narrative interest and identity issues; it’s less about the highest levels of craft and more about the highest levels of expression — and almost provocation.”

Because the material carries so many cultural and ecological associations, it is well suited to engage with contemporary issues. Joyce Lin, 30, a furniture maker in Houston, created her “Material Autopsy” series of conceptual domestic objects to explore the impact of our industrialized society and how most of us are far removed from how things are made. For one chair in the series, which looks like it was grown from a single log sliced open to reveal its rings, Ms. Lin riffed on the decorative arts tradition of faux bois, or realistic-looking artificial wood.

“When I post photos of the piece online,” Ms. Lin said, “I get people who think I actually grew the wood and then there are a lot of people who think it was A.I.-generated.”

For Kim Mupangilaï, 35, a Belgian Congolese interior designer in Brooklyn, N.Y., wood was a natural choice for her first furniture collection, introduced in 2023. “I really wanted

my furniture to come from me, kind of like a self-portrait,” she said. Her utilitarian objects loosely refer to archival photographs taken in central Africa and are made of materials common in Congolese crafts, including teak, banana fibers and rattan. Her [Mwasi armoire](#), an hourglass-shaped piece with woven doors, is currently on view at “[Making Home —Smithsonian Design Triennial](#)” at the Cooper Hewitt museum, and she recently exhibited chairs and stools that refer to Art Nouveau and the colonial history of Belgium at the [Fog Design + Art](#) fair in San Francisco.

Deirdre Visser, a curator and woodworker in San Francisco, said that speaking more directly about the role of gender in the field was important to welcoming new perspectives and creating more exciting objects.

Her commentary has taken the form of a recent book called “[Joinery, Joists and Gender: A History of Woodworking for the 21st Century](#).” It features women and gender nonconforming people involved with the medium: from medieval turners to the Shaker who developed the first circular saw, to contemporary artists like Katie Hudnall, who leads the woodworking and furniture program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Yuri Kobayashi, who studied under Ms. Maruyama at San Diego State University and taught furniture design at RISD for many years. (Ms. Lin was one of her students.)

Ms. Visser, 54, rejects the notion that to be classified as a female woodworker rather than just someone working in wood diminishes the maker. “All of us have identities we bring to making and that is, more and more, where the discussion is rooted,” she said. “The most cisgender, straight white male is also bringing identity and a set of experiences to the wood shop, and so this perceived neutrality of their identity as a maker is foolish.”



A cabinet by Fay Toogood is part of her “Assemblage 7: Lost and Found II,” series of chairs, tables and cabinets that includes pieces hand carved from oak and covered in shellac.

Faye Toogood, a British designer, has become more attuned to the ways that her identity shapes what she creates. She used wood for her earliest works, but quickly shifted to industrial materials. “I looked to my left and my right and thought, if I want to be taken seriously, I need to pick up bronzes and steel,” she said. “I now realize that was because I felt like I was wacky in a male-dominated field of industrial design.”

Recently, Ms. Toogood, 48, returned to wood with “Assemblage 7: Lost and Found II,” a series of monolithic chairs, tables and cabinets that includes pieces hand-carved from oak and covered in shellac, a finish popular in 18th-century England. “It made the pieces really modern but feel quite ancient at the same time,” she said.

With all the leaps, woodworking can still be unwelcoming and isolating for women, and some makers are bent on building community and support.



The design of the Ledoux Shelving System by Natalie Shook relies on a central column to evenly distribute weight, channeling loads directly down its spine to ensure stability and enable impressive cantilevers and unexpected compositions. Credit...Jack De Marzo

Natalie Shook, 42, an artist and self-taught woodworker in Brooklyn, is one of them. After her products grew from stools to large-scale modular shelving, she opened her own workshop. This allowed her to “completely insulate” herself from the hostility she had experienced at other shops, she said. “There is not an energy or assumption that women can’t do things in our studio.”

Alexis Tingey and Ginger Gordon, who founded their woodworking studio Alexis & Ginger in 2023, a year after graduating from RISD, experienced culture shock once they left the cozy precincts of their academic furniture program. At school, they were able to “just focus on materiality and run full force into exploring and articulating our ideas,” Ms. Tingey, 34, said. “And that hasn’t always been the case since.” Sometimes they are the only women in their workshops. “But at least we have each other,” she added.



Alexis & Ginger's Savoye cabinet, made of burl and solid ebonized ash, is part of their Sight Unseen collection. Credit...Isobel Rae

Katie Thompson, 38, an artist in rural South Carolina, started a blog and Instagram account called [Women of Woodworking](#) in 2015 to connect with other makers. "I felt pretty isolated as a woman woodworker at the time and wanted to help amplify the stories of other women and gender nonconforming woodworkers out there so more people could see themselves being a part of the field, too," she said. The community has grown to thousands of members from around the world and hosts interviews on Instagram Live and virtual meet-ups.

Practitioners hope that this momentum continues. "As much as I'd love to believe the next few years will bring more progress for women in these fields, the political climate doesn't give me much hope," Ms. Maruyama said. "But I'd like to be wrong. I've been pleasantly surprised before."