



SCOTT MORRISON: NURTURING WOOD

Finding comfort and connection in “Butterfly-Jointed” Rocking Chairs

Story by Stella Fong, Photography by Janie Osborne

Scott Morrison is comfortably situated above the Stillwater River in Columbus, in south central Montana. In his woodworking studio, he transforms raw wood into elegant rocking chairs strengthened with his signature “butterfly joints.” Three years ago, Morrison and his wife, Val, took flight from their life in Southern California and landed on a picturesque hill up Countryman Creek Road.

They migrated to Montana sight unseen. The Internet enticed them to their new nest-



ing grounds with Val wanting vistas and Scott requiring space for a shop. Both wanted a “cool little place with a view.” Scott suggests that he is a “Montana native who wasn’t born here.” Settled on 20 acres—with the Beartooth, Crazy, and Pryor mountain ranges gracing their horizon—Scott is already talking about expanding his 1,500-square-foot workshop.

The stages in Morrison’s adult life have a common thread of sky and flight. He worked as a cryptographic engineer for the



From left: The headrest, and every detail, of Scott Morrison’s chairs are hand-crafted and made from quality hardwoods. Morrison enjoys his work in his comfortable studio outside Columbus, Mont. Wood shavings are common in Morrison’s studio.



Morrison credits his father, a blue collar construction worker, for teaching him to love working with his hands.



Left: The Oregon Black Walnut chair is a popular choice among Morrison's clients. Above: Morrison designed the Butterfly Joint specifically for his unique chairs. He uses the "Scorp" tool to, as he puts it, "scoop out a chair's seat."

United States Air Force, and on the Space Shuttle and Titan Missile programs. He founded go2 Systems, a mobile Yellow Page listing, growing the company to 140 employees while securing two patents uniting Global Positioning System (GPS) with cell phones. Then he retired from the software business and took up woodworking. In his latest phase, he utilizes a mortise and tenon joint he calls the "butterfly joint" as an integral part in his furniture pieces.

Morrison is a Renaissance man. He wears his accomplishments and talents behind his boyish good looks and casual manner. His playful eyes hint at his sense of humor and belie a deep thinker. The calluses on his hands and his freshly scratched arms expose his seriousness about this period in his life.

Morrison credits his father, a blue collar construction worker, for teaching him to love working with his hands. He built birdhouses to impress his mother. But it was his Grandma Rose who inspired his fascination with rocking chairs. "All the greatest grandmothers have a rocking chair," he says as he tells of how he and his two brothers fought over who would sit in their grandmother's chair.

Morrison is self taught, but his time as a software engineer may have provided the backbone for his methodological progression as a fine woodworker. He spent years honing his craft. He sought out legendary Sam Maloof, an American furniture maker whose work is found at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and learned from him. He entered competitions and submitted works to juried shows.



Scott uses a variety of beautiful hardwoods to make his chairs: hard maple, English walnut, tiger maple, African rosewood, Oregon black walnut, cherry, African anegre and birds-eye maple.

furniture category.

In the same year Morrison entered a half-dozen pieces in the Festival of the Arts in Laguna Beach. From July to September, Morrison spent his days talking to people. "I am an animated guy. There were people three or four deep waiting to talk to me," he recounts with cockiness. At night, in his three-car garage, Morrison built more furniture to sell. With the increased demand for his creations, along with growing complaints from his neighbors of noise, the time had arrived to find a new place to work and grow.

Morrison admits that his first chairs were strong but not comfortable. He went straight into building "torture chambers," he says with a chuckle. He sold the very first piece that was saleable but cried like a baby when he parted with it. In 2003 he entered a double seat rocker named "Make Mine a Double" at the San Diego County Fair Design in Wood Exhibition, a juried show that now averages more than 300 entries from all over the world. The Oregon black walnut creation placed first in the contemporary woodworking

Morrison nurtures his pieces as if they were children. These days he mostly makes rocking chairs, though he will consider other commissions. Walnut and cherry woods are his favorite media. "These woods have really good personalities. Their inner glow makes them friendly to work with." He then begins his analogy, "Some kids are spoiled. Others fight you all the way."

A "box of parameters" guides Morrison in his work. He



BRETT JAMES SMITH, *River Fisherman*, O/C, 20" x 22"



BOB BARLOW, *Evening on the Yellowstone River*, O/C, 28" x 36"

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Morrison nurtures his pieces as if they were children.

realizes that the actual wood has limitations, so he must work within the boundaries of each piece. His chairs must be comfortable and good looking. Longevity is the final requirement: "I want to build chairs to last for generations."

When asked if Morrison favors a particular stage of his work, he confesses to enjoying the entire process. He says he will never hire anyone to help him with his woodworking. "I do not want anyone else to raise my kids." From the beginning, "I love picking the wood, establishing a connection with it." On subsequent steps, he says, "Nobody likes to sand, but I think wood takes on personality when sanding." About the people who buy his wares he says, "I want to meet every dang one of them."

Morrison communicates with his clients on the Internet or telephone. When customizing a project for his buyers, he becomes familiar with not only their needs and desires, but their body dimensions and curves. On Morrison's website (www.finewoodworker.com), he states, "The match between human form and chair, done correctly, becomes the first goal

and number one rule." In everyday terms, Morrison's daily mantra is handwritten on his workshop wall: "I don't want to change the world. I just want to make it a more comfortable place to sit."

Morrison's rockers are comfortable for the body and yet eye-catching. Private art consultant and former Big Sky gallery owner Melissa Cronin believes Morrison is a "woodworker with a vision and his work is a higher form of art." Debbie DeSantos, from Bend, Wash., who recently purchased two barstools, believes Morrison's artistic ability is unparalleled. She says his chairs are beautiful and his workmanship is finely detailed. "The back is set at such a good angle that it is good for posture, not uncomfortable." His identity as a fine artist was further validated when his 'Rocker Cradle', a rocking chair and cradle combination, was accepted into the 2005 Western Design Conference Exhibition and Sale in Cody, Wyo.

Morrison works a full day, every day. A chair may take him one month to complete, but he can work on "three chairs



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I'm in love with Montana. For other states I have some affection. But with Montana it is love. And it's difficult to analyze love when you're in it."
— John Steinbeck



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How does Scott carry his chairs from place-to-place? "As far as carrying the chairs," he says, "well...yes, this [moving them around on my back] is the easiest way I've found to carry them."

and finish them in one month and one day." Morrison is backlogged six months most of the year, and up to one year in the summer. When asked what motivates him to begin his day's work, he quickly says, "Coffee." Upon deeper reflection, he admits that he leaves unfinished work the night before, giving him objectives for the next day.

Clients from all over the world solicit his craftsmanship. Buyers vary in motive when purchasing his furniture, from collectors to those whom he describes as people who appreciate quality handcrafted workmanship. Morrison's butterfly joint, which is used to unite the arm rest and the seat and to distribute pressure on the joint's wings, provides another distinctive feature for admirers.

Scott Morrison may want us to believe that he just fluttered into Montana with his butterfly-jointed rocking chairs. But his landing in Columbus is part of the tapestry he has woven over his lifetime. He has arrived equipped with talents that have already made the world a more comfortable place to sit. **BSJ**