

TWW



Issue 51, September 2024

Hello Steve r,

When I was a kid, I don't think I ever used the term "woodworking." I just "made things." I made laser pistols out of bits of found tree branches, nails, and wire; ashtrays (lol, yes ashtrays) out of clay; a Greg Brady bead-style curtain for my room by linking together hundreds of those bygone peel-off soda can pull-tabs I had saved; and a bloody Halloween mask (naturally) out of a grocery bag and paper mâché. I even remember making an ephemeral art sculpture out of rocks and glue. (Ephemeral because it didn't stick together.) It was all simply a desire to create, probably more akin to creating art. I didn't consider making anything conventionally useful.



Anyone remember these? The lore was that people would peel them off and drop them into the can and that some people (presumably drunken Schlitz consumers) ended up swallowing them, which led to the type we have today that remain fixed to the can. All of which, I suspect, is urban myth.

So when people ask me how long I've been woodworking, it's hard to say because I was certainly using scrap lumber and pieces of plywood to make random things long before I had any idea of "proper" building methods. It was very natural. The term "woodworking" comes with way more fussy properness than it should. Perhaps "woodplaying" is a word that needs to exist.

I had been making crude boxes and stuff from scrap lumber, a hammer, nails, and a coping saw in my grandfather's garage long before I knew the concept of joinery. I legit thought that the only way to connect boards together was to use nails. I was aware of screws, but they seemed very adult and way out of my league. I never even considered the possibility of glue, nor did Grandpa have any clamps.

It wasn't until my dad bought a Shopsmith multi-tool that I began to use power tools and a table saw with any regularity, and that was when I started to understand the word *woodworking*. I learned that joinery was a thing in my teens, only because I started watching *The New Yankee Workshop* and *The Woodwright's Shop* on TV. The idea began to work its way into my head that proper woodworking was defined and accomplished by means of technique and tools. I didn't have Norm Abram's state-of-the-art power tools, nor did I have Roy Underhill's experience or audacity to shape wood with an adze (what a crazy-ass

tool), so I shamefully stuck with my crude building techniques thinking they were “wrong.”

When I was in my early 20s and living in an apartment in San Francisco, I only had a few handheld power tools that I acquired from my days of doing maintenance work for a chain of cinemas. If you’ve been a reader of this newsletter for any length of time, you already know that was the apartment where I built furniture on the roof with a long extension cord.

I enjoy telling that story as a bit of inspiration, but I didn’t really think about it at the time. I didn’t even consider it woodworking. I was a broke and struggling photographer who could have bought second-hand furniture cheaper, but I just felt the need to make things. I used the tools that I had: a jigsaw, a circular saw, and a drill. I didn’t even have a power sander: I hand-sanded with sheets of sandpaper.

I butt-joined boards together with screws (I was now an adult lol) and metal angle brackets for added support. I bought and glued into place pre-made quarter-rounds and other molding strips to add some flair, and I finished everything with stain and polyurethane. These were sturdy, functional cabinets and furniture pieces that provided years of service. I thought they looked great, plus they were so satisfying to make. They met every requirement without the use of rabbet joints, dovetail joints, mortise and tenons, or dados. Butt joints with mechanical fasteners FTW.

Now jump ahead to buying a house in my early 30s and having an actual garage that I could use as a workshop. I was still very much afflicted by the teachings of Norm Abram and his use of power tools. I had spent most of my life dreaming of the day when I could do some *real woodworking* and this was finally my opportunity. I was convinced that “woodworking” was a magical word unlocked by having a specific space, owning certain tools, and using prescribed techniques. It never occurred to me that I *had* been doing real woodworking most of my life.

So a table saw was one of my first purchases. I believed the hype.

(Okay, I still do 😊) I soon followed it up with a bevy of tools including a miter saw, a jointer, a planer, a router, a router table, a biscuit joiner, clamps, sanders of all types, gadgets, gizmos, etc., etc., etc. Finally, I could call myself a woodworker. Well, almost.

You see, I still hadn't made any *proper* joints, and all the knowledge I'd been soaking up from books and magazines made it pretty clear that a butt joint was the weakest, most amateurish, most pathetic joint you could make. Sadly, despite my real-world success at butt-joint rooftop furniture-making, if an article by some random dude in a magazine implied that my experience was frowned upon by the Woodworking Boys Club, I took it to heart. Not only that, I inferred that arbitrary (i.e. expensive) tools and techniques only made you a *regular* woodworker. The REAL goal was to become a *Fine Woodworker*. It felt like there was a litmus test: To enter the finely kept Fine Woodworking gate, you had to make dovetail joints. I didn't know why then, and I don't know why now.

I spent \$200 on a dovetail jig for my router. It was ridiculously fussy and time-consuming to set up and I used it for two projects. The dovetail joints looked okay, I guess. I didn't feel any different, other than now this was a feature I had to point out to people.

I bought a dovetail saw and chisels and tried making hand-cut dovetails. They pretty much looked like crap. I practiced these for a week and improved a little, but felt no joy. If anything, they just seemed tedious and frustrating. *Was real woodworking* supposed to feel this way?

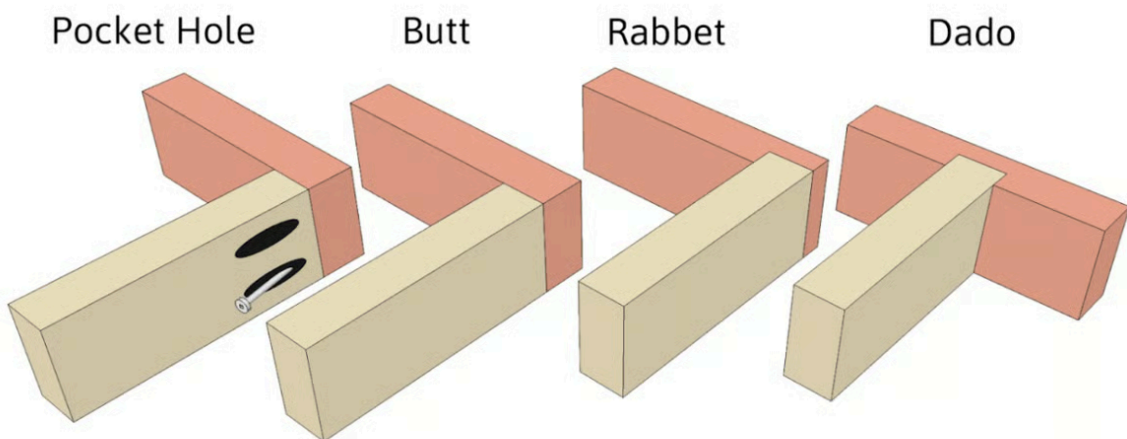
4 practical joinery methods

Everyone's experience will be different, but after years of actually building things, I've concluded that four joinery methods are strong, easy to use, and as you probably already know, define the Woodworking for Mere Mortals style of woodworking:

- **Rabbets.** (*Rebates* in the U.K.) For joining sides of boxes or casework at 90° angles. They keep the edges in alignment, are

self-squaring, and provide a lot of surface area for glue.

- **Dados.** For joining the edge of one board perpendicular to the face of another, such as bookshelves. Basically, rabbets that aren't on the edge.
- **Butt joints.** Yep. For larger-sized construction, there is nothing wrong with these. You can screw the edge of one board into the end grain of another with long screws. I build my workbenches like this and they are rock solid. (But for smaller projects, I usually go with Rabbets.)
- **Pocket Hole Joinery.** My pocket hole jig is one of my most-used tools. Pocket screws (and the modern jigs that simplify their use) have fundamentally made woodworking more accessible to more people than ever before. The joints are stronger than butt joints and easy to make.



So what's the deal with joinery techniques and why are so many woodworkers obsessed, stressed, and confused by them? Do you need to learn and become proficient at making dovetail joints, bridal joints, box joints, tongue and groove joints, or mortises?

If you enjoy the challenge and gain satisfaction from crafting a perfect dovetail, then of course pursue it! I'm all about embracing the experience of making things in whatever way is personally fulfilling. I have friends who love to constantly practice and refine their hand-cut dovetails, while others enjoy cutting absolutely bonkers joints on a CNC.

But what about strength and longevity?

Strength is the most common reason cited for using a particular type of woodworking joint. For sure, a mortise and tenon is one of the absolute strongest ways you can join boards together. People often feel dovetails are needed in drawer construction because they believe opening and closing a drawer puts a lot of stress on its construction and any other joint will fail.

So how much strength does a project need? There's a point of diminishing returns. A bedroom nightstand drawer might only get opened once a day and be seen by only one person. I have rough-and-tumble shop drawers that I open and close all the time made with rabbet joints. They are just as strong now as when I made them many years ago. They are simple to make and sturdy enough.

I feel like many woodworkers place the longevity of a project above all other concerns. Any project only needs to be as strong as its realistic usage demands. Again, if you want to assemble drawers using dovetails, great. Just don't be under the illusion that they are necessary. Or, put it this way: Would you prefer a drawer to reasonably last 40 years or 50 before needing repair? Is that tiny bit of potential longevity worth the upfront cost of time and effort? These aren't questions with right or wrong answers, but honest questions worth asking yourself.

What about a coffee table? Does it need mortise and tenon joinery to withstand years of sliding around and feet resting on it? Do you expect this to be the one coffee table you will use for the rest of your life? Do your tastes change? Is there a possibility you might want to make a different coffee table at some point in your life?

Is it worth building a patio table to last for just 10 years? Are you cool with building something that will *only* last 60 years, or do you want to only make heirloom furniture to hand down to your kids or grandkids? Will it even fit their decor or will it be a burden on them? Will they appreciate your highly crafted joinery?

That last question is a big one. In general, most people don't notice or even care about the type of joinery used in furniture construction. (Although, I do see where "made with dovetail joints" is a marketing bullet point these days, even on furniture made out of pressed wood or MDF. 😂) So, as a rule, any joinery you use on a piece of furniture will need to be pointed out to people who will politely nod and say, "Well that's very nice" without comprehending the amount of toil that went into their creation.

Maybe it's that *effort* we are needy for others to appreciate. I find that woodworkers mostly like to flex their joinery prowess with other woodworkers. Have you experienced any of those utterly fascinating dopamine hits on Instagram from (often) Southeast Asian guys hand-cutting the most mind-bogglingly complex joints? It's pretty amazing, but I assure you, these are viral sideshows only showing you samples of two small boards. It is highly unlikely they are building furniture this way, especially professionally. The product is not the woodworking, it's the video.

This is all just a reminder that your creativity and joy should never be defined by others. Honestly, it doesn't even need to be defined at all. Even though I have higher quality tools and a lot more experience now, it took me years to learn that what I'm creating now isn't fundamentally different from the things I made when I was a kid or on a rooftop. I'm just making things.

—Steve

Exclusive Offer For Readers of Notes from the Shop!

It's crazy to think that **Kreg Tools** has been a supporter of WWMM for 14 years now. They make products I use all the time, even when you aren't watching. The first video I made for Kreg was in April of 2010. I just watched it again and, well, it's a hard watch. I thought I

would include the link here, but I can't bear the cringe. (If you really *must* see it, search for the *Kreg Keg Crate* on my channel.) I went on to partner with them on at least five other videos.

I believe the [Kreg Pocket-Hole Jig](#) has brought more people into woodworking than any other product and has fundamentally changed how people approach building. It dovetails (lol) perfectly with my philosophy towards building: woodworking doesn't require expensive tools, a lot of space, or years of training.

With the Kreg Jig, there is no learning curve to joinery, allowing you to build anything right away. The joints are strong and easy to make; I have made countless projects over the past 14 years using pocket screws and am always pleased with the results.

So I'm thrilled to tell you about this exclusive special offer just for readers of this newsletter. From now through September 30th, take [\\$10 off any order](#) (\$10 minimum order, duh) by using code **WWMM10** at checkout. And this isn't just for the Kreg pocket hole jigs, this is a discount on anything on the entire site! So go take a look, and if you don't already have a Kreg Jig, get one! You'll love how it opens up a world of woodworking possibilities.



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Discover the easiest way to build strong, beautiful wood projects with pocket-hole joinery. Even if you're just getting started, our pocket-hole jigs make every project a breeze.

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Pocket-Hole Jig 520PRO
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Pocket-Hole Jig 720PRO
Fast, precise results every time

(Also, if you're new to pocket hole joinery, here's a [video I made that will get you started.](#))

Creative Culture Conversations

This was a really fun month on the podcast! I was stoked to have the [opportunity to interview Kevin Perjurer from Defunctland](#) about making documentaries. He makes some of the most engaging feature-length videos on YouTube.



Then I had a super fun [chat with Raven Griim](#) about her massive TikTok presence, cosplay, horror films, and how much she has transformed herself to become this spooky goth girl from the underworld!



Creative Culture is available on all podcast platforms, [YouTube](#), and on the [Creative Culture website](#).

Reader Mail

Wow! The response to last month's newsletter (13 Woodworking Tips) was huge, perhaps the most I've ever received.

Thank you all for your thoughtful messages. 😊

“Excellent list. There are no mistakes, only unanticipated redesign opportunities.” —Karl P.

Embrace the redesign! —Steve

“I always enjoy your newsletters and love your videos. I've learned so much from you and your online courses. I've enrolled in them all but have finished none of them. I've learned from all of them though. I'm a 72-year-old woman doing woodworking in my retirement and have a small business where I sell my crafts at the local farmers market. I find four hours on Saturday mornings are enough for me. I don't want another job. LOL! I've learned a lot: one thing is that when I make a mistake (every project), like you said, I can usually fix it. More importantly, I learn something from it and sometimes find a better way to do what I was trying to do.

Another thing I'm trying to learn is to NOT point out my mistakes! I'm still working on that one. :) I love my BMW and use it every day. I also love my RIO shelves. They hold a lot! And my lumber cart is overflowing. I've got to learn to do something about my scraps. Another thing I'm working on.

Thanks for all you do for us! Enjoy the rest of the summer!” —Gayle W.

*“Stop pointing out your mistakes” will be etched into my tombstone.
—Steve*

“All of these tips are valuable. I wish I had seen some of them years ago. An additional thing that I’ve learned the hard way is if you’re going to build something incorporating hardware, especially hardware that you haven’t used before, buy the hardware first. Build the project around it. There is little more frustrating than building something and then having to alter it because the hardware you need isn’t available. Or hardware is available but it doesn’t work the way you want it to. Hinges are a prime example.

Anyway, keep on truckin’.” —Dennis N.

Great tip. Finding the right hinge can be a nightmare after you’ve already built the project. More than once I’ve had to modify a hinge with a grinder to get it to fit. —Steve

“Tip #5 particularly resonates for me, as part of my favorite woodworking story: My wife and I had planned to replace our laminate kitchen countertop with a dark hardwood countertop, inspired by cabin decor from a recent getaway. I was new to woodworking and had not yet used a table saw, but knew that I would need one to rip and bevel some boards for a professional look. I made my plans, studied Steve’s videos, borrowed a friend’s little job site saw, and gave it a go. They turned out amazing! The whole project, seeing how the countertop and cabinets underneath were assembled, I just kept thinking how demystifying it all was — it wasn’t rocket science, it was doable. Those counters are my proudest woodworking accomplishment to date.

But the best part of the story: This project took place in January 2021. On demo day, after I had taken out the last bit of the old counter, I was — oddly — absolutely wiped. I then sat down for dinner... and couldn’t taste anything. The counters were cut, assembled, stained, and Waterlox-ed all during a bout of covid!



Happy woodworking.” —Brian H.

Covid was absolutely not the best part of that story! 😊 But great looking countertop! —Steve

“While I’m not much of a woodworker these days, I was surprised to see how many of these also apply for my main hobby — leathercrafting! Thanks for the inspiring newsletter — time to get off my bum again and start my next project!

Break a (wooden) leg!” —Karl T.

Haha...the woodworking conceit of this newsletter is a ruse. —Steve

“Thanks so much for consolidating all those important tips into one newsletter. I really got into gardening this year but my mere mortal shop awaits cooler weather in September.

Spent some amazing time in Lima, Peru with family and was very inspired by the amazing woodwork I saw. This is from the historic old city of Lima. These balconies were on all the townhouses that lined the streets.” —Leslie L.



Wow! Amazing. Peru has been on my shortlist of places to visit for years. —Steve

*Thoughts on this month's newsletter? Got a story to tell? Just want to say hi?
Drop me a line by simply replying to this email.*

Member Projects

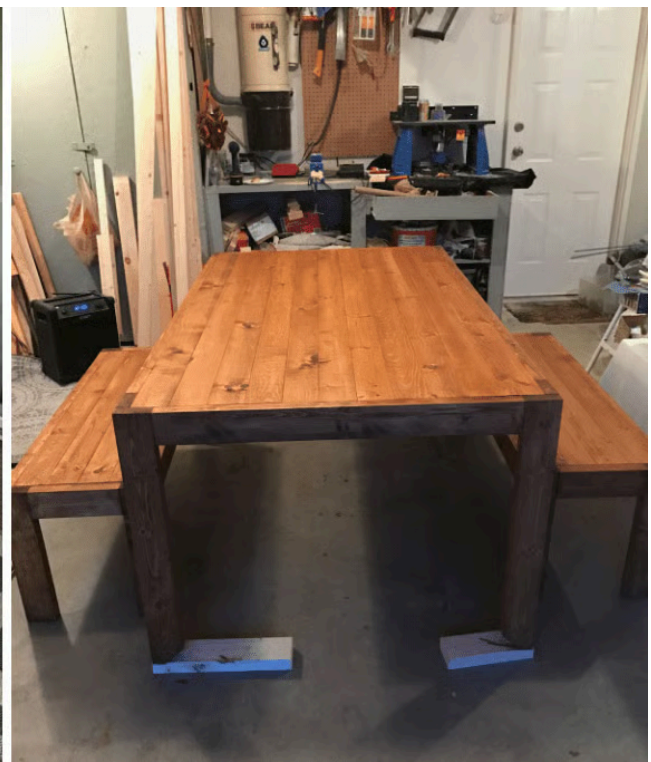
“I want to thank you for your courses and videos. Between them you have given me confidence in woodworking. I used your plans and built a couple of Adirondack chairs for our front patio. Between your plans and the video on making the chairs I knew I could make them. They turned out great. Below is one of the chairs.

Again, thank you and keep up the good work.” —Keith W.



OMG the color is amazing! I absolutely love this! — Steve

“Hi Steve, using your advice on the Kreg jig, tools for the woodworking shop, and your ideas, these are just a couple things I have turned out of my little shop. It all started with that bench, my wife wanted one by our front door. I later built the patio table and chairs which sit on our porch now (wife claimed it before I could decide what to do with it).



If there's a couple things I have learned over the last 10 years it's this:

- 1) You don't need the most expensive tools in the store to produce a nice project (I bought some of my stuff used and upgraded when I could)
- 2) You can use ideas from previous projects to help you with future ones
- 3) This one is probably the most important: enjoy every minute of your project and take away with you the ideas that worked well and the ones

that didn't.

Looking forward to the next issue and the next project.

Thanks!" —Lloyd L.

Thanks Lloyd! Definitely agree with these 3 tips! It's funny how often we need to remind ourselves to enjoy the experience of making things. It's just woodworking. —Steve

Here's my California casual side table! Extra-fancy two-tone edition.
—David F.



Love this color. Here's a secret about me: I just bought a purple couch!

— Steve

Have you made something you want over a quarter million people to see in next month's newsletter? Just hit reply and send me a pic.

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