



Charles Prowell in Sebastopol workshop.  
*Sebastopol craftsman puts his art to work* D1

**Prep surprises**

Newman boys, Petaluma girls fall in basketball playoffs C1



Santa Rosa, California, Saturday, March 7, 1998

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**GARDEN:**

Spring budding, and the stately foxtail lily

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The Press Democrat

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Home Life

Santa Rosa, California, Saturday, March 7, 1998

The front gate of Rick Mitchell's Petaluma home, built by Prowell, exudes craftsmanship.



Prowell uses a draw knife to shape part of a standing mirror in his Sebastopol shop.



Custom woodworker Charles Prowell with a fence he built for a home in Ross Valley, Marin County. As a child, building fences was one of the first things he learned as a woodworker.

MASTER OF HIS ART  
**WOODWORKS**

Sonoma County craftsmen such as Charles Prowell combine creativity and commerce for their love of wood

**B**y age 16, custom woodworker Charles Prowell made good pocket money working for his stepfather, an Illinois contractor.

"He built houses," Prowell remembers. "My job was to build fences. That was one of the first things I could do all on my own. I didn't set the fence posts because I was too small to do that. But I cut and nailed all the rails to the fence posts."

Prowell, now 47, has renovated Victorians, built restaurants and runs his own Sebastopol business, Charles Prowell Woodworks, designing and crafting fine furniture.

And he's putting up fences again. However, the fences he makes now are upscale, furniture-grade modular panels, designed and crafted as carefully as his furniture.

He's well-known among members of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association, and to Bay Area patrons who order his furniture and his fences.

And his name should be familiar to readers of such magazines as



Prowell, at his drawing board in his Sebastopol workshop, has renovated Victorians, built restaurants and now designs custom furniture.

Fine Homebuilding, Woodwork, Fine Woodworking and Old House Journal. He has written for Fine Woodworking magazine and his fences or furnishings were featured in other magazines.

Like many professional members of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association, Prowell has developed his fences into a produc-

tion line niche market that financially supports the one-of-a-kind creative pieces he would prefer to concentrate on.

"Sometimes," Prowell said, "I can't wait to get to the shop."

When he's in his office, he is a businessman scheduling client meetings, marketing himself and

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'Real jobs' support more artistic work

**A**nyone who is a member of the ancient order of woodworkers has one thing in common: They love to work with wood and create. No one forced them to do it.

But love of one's work doesn't pay the rent, so woodworkers find ways to combine art and commerce, and stay solvent.

Sebastopol craftsman Charles Prowell said, "It is a constant struggle to keep above water when, as people say, there are 'real jobs' out there."

When Prowell was growing up, his stepfather told him, "If you tend to be a nail-biter, get a regular day job and look on wood working as a hobby."

It's a matter of combining art and business, being a craftsman and bean counter, knowing how to create and how to sell.

The artist must be willing to craft sure-sell items to support

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STORIES BY GEORGE HOWER/STAFF WRITER ■ PRESS DEMOCRAT PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT MANCHESTER

**Masters**

Continued from Page D1 updating financial records. It's a matter of combining business and art to survive, he said.

"Most people have their own niche or specialty, their own way of making money," said David J. Marks of Santa Rosa, a designer and craftsman and member of the Sonoma County Woodworkers' Association.

Marks wants to be recognized more as an artist than as a furniture maker. That's his niche. His clients are perfectionists who demand a high standard of quality, he said.

Marks' specialty is applying gold leaf, silver, copper leaf and Dutch metal — it looks like brass leaf, he said — and creating something that looks ancient.

"That is in vogue now — creating something that looks like it was made hundreds of years ago," Marks said.

Karl Shumaker of Sebastopol has positioned himself competitively in the furniture market with furniture and marquetry created by a laser. Marquetry is the art of creating inlay images or patterns.

Shumaker, who studied with the famed Swedish furniture builder James Krenov in Fort Bragg, describes his work as part of a graphic art last popular in the Art Nouveau period.

Prowell's niche right now is producing dressy gates and fences.

His present design for gates and fences was born in the mid 1980s after he was commissioned to make a front door for a Larkspur woman. As soon as that was done, she asked him to put up a fence and gate.

"While we were building the fence we got to thinking about the gate," he said. "Our minds were still on door construction and we started to think of the gate as a door."

That, he said, was how his first Craftsman-style stile and rail gate came about.

"I think I made all the design solutions while building the fence," Prowell said. "Nowhere else did I see a stile and rail gate."

Prowell's fence designs have mortised slots through which a person can catch a glimpse of what is on the other side of the fence. If the gate has an arch, the slots are cut to match the basic arch shape.

About the same time that Prowell started making stile and rail gates and modular fences, he started to change his approach to making legs for one-of-a-kind tables.

Prowell stopped using four-corner, block table legs and experimented with tapered table legs. His goal was to convey a "frail intimacy," and the development of those legs was a gradual evolution.

"Nothing associates more with sensuality than a ballerina when she is en pointe," Prowell said.

When people look at the legs on his tables, they should see frail, delicate yet finely balanced work, he explained. The rest of the table is fairly straightforward and the eye gravitates toward that leg.

The first time Prowell put ballerina-style legs on a table he was working on a glass top table.

"I thought the legs would be more visible, but, as it turns out, you don't have to use glass," he said. Even with a wood table, he said, the legs are fully exposed from all angles except above the table.

The table top, Prowell added, has a minimum of detail work. "You have to be careful about the sum of details you put in. It can't be too frou-frou. Sometimes you need two or three runs at a piece before you get the right balance."

If you make doors or gates one year and a story about it gets into a magazine, Prowell said, "then that's what you are for that year — the maker of fences and gates."

That could change. One of his ballerina-leg end tables is in the "Artful Living" juried exhibit, on display through March 29 at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts, 6821 Laguna Park Way.

**Support**

Continued from Page D1 himself, the artist, and juggle his schedule so he do creative work, too.

"There are a lot of problems we all have to face," Prowell said. "When you are running a one-man cottage industry business, you have to take time out and go meet patrons. This is non-billable time."

"It requires a different side of the brain than you use when you are in the shop," Prowell said. "When you are working in the shop you are fundamentally in a grounded, methodical, patient side of the business. It is not a social gadabout thing. You have to stay focused. You can't daydream."

And it helps to keep costs down as well as drive revenues.

"Most of the work I do is for people in the Bay Area and down the Peninsula, but it's cheaper to live here and have a shop here," said designer and craftsman David J. Marks, who lives in Santa Rosa.

Beside striving for clients in Marin County and San Francisco and on the Peninsula, Marks cultivates New York and Boston money. His works have been shown in New York and he'll participate in a Boston show in March.

He also teaches part-time at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, gives workshops and works with apprentices.