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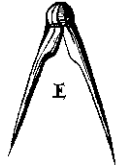
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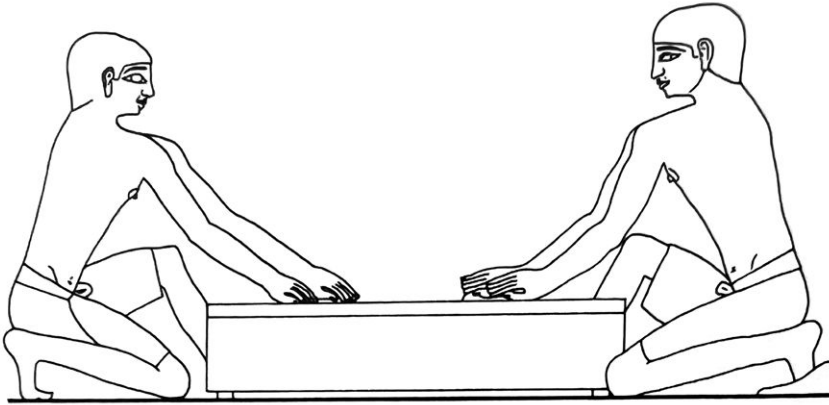
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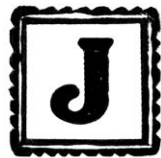
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FLAT & SMOOTH

EGYPTIAN WOODWORKERS SANDING A BOX, FIFTH DYNASTY. FROM "EGYPTIAN WOODWORKING AND FURNITURE" (SHIRE) BY GEOFFREY KILLEN.

True Grit: A Dirty Job, But Not a Dirty Word



James Krenov was the first woodworker I heard about who didn't use sandpaper. That idea – no sandpaper – was so shocking that I can remember the moment it happened. My boss at the time handed me a copy of "A Cabinet-maker's Notebook," and mentioned that Krenov used only planes and scrapers to finish his furniture. I took the book with a somewhat skeptical look on my face. I was not impressed, but I was amazed.

Since that moment in the 1990s, I have met lots of woodworkers who eschew abrasives. They finish the work with edge tools only. Their sharp steel edges slice open the individual cells of the wood, allowing us to peer inside. The edge tools produce a shimmering glow in the wood that is almost unobtainable with sandpaper. And they do it all without producing the lung-destroying dust that comes with sanding.

Or that's how the story goes.

Anyone who has embraced edge tools (myself included) goes through a phase where they finish projects using only sharpened steel edges. To be sure, this phase makes us better sharpeners. It makes us better users of planes and scrapers. But it doesn't necessarily make our projects any better.

I invite you to conduct the following experiment. Plane one face of a board dead flat without any plane tracks. Then finish its other face with sandpaper, working up the grits with care to



IT'S SANDED

A STOOL IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM THAT HAS BEEN FINISHED WITH SANDSTONING, ACCORDING TO KILLEN, AUTHOR OF "EGYPTIAN WOODWORKING AND FURNITURE." MANY PIECES OF EGYPTIAN FURNITURE SHOW SIGNS OF BEING FINISHED WITH SCRAPING OR RUBBING WITH SANDSTONE.

#220. Now finish both faces of the board with shellac, lacquer or varnish. Hand the board to another woodworker and ask them to figure out which is which.

I've done this. It's a guessing game.

While there might be microscopic differences between surfaces that have been planed and those that have been sanded, they aren't noticeable to the naked eye once a film finish has been applied. And people who say they can tell the difference are just guessing. (I have played this parlor game many times.)

So why learn to use a handplane? Easy! It's usually faster than sanding. It produces little lung-clogging dust. And it's frankly more enjoyable than sanding.

So why learn to sand? Because woodworkers have been doing it for at least 4,000 years (abrasive technology is older than the first handplane), and sanding can easily accomplish things that are difficult to do with edge tools.

In other words: You probably should learn to do both.

When I learned to finish surfaces, this was the routine: Plane the surfaces until you cannot improve them. Scrape any tear-out. Quickly sand the surfaces with a fine-grit paper to blend them and produce a consistent surface.

The above traditional technique (around since at least the 18th century) quickly produces nice surfaces. Using a combination of planes and abrasives is faster than using only planes or only abrasives (assuming we are all striving to get to the same destination).

If you don't believe me, ask the ancient Egyptians. Or Grinling Gibbons. Or A.J. Roubo.

TRUE GRIT



A FLEXIBLE RASP

CHAIRMAKER CHRIS WILLIAMS DEMONSTRATING HOW HE AND JOHN BROWN SHAPED THE ARMBOW USING STRIPS OF ABRASIVE, MUCH LIKE A SHOESHINER.

BUT THERE'S MORE

Sometimes I use abrasives to round over corners, produce fine chamfers or to fair curves. In other words, I use abrasives to shape the wood – not just prepare it for a finish. Unlike all the stuff above, this is not a known historical technique. Yet I gladly stand by it. Let's talk about it.

I love my rasps. These steel tools allow me to shape wood without regard for grain direction or the shape of the wooden surface I'm working. I can just as easily shape a curved surface as I can a flat one. Rasps work by means of many tiny teeth that minutely scrape the wood. The fact that there are hundreds or thousands of teeth makes the work go quickly.

Each tooth of a rasp looks like a triangular pyramid. In fact, if you look closely enough, you will see that the teeth on a rasp look a lot like the teeth on a handsaw or backsaw. After drinking a couple beers, I would eagerly say that a rasp is only a little different than a saw. The primary difference is in the arrangement of the teeth. The teeth on a handmade rasp are scattered randomly on a steel blank. The teeth on a saw are arranged in a discreet line on one edge of the steel blank.

Also, the rasp and the saw make the same sound in use. They provide the same vibrational feedback to the user. And the teeth of the saw and the rasp both stop cutting when waste wood clogs up the teeth.

Sandpaper is not much different. Its teeth are randomly scattered over the substrate (paper, cloth, woven material). They also make tiny cuts. They also stop cutting when waste wood clogs up the teeth. And sandpaper makes the same "shushing" sound.

THE STICK CHAIR JOURNAL



*11 Reams and 6 Quire Paper Emery £10/3/0
1 Ream Sand Do (Paper) £0/10/0*

— *The 1800 inventory of ironmonger Christopher Gabriel of London. A ream is 500 sheets, and a quire is 24 sheets. So, Gabriel had 5,644 sheets of emery paper and 500 sheets of sandpaper on hand that day. From “Christopher Gabriel and the Tool Trade in 18th Century London” (Astragal Press) by Jane & Mark Rees.*

Put another way, sandpaper is just a flexible rasp or saw. It uses the same cutting technology – tiny teeth. The only difference is that with sandpaper the teeth are bonded to a flexible backing.

So, if you don't use sandpaper, is it because you are opposed to paper or cloth?

I'm not trying to be a jerk. I am happy for you to use the tools that please you. If you hate sandpaper, fine. Don't use sandpaper. But don't delude yourself into some historical reverie in the process. And don't (as mentioned above) assert that a sanded surface is inferior.

Abrasives have been around for as long as human history has been recording its progress. They have been used in woodworking since (at least) ancient Egypt. They show up throughout history – even in the beloved Golden Age of Furniture in the 18th century. And like any tool, they are useful when used in the right place, in the right way and at the right time.

In other words, don't make a chair seat using only #40-grit sandpaper (unless that's the only tool you have). That's just as peculiar as making the seat using only a scraper or a travisher. Or only an adze.

The world is filled with many good tools and questionable opinions. So, keep an open mind and pick the tools you like and that bring happiness (or, as in my case, buy groceries). ^



RECOMMENDED: 'TURKEY WING' CORN WHISK

WHEN I SADDLE A SEAT, I DON'T BRUSH AWAY THE WASTE WITH MY HANDS; I'VE GOTTEN TOO MANY SPLINTERS THAT WAY. AND MOST BENCH BRUSHES ARE TOO FINE TO DEAL WITH THE HEAVY CHIPS. THE SOLUTION: A "TURKEY WING" CORN WHISK. THESE SMALL BROOMS HAVE STIFF BROOMCORN (*SORGHUM VULGARE*) FIBERS THAT EASILY PUSH HEAVY CHIPS ASIDE. PLUS, THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF BROOM MAKERS OUT THERE WHO SELL HANDMADE VERSIONS – SOME QUITE ELABORATE – FOR \$20 TO \$35. (GO TO [ETSY.COM](https://www.etsy.com) AND SEARCH FOR "TURKEY WING CORN WHISK.") I LOVE THE MULTICOLORED WHISKS BECAUSE THEY DON'T GET LOST IN ALL THE BROWN SHAVINGS.