

At last, Dennis,

An Answer to Your Question

Several years ago, an accomplished woodworker, Dennis Rollins, wrote to me asking, "How do I become a master craftsman?" I sweated over his letter more than any I have received before or since. It's a perplexing question, and an important one. Although we may not all share Dennis's ambition to be a master, we certainly hope to produce masterful results. But how do you ferret out the necessary experience and wisdom from the overabundance of woodworking information that surrounds us? And how do you know that you've gotten correct and complete information?

To answer Dennis, I studied European guilds that set standards of craftsmanship and still confer the title "master craftsman." (Here in America, it's an honorific bestowed by publishers to help sell books.) A master must understand four areas of woodworking lore — *wood and woodworking materials, design and construction, tools, and techniques*. Each subject is necessary to the others. A craftsman who knows tools and techniques but doesn't grasp the subtle properties of wood and how they affect an assembly cannot consistently do good work.

I searched for a reference to help Dennis with his quest, but no one book would serve. There are several excellent texts on general woodworking that provide an overview of this essential knowledge. But none take you to the next level, showing you how to progress beyond the basics and gain the know-how to do truly masterful work.

Well, if you can't find it, make it. So I began to collect information for the book that Dennis needed. This is the result — an answer to his question and many others that I've received from readers. It's not a "complete" book of woodworking; there's no such thing. Woodworking is too vast a subject to squeeze between two covers. I've written a 21-volume woodworking encyclopedia (*The Workshop Companion*) and still didn't have the space to say everything.

It is, however, a *comprehensive* book, covering every facet of the craft. Dozens of professional

craftsmen and experienced amateurs have told me what they felt was necessary information, and from this I collected what most agree is the *core* woodworking knowledge necessary for good work. If you are new to the craft, this book will give you the firm jumping-off point you need for a good start. If you are a veteran craftsman, it will provide crucial information to round out your woodworking education. Either way, it will answer your most pressing questions.

But that's just for starters. As I was writing this book, I imagined it as a signpost in the middle of a vast country: "This way to an in-depth understanding of lathe turning; that way to some excellent plans for Shaker furniture." Although we all need general woodworking knowledge, every craftsman has unique ambitions and needs *specific* information. So I've included important woodworking *resources* — books, videos, organizations, institutions, schools, museums, and publications — showing you how to explore the parts of the craft that you wish to master.

I was flattered that Dennis asked me how to become a master craftsman. I've never claimed to be one, although enough book-sellers have claimed it for me. I am, however, a master of research and of what journalists call "boiling it down." This is the distilled wisdom of hundreds of true masters whom I have read or talked to, and the sources from which they gained their wisdom.

A parting thought for Dennis and others who have the same dream: No, reading this book won't make you a master craftsman. But this is where you begin.

With all good wishes,



*This Appalachian Dulcimer, built by craftsman/author Nick Engler, was displayed at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts during America's Bicentennial (1976). In addition to making traditional American musical instruments, Nick holds several patents on woodworking tools. He has taught wood technology and craftsmanship at the University of Cincinnati and was a contributing editor to **American Woodworker** magazine. This is his 48th book on woodworking.*

