#CRAFTSWOMEN

Furniture making has acquired an elevated status. New technologies and design practices have entered our production processes and are diversifying the workplace, while many women-identifying woodworkers still encounter challenges in the woodshop. The 'Maker' identity solidifies this emerging relationship between design and craft, and social media provides broad access to the surrounding narrative. #Craftswomen is organized in response to these shifts, as a space to discuss current issues and brainstorm possible futures for women in the field.

A transcribed conversation initiated and facilitated by Emily Bunker, held during the Furniture Society Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 25, 2016. Panelists include: Wendy Maruyama, RH Lee, Michaela Crie Stone, and Sarah Marriage.

Please find updated bios for each contributor on the final page.

LEARNING FROM A PIONEER

We asked Wendy Maruyama to open this conversation by sharing with us her history as both a dedicated practitioner for over 40 years, and as a pioneer for women in the field of fine woodworking within higher education in the United States. She walked us through her experiences beginning with junior college, earning a BA at San Diego State University in 1975, and studying under Alphonse Mattia and Jere Osgood at Boston University from 1976-78. In 1980, she was one of the first women, and the first deaf student to complete an MFA at Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts.

WM: Thanks for inviting me here. It's not often that I give a talk about being a woodworker as a woman, or a woman woodworker.

You will be surprised to hear that my first teacher in woodworking was indeed a woman. Woodworking began for me, when I took a craft class at a junior college right out of highschool. At that time 'crafts' were defined as metal, textiles and wood. I fell in love with the woodworking

component of the class. That had a very positive effect on me because if your first teacher was a woman in woodworking that already enables you in a way. So I was fortunate to have that beginning, because after that it was all men.

At San Diego State I had a male teacher. I don't think he was sexist at all, but some of the students were. In the early 70's we had a lot of male students taking art classes under the GI Bill; they had just come out of the military or the navy. So of course they had an attitude that was very sexist.

After San Diego State, I went to school at BU [Boston University] to study with Alphonse Mattia and Jere Osgood. They also were not at all chauvinists. It was intimidating though because the word on the street, even before we started class, was that myself and two other women were the first women admitted to the program. That fact in itself was more scary that the fact that we were starting school at BU. It set a precedent in a way---more pressure that we had to be good. If we made any mistakes they were one hundred times worse.

Then I think about my professor [at Rochester Institute of Technology]. Is he here? (looks around) He was a *total* chauvinist pig. In fact all the male students called him 'coach'. So that gives you an idea, you know...strutting around talking about sizes, how big things are. It was an unpleasant environment to work in.

Once again, the word was that Gail Fredell and myself were the first women graduate students at RIT so there was another hurdle there where we would always be taunted by the undergraduate boys, trying to see if we really earned that right to be graduate students in their program. And the teacher wasn't a big help that way.

But I overcame that, and got my first teaching job. In the beginning it was mostly men taking the class, but as time went on the enrollment of women grew pretty quickly. One thing that I became aware of as a teacher is I would catch the boys trying to help the girls with their work. That was something that I had to really nip in the bud. I would go up and say 'what are you doing? Is that *your* project?' He goes 'no, it's Nancy's. I'm helping her.' And I'm like 'If that's Nancy's project, you should put it down and let Nancy do it.' And he would say 'well, she's afraid of the table saw.' And I would say 'let me go over that with her,' you know, and we would. That kind of thing that happened with teaching...how to educate the boy students to not help the girl students.

And then there were the technicians. Often a technician would come into the shop and say, "I'm looking for the head of this program, I heard we have a problem with the table saw,' and I would say 'You're looking at her now.' Those were the kind of things… but I think what's important in all of this is to maintain a certain level of clarity about who you are and to turn down the sensitivity meter. Because I found that in the beginning I was pretty sensitive, but If you turn that down, and mentally say 'I'm better than you people, I don't need to stress about how I'm perceived as a woman in this field.' I mean….I'm still working on that.

But the sad thing is that I'm in a shelter, pretty much. I'm in a bubble because academia is a huge security blanket. Once you get off the campus and go to Home Depot, you realize how sexist the world is. But it's tough to, again, to get what you need, don't waste your time with these people and get to whatever it is you need to get taken care of right away.

There's something else I wanted to mention along these lines. What's been interesting to observe is that in the last five years some of my male students were experiencing harassment at the lumber yard because they were students. In the beginning I would say, 'Get what you want. Don't let the lumber yard guy tell you what he thinks you're supposed to buy. We already talked about it, we're doing a solid wood project. Don't let him talk you into buying plywood and stuff.' That's the kind of thing we were coming across in the lumber yard. But I was finding out that the male students were getting the same kind of treatment.

That made me think. It's an interesting discovery to find that my male students were having the same problem at the lumber yard as the women.

MAKING SPACE

What's the value of creating spaces assigned strictly as women's only within this field? Does this function as another bubble? How does Sarah's space in Baltimore, A Workshop of One's Own, function within the broader landscape?

SM: Yeah, when you leave the woodshop, the all-womens' woodshop, and you go to the lumber yard or to Home depot you're back in the world again. Does that really prepare you for the real world? I think it's interesting to talk about because it doesn't prepare you for that in theory, but it doesn't have to. It doesn't on it's own. At the same time because the real world exists that's why we need to make that space. Why not have that space where you feel great and you're with a bunch of other women?

There's a history to of this. At the World's Fair in Chicago in 1897 there was a building that was all women architects and designers and it was completely women-designed. Then in the 1970's in Los Angeles there was a show at a museum that was about the next artists and it was all men. And these women in LA were like 'fuck you guys' and they founded an all women's space called *The Women's Building* named after the project at the World's Fair. That was part of second-wave feminism, there were a lot of these women-only spaces that were created. Especially with artists. Although those spaces were problematic in their own ways--often times they were not welcoming to queer people--I think they provided a really great space where a lot of awesome creative stuff happened in an environment where everyone was supporting each other.

I think that even though the real world out there exists, it's important to have these bubbles where you can go in and not worry about it. And I think you can structure this space in a way that talks about the real world. And talks about how you go to the lumberyard. You know how you were saying with your students, Wendy; I think you can prepare each other and be supportive of each other to then do better out in the real world.

MCS: I think it's an important to have these kinds of spaces that are designated for women because it's a safe space to focus on the work. So that you don't have these distractions of navigating discrimination whether it's overt or implied or subconscious. It's an opportunity to really let the creativity flourish in a way especially for someone where it otherwise wouldn't if they were situated in a different space. Especially with the education component. I think it's a lot more intimidating for some women to go into a space that they know is going to be dominated by men and they know from their experience in education just in primary school that if they do something wrong it's a bigger deal than if a guy does something wrong. So I think because of that education component it's really crucial.

I'm reminded of the issue with overcrowding on the subway, so some cities have female-only subway cars to try to help women not get groped so much. I think that's problematic. Because that's trying to create a separate space and it's not focusing on teaching men not to grope women on the subway.

When it comes to trying to learn something new, I think that's totally different, and it's not just getting to and from work. It's about potentially having this life-changing new skill that you're developing and there are plenty of women that will see your shop, Sarah, as an opportunity to enter into this male-dominated field.

SM: Thanks, I hope so.

BEGINNINGS

How did you get into furniture making? What were the circumstances that led to you to where you are now?

RHL: For starters I come from Berkeley, California, a very progressive place. My parents were hippy-intellectuals so we had some of that back-to-the-land, make-your-own-stuff culture in the family. So it was never defined as 'craft' per se, but there was a lot of entertaining ourselves through our own creative practices. I was encouraged to do that from a young age.

When I was in elementary school my parents enrolled me in a kids carpentry program, it was an after-school program that was part of the Berkeley public schools. I was hooked from then on. I started out making skateboards, and then cutting boards and whatever projects we all went through. Afterwards I set up a bench in my own house and got hand tools and then started making all kinds of weird stuff on the weekends. So you could say that was the beginning of my furniture career. I think I made a chair when I was eight.

Fast forward many years later, I made a lot of failed furniture--nailed together pine things that fell apart every time you closed the door. So it was a slow entering into fine furniture. That probably happened to me after leaving the Exploratorium [a Bay Area science museum] where I was doing a lot of cabinetry. I spent a summer at College of the Redwoods [where there is a well-respected woodworking program] and I think that's when my skill level shifted from a time of making things that were [temporary, and] going to live a long time but not have that same mark of the craftsperson that made it. College of the Redwoods really inspired me to start designing and building furniture.

MCS: My background is in the so called Fine Arts in terms of my education. I went to Skidmore college which is a liberal arts college in Upstate NY. I didn't study woodworking there at all, I did painting and sculpture--mostly in metals. After I graduated I moved back to Maine for what was supposed to be a summer, but it ended up being 5 years.

My first woodworking course was at Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine.] It was with Mitch Breyerson and Adam Manly was the shop assistant. I was the youngest person in the class by at least by 10 years. I was the only woman. It was a steam bending class which I had no idea was an advanced technique, so I was the only person with zero woodworking experience. Haystack is a super progressive place and all the people there for the most part were extremely open-minded. But there was also this attitude of 'oh isn't that so cute that she wants to do woodworking?' It wasn't overly negative. I didn't get the feeling like they didn't want me there, but just being taken seriously was tough especially given my age and lack of experience compared to the others. But that didn't deter me in the least. I had a blast and I fell in love with the material, so I ended up at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship [Rockport,

Maine] taking a course there. Afterwards I did a fellowship there and then Peter [Korn], the director, hired me.

SM: I began by studying architecture in college. I was nineteen and angry and I ended up dropping out. I left when I was 21, before finishing my architecture degree. I started in physics, I went into architecture. I really loved design and building but I was obsessed with this sentence that Robin Evans wrote in an architectural essay: “Architects don’t make buildings, they make drawings of buildings” and I thought ‘I want to make buildings.’ So I got it into my head that that means furniture, you know something at a scale that I could control. A scale where I wouldn’t have to worry about the ethics surrounding the construction of buildings. It was such an issue for me, I just decided I wanted to go into a smaller form. So I dropped out. I went back to Alaska (I’m from Alaska.) I worked in IT for a couple of years, and then I moved back to New Jersey and worked in a physics lab for a year. During that time read a book by James Krenov, and that was the moment I decided: ‘I’m going to College of the Redwoods.’ I’m going to do this crazy thing.

MCS: You drank the Kool-aid!

SM: I drank the Kool-aid. But then I didn’t go, I was on my way to California and I stopped in New Jersey to pick up my stuff and my cat and I was offered a free apartment in Manhattan for six months and I took it. I became a dog-walker and then when I was walking dogs my friend, who worked for Gee Nortinson, who’s this amazing structural engineer in Manhattan and who taught at my university. My friend was leaving his job, and said ‘you should just work for Gee, you should take this job.’ I went. I did an interview and because I had CAD experience I got hired and ended up working in Manhattan for 6 years in structural engineering. Then in 2010 I broke up with my boyfriend and decided ‘you know what? I’m going to do the thing I’ve always wanted to do.’ So I took a 10 year journey to do that. I applied to College of the Redwoods, got waitlisted, got in, and studied there for two years.

WORKPLACE CULTURE

The motivation for this discussion came for me while working as the only woman within a fifteen-person woodworking company. I have been situated within an entirely cis male-dominated shop for the whole of my career. What have your workplace experiences been? How have you worked to shape the environments where you work?

SM: I have worked in what could be called progressive-leaning guys' woodshops. It's just not that great. (laughs) You know, people I love, people who listen to NPR, but there's still nude-y calendars on the wall. There's still an ogling of women salespeople that come in. Outside of those walls, when you go to a lumber yard people ask you if you're lost or they think you're a client, not a maker.

That [produces a] daily need to be a feminist, it's not because it's something that I ever set out to be like 'I need to teach people about women in woodworking' it's more like I was a woman in woodworking and everyday I had to have a conversation. Or maybe I choose not to, maybe I would choose to ignore. Either way there was always an opportunity or some situation: to be like "stop watching me use the table saw! I know how to use the table saw." Things like that.-That daily experience lead me to want to make an environment where it's just not an issue. And that's why I'm doing my project.

MCS: It's interesting, I don't think about being a woman in the context of my job that often, but when I'm actively thinking about it now that there are more women taking courses every year there. It's exciting to see younger women and younger men each year. It's not just older retirees looking for a hobby, and there's nothing wrong with that either, but it's just great to have some young blood and people who are interested in more of a career. At the same time everyone in the administrative staff is a woman, everyone except for the director and the two facilities managers are men. There are far more men on the faculty, though there are some fantastic women on the faculty. So I think there's still plenty of work to be done even in more progressive places too. It's important to keep having conversations about it and continue to diversify these atmospheres.

Maine has a lack of racial diversity problem in general so we have that at the school absolutely. So talking about women, but also queer people, and people of color. How can we make it more welcoming and more encouraging for people to experience this field that we all love so much?

RHL: I think I'm a bit shielded from operating within progressive places and urban centers, but I've had my share of working in pretty terrible shops as a woman. Even at the museum where I worked which had a very progressive environment there were issues where managers weren't

hiring women for the shop. So women would come in as interns or volunteers and everyone would have to work their way up and were funnelled into the administration positions. In that situation I found it really important to find your allies; I got together a group of women who worked in the shops in particular. We put our experiences down in writing and formed an argument for hiring more women. I'm not sure how much of a difference it actually made. In some settings we were mocked by the management. You know that's kind of how it goes. But continuing to make a stink, make meetings uncomfortable and really just the power of aligning yourself with other women in the field even it's futile politically, on a social level being able to get yourself to work and continue to do the work...it's really important.

In my current shop I'd say my role is pretty huge in terms of setting the community and workplace culture. Because I started out and it was just me, and one other person, Nick [Offerman], so literally I've brought everyone in that is in there now. it was a no-brainer that I would bring in people I've worked up in San Francisco with, queer people, people of color. There was a real emphasis on creating a diverse workplace that's *not* the kind of workplace that you usually see in shop settings.

I have a lot of guys working for me as well, and I've noticed recently that they all have big sisters and I think that somehow those are people who gravitate to working for me in the shop and it works out real well. (laughing) Their sisters trained them right. So it's an incredibly respectful environment and that doesn't mean we don't have a pretty hilarious time and get into all kinds of probably totally inappropriate raunchy conversations at lunch, but it sets a really different tone when there's such a diverse group of people having that conversation. (laughs)

SELF-PROMOTION

Woodworking in an era of social media can involve an emphasis on sharing your story and images of your story. How do you approach self representation and promotion? How does the term 'maker' fit into your public identity?

RHL: I was drawn to craft the way that many of us are. Coming from a fine arts background, craft felt like a safer, quieter, less of an in-the-limelight, creative existence. So I think I do tend to be a little more naturally withdrawn in terms of self-promotion. I now run a collective woodshop in LA [Offerman Woodshop], and I've found that having a community of people really helps that shyness around self-promotion. I found a good outlet in our woodshop's newsletter which I write with a discreet authorship in the voice of our collective and still reach about ten thousand subscribers. On the flip-side, if I'm doing something like speaking on this panel and I can have another member of the collective post it on social media and It helps me feel less weird about the self-promotion. I do think there's something about it that goes against what craft is on some level. Craft is a solitary, quiet, and unpretentious venture on some level, so I've struggled with it.

As far as the term 'maker' I think on some level I'm somewhat uninformed about what the term maker movement is and means. I will say that being from being from Berkeley, San Francisco and the Bay Area to me the word doesn't resonate. To me it has connotations of Burning Man and tech culture, things that I've seen erode the public art life of my community. So, I don't find any resonance for that word or identity though I think a lot of the values of D.I.Y. culture and open-source instructions even technology, the use of technology in craft...all that I can totally get with, but the title itself is not something I identify with strongly.

MCS: Maker...I think there's a coastal difference. Specifically in LA and San Francisco 'maker' has been co-opted by a more corporate, more commercial use. I like the word 'maker' because it feels open-ended, but I just identify as an artist when I'm presenting myself. For me that's the most open-ended word I can use. Especially because my work plays with functionality and the boundaries and definitions of functionality where some things are more sculptural and less functional and vice-versa. Artist, to me, encapsulates all of that.

The idea of self-promotion is a tricky one for me. I do all the social media for the school [Center for Furniture Craftsmanship] as well. I have some similarities with Lee where I have this kind of dual experience of trying to promote my own work through my own personal Instagram but I'm also maintaining this Instagram for an institution where my voice is anonymous and someone could take it over for me and no one would know so it's less about having to worry about how I'm personally being projected and more how I'm representing the school as a whole.

When it comes to my own self-promotion I have a hard time with it. I think it's partly my personal temperament but to go with the view of this panel I absolutely think that there's a gendered component as well. We teach girls that they're supposed to be second fiddle, and be demure. A woman who promotes herself is seen as a whole host of things. Where as when a man promotes himself, this idea of 'celebrity' is embraced. So yea it's an interesting and tough struggle and it can be hard to force yourself to do something that doesn't come naturally for me. For me, I take photographs of my work and post it publicly and try to say something nice about it, rather than the mean stuff I say to myself in my own head.

SM: As far as self-promotion and self-representation, I probably do a lot more of it than these guys. I *do* post to Social Media a lot. I think my work is great and everything, but I think I've been given things because having 7,000 followers on Instagram somehow legitimized me in people's eyes. I also like it because if you're in your head making stuff all day now you can post this thing and now you're in conversation with people across the globe. I find that useful.

I think another interesting thing to talk about when we talk about self-promotion as a woman in furniture-making--I have this conversation a lot with women who make--is how much do you talk about being a woman? Do you have to talk about that? I have friends that have very specifically chosen business names that don't sound like a woman is making the objects. Not to say that they're trying hide something but they don't want it to be an issue...

MCS: Or a first impression...

SM: Yea, or a first impression. And they are acutely aware of what it means when someone finds out that you're a woman who's making furniture all of a sudden that becomes the conversation instead of talking about the work. There are other women who really focus on that and you could argue that I am doing that. (laughs) I never really intended on this being the direction of my career, I just ended up doing this. But there are definitely people who promote themselves as the sexy female woodworker, so I think there's a whole continuum and I think that's an interesting topic.

COMMUNITY AND FUTURES

What's the future for women in this field? What structures can be put in place--online or physical spaces--that encourage women and form communities as we move forward?

SM: I'm doing my project because I just want a space that's fun to work in with a bunch of people that I want to work with, but also I think it is needed. I think we're not there yet. We still need to have a panel on women in woodworking. And I think if you look at academic environments, if you look at the academic programs in furniture, most of them at major universities are at least 50% if not more women. So there's definitely interest and there are women doing it, they're studying it. But if you go into any woodshop in Brooklyn it's gonna be mostly dudes. So I think it's important to create these professional spaces..now I feel like I'm just giving my sales pitch…(laughs)

MCS: Self promotion, Sarah.

SM: Self promotion! Yea, to have a space that can be a space just for women. But I also think there are a lot of awesome online collectives. There's this woman Hannah Whites that just founded *Baltimore Women's Makers Collective* and that group is just an organizing group. It's a group where women makers get together once a month, and hold events that promote each other. I think hopefully the future for women in furniture-making is that it just won't be a big deal, right? It won't be strange. I think that's what we're aiming for. But we're not there yet, and I think because we're not there yet we have to go out of our way to swing the pendulum to the other side a bit and give people a welcoming and comfortable place to do this thing that they want to do.

RHL: As far as the future for women in furniture-making, I think of Laura Zahn of *Allied Woodshop* in Los Angeles. I'd say half of the people who enroll for Allied's classes are women not necessarily interested in a career in furniture-making but definitely with the excitement to make their own furniture and get their hands dirty.

So that's been a really great community service in terms of female teachers who can be role-models for these people. Similarly I am a professor at California State Long Beach, which has a great crafts program in the art school and there we have 60%-70% women students. Like what you were saying, Sarah. I teach an introductory course which I really love: Intro to Furniture Making and Design. A lot of my students are graphic design students, they're not used to hands-on work. I think it's really exciting to see that moment when anybody--whether it's a male student or a female student, in particular the female students--when they make something for the first time or have been struggling with a material problem all semester and then it clicks and it all comes together. Not only do they have that creative empowerment but it has political ramifications too for young people and for women to see that you can manipulate and change

your material world. Whether they ever build something again or they go home and something breaks in their house and they fix it, however that ripples out or translates, I think it's an important kernel of social and political empowerment for women.

Back to my other collaborator, Jay Sassaman. Her shop Pier 9 in San Francisco, they put out Instructables--it's an open-source website that gives directions on how to make all different kinds of projects. And that ties into the maker movement. So I'll back-track a bit and say as a democratic platform, these websites and the internet in general has really opened up the field for people, for women who are interested in how to fix things around the house and build things even if they don't have access to a shop or a woodworking education there's a lot of access out there that there wasn't before.

I'm also about to embark on a collaboration with Amy Poehler's *Smart Girls* channel. Is anybody familiar with that? They're going to come do some videos at the shop with the women at the shop making different things. I'm really excited to see where that collaboration goes. It's another way that the internet has opened up the field for women.

MCS: That's really exciting. *Smart Girls* is awesome. To piggyback on that, I think in any field visibility is crucial in getting people who want to be in the field to realize that they can be. It's a problem in academia too, where just like the woodworking programs that you guys are talking about where 60% of the students are women in colleges, but so many are being taught exclusively by men. This component of social media and the internet has a really interesting potential for this democratic platform where instead of the cigar-smoke-in-the-back-room group of straight, white men deciding who gets in what publication or what show, people have this outlet now where they can promote themselves. Now there are women who have Instagram accounts with fifty thousand followers who are making lovely woodworking stuff. Whereas just one generation prior, women wouldn't be accepted into shows because of their gender or even if they got into a show their work wouldn't be mentioned anywhere in a publication about it.

Social media has the potential--and I think it's already starting--to change the optics of our field. Just by creating this visibility. Women and younger women who are looking for a different creative outlet can see and think to themselves: 'if she can do it, so can I.' That can be a truly subconscious thing.

PANELISTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Wendy Maruyama is an artist and educator from San Diego, CA. She was the first woman to graduate with a Masters in furniture making from Rochester Institute of Technology. Maruyama's early work combined ideologies of feminism and traditional craft objects. Her work continues to move beyond the boundaries of traditional studio craft and into the realm of social practice.

RH Lee began woodworking through a Kids Carpentry program. Years later, she worked as a scenic carpenter before building exhibits for the Exploratorium Museum. She now runs Offerman Woodshop, designs and builds custom furniture, teaches woodworking in the School of Art at CSU Long Beach and is a member of the LA Box Collective.

Michaela Crie Stone lives and works in Rockport, Maine. After receiving her Bachelor's Degree from Skidmore College in studio art, Michaela attended the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship to study furniture making. Working predominantly in wood and leather, she combines traditional craftsmanship with innovative form. Her work has received numerous accolades including: grants from the Windgate Foundation, the Maine Arts Commission, and the Furniture Society; the Artist Award from the Society of Arts and Crafts; and several esteemed artist residencies throughout the country.

Sarah Marriage studied architecture at Princeton University and fine woodworking at The College of the Redwoods. She is the 2015 recipient of the John D. Mineck Furniture Fellowship, and is using her funding to support the creation of "A Workshop of Our Own," a cooperative workshop for women furniture makers.

Emily Bunker has been woodworking in Philadelphia since 2010. She has had the opportunity to work with Michael Hurwitz, and managed projects for several years at Staack Moore Woodworking in northeast Philadelphia. She currently runs community design/build workshops with Tiny WPA, and builds frames for the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Conservation Department.