



PHOTO BY LEIGHT

Emil in shop doorway, sander in background, ca. 1983.

EMIL MILAN

The (re)-introduction of a seminal American woodworker.

BY BARRY GORDON, WITH NORM SARTORIUS AND PHIL JURUS

Emil Milan was a bona fide character. Little recognized and historically underappreciated, he was the antithesis of the archetypical “Organization Man” of his era. Throughout his career, stretching from the 1950s to the 1980s, Emil marched to a different drummer. He was not particularly concerned about other people’s opinions of the way he lived or worked.

Emil solved problems in original ways. A master at using the bandsaw, Emil initially had three saws in his studio, located in an old barn in rural Pennsylvania. A surplus Bureau of Ships saw was so large that it was set in a pit. Emil had simply cut through the barn’s floor and excavated the underlying rock.

In later years, the barn contained only two saws—he’d moved the third across the road into the living room of his house! Why? Emil used pieces of slab wood as

material for making spoons and as fuel for his living room woodstove. If he came across a chunk suitable for a spoon while loading the stove, he would saw the blank, set it aside, and throw the cutoffs back into the firewood pile by the stove.

That saw and its pile of sawdust are indicative of Emil’s search for efficiency and his way of plowing through life—and probably contributed to his bachelorhood. A penchant for regularly smoking White Owl cigars may have been another reason he stayed single.

Everyone who knew Emil well has humorous stories reflecting his creativity, wit and unconventional ingenuity. For example, you’ll hear about how Emil solved the problem of his chronic headaches. His physician could find neither cause nor solution. Finally, the doctor mentioned that a constant draft aimed at one side of

the head might cause headaches. While Emil drove home in his derelict vehicle, he realized that the driver’s door sagged and didn’t seal, producing just such a draft. Emil’s unconventional but effective and economical solution? Purchase a beret and pull it down over the left side of his head while he drove. No more draft, no more headaches!

A close friend affectionately described Emil as both the laziest and the hardest-working man he knew. Although Emil was capable of sprints of prodigious output, he preferred a relaxed existence. Broadly curious, he read voraciously and enjoyed sustained conversation in a “salon” setting, transposed to the hills of rural Pennsylvania. An excellent chef, known for pies with fillings made from berries harvested on his property, he very much enjoyed a fine repast in the company of friends. He was

an avid photographer and was part of an informal, but very active, photo club. Emil also had a longstanding fascination with boats. He frequently read about and discussed boatbuilding, but, alas, the interest remained vicarious—he never built one.

Depicting Emil as a humorous character should not overshadow his important contribution to studio woodworking. By example and through teaching, Emil influenced many woodworkers. He trained in sculpture and worked in a Modernist style, primarily creating elegant carved objects. Most were functional, such as bowls, trays and spoons (3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12), but many others, primarily fish and birds (1, 6, 7, 8), were decorative. He also produced an occasional piece of furniture. One of the objects for which Emil was best known was an ingenious two-piece cutting board (3, 4). A bowl for the chopped food nested in one end of the thick board, giving the illusion of it all being a single piece.

One of these cutting boards is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery. His work is also found in the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. Significant early exhibitions that included his work were the landmark *Designer Craftsmen U.S.A. 1953*, co-sponsored by The Brooklyn Museum, and the Renwick Gallery's *Craft Multiples* (ca.1975). Here he was in the company of Bob Stoksdale, Wendell Castle, James Prestini, George Nakashima and Wharton Esherick—all noted woodworkers. His pieces are currently pursued by collectors and appear regularly on eBay and in galleries specializing in mid-century modern objects.

Born in New Jersey, Emil lived from 1922 to 1985. During WWII, he served in the US Army as an MP in Europe. After the war, he took classes for several years at the Art Students League of New York, joining a distinguished group of alumni including Alexander Calder, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Louise Nevelson. In the early 1950s, he was living in his parents' home, apparently carving in a basement workshop. He subsequently moved to a building in Orange, New Jersey, and, in 1962, relocated to a former dairy farm in a remote region of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Emil spent a lot of time at Peters Valley Craft Center in New Jersey, helping to set



1. Typical Bird; black walnut; 10" x 2" x 9"; collection of John Sheridan.



2. Scoop; hard maple; 11" x 4" x 2-1/2"; collection of Morris and Nan Baker.



3. Cutting Board and Scoop; hard maple; 20" x 12" x 2-1/2"; collection of Morris and Nan Baker.



4. A similar cutting board and scoop, with the scoop removed; collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

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5. Emil teaching,
Pennsylvania, unknown date.

6. Double Birds; rosewood;
5" x 4" x 5-1/2"; collection of
Morris and Nan Baker.

7. Fish Sculpture; black
walnut; 14" x 11" x 13-1/2";
collection of Morris and Nan
Baker.

8. Grouse; sumac;
14" x 6" x 9-1/2"; collection of
Morris and Nan Baker.



up its woodworking program. He served as an associate (1971-72), resident (1973), and taught eleven times (1971-1984). He was also an instructor in a USDA-Cooperative Extension Service craft education program in rural Pennsylvania that operated from the late 1960s into the early 1980s.

In 1964-65, his teaching extended to Honduras, where he participated in a USAID program at the invitation of renowned woodworkers Joyce and Edgar Anderson. Emil's role was to assist Hondurans in developing skills to carve and market functional objects, using local woods. There is anecdotal evidence that traces of his style can still be found in products from that region. His enduring friendship

with the Andersons originated during the years when Modernist craftspeople were first finding one another and starting to form craft organizations. For their part, Emil and the Andersons were involved in the formative years of the New Jersey Designer Craftsmen.

Little is known regarding early influences that may have led Emil to a career in contemporary crafts. He carved during his time in the Army and, apparently, even before then. He may have gained an understanding of manipulating materials from his father (an industrial welder) as Emil accompanied him doing home repairs and simple creative projects. Emil was known throughout his career to be confident and

effective in tackling all sorts of repairs and construction projects.

Emil used the bandsaw as a carving tool, shaping not only the plan view and profile of spoons, fish, birds and bowls, but also for contouring the curved intermediate surfaces (5). Creating these surfaces meant using only a single point of contact for support between the wood and the saw table. With an excellent sense of form and great fluidity of movement, a performance by Emil could be titled: "Ballet with Bandsaw and Wood". His physique, however, was not at all evocative of a dancer's. He was stocky and powerful, partly a result of years of weight lifting and partly attributable to his love of good food. His strength, fine eye



9. Handled Two-Compartment Bowl (1985); hard maple; 18" x 8" x 1-3/4"; collection of Morris and Nan Baker.

10. Handled Shallow Bowl; hard maple; 17-1/2" x 11" x 2"; collection of Morris and Nan Baker.

11. Salt Cellars with Spoons; top: hard maple, 6" x 2-3/4" x 3/4"; bottom: bissilon, 4-3/4" x 2-3/4" x 1-1/2"; collections of Morris and Nan Baker and Barry and Barbara Gordon.

12. Spatulas & Salad Servers (left); hard maple; 15" x 4" x 1-1/4", 13" x 3-3/4" x 3/4". Salad Servers (right), black cherry; 13" x 3-1/2" x 1-1/2"; collection of Morris and Nan Baker.

and smooth execution also enabled him to cut extremely large pieces freehand.

Emil developed a repertoire and produced many copies of his designs. He used patterns and produced some pieces in small batches. For most work, however, each piece was shaped individually, often varying considerably in form and size from other examples of the same item. He explored the use of duplicating machines, but it's not clear how successfully he utilized them. Speed was important to Emil and he worked as rapidly as possible, consistent with good workmanship. He diligently conserved wood, using cut-offs from a large bowl as material for a fish or bird, then taking the remnants from that object to make salt cellars and their tiny

spoons (11).

The June 1957 *Craft Horizons* (predecessor of *American Craft*) contains an article on Emil subtitled, "the maker of the 'emil-an' [sic] bowls tells why and how he uses machines—and still gets a handmade look." Ignoring others' disdain for power tools in carving, Emil made ready use of Forstner bits for hollowing, followed by ball mills in die grinders for intermediate smoothing of bowl and spoon interiors. He used powered abrasives for shaping, which allowed him to emphasize the curved intersections of adjacent surfaces. Using a two-wheel stationary sander he designed and built, Emil would shape an object on an inflatable drum at one end and refine

its surfaces, freehand, on the unsupported portion of a sanding belt at the other end. Versions of this sander were built and sold to other woodworkers.

When he taught, however, the focus was on edge tools, particularly gouges for hollowing. It's likely that his Arts Students League education provided strong grounding in the use of these traditional tools. He also used gouges and chisels on the surfaces of his figurative sculptures.

Emil's species of choice for much of his career were black walnut and a variety of exotics. He used bubinga, wenge, lignum vitae, zebrawood, teak and Brazilian rosewood, among others. Hard maple was added later. He was cognizant of the



13. Emil's studio barn,
November, 2008.

PHOTO BY BARBARA GORDON

beauty of special pieces of wood and often exploited strong figure. Emil worked primarily from boards but also utilized chunks. Though he understood the structure of wood, he seems to have envisioned his material as rectilinear blocks and didn't necessarily follow grain direction when determining the form of individual objects. In the earlier years, he employed a lacquer finish. He used linseed oil-based concoctions for many of the food utensils and, in later years, for other objects as well.

When Emil's career began, there wasn't much retail infrastructure for crafts. An attempt to sell his work to stores (including Niemann-Marcus and Hammacher Schlemmer) involved participation in Buckridge Contemporary Design, for which Emil made his creations on a production-type basis. The enterprise, however, was relatively short-lived.

Emil participated in very few craft fairs, selling instead through a small number of galleries, including The Craft Barn (in Florida, a town in New York) and Sticks and Stones (in Eagles Mere, Pennsylvania). These sales were supplemented by retail commissions, including some for furniture, primarily tables. He occasionally created figurative sculpture, but nothing is known about sales of this work. He was notorious for being tardy in filling orders and commissions. One hears stories about customers standing around the unheated barn studio on Christmas Eve as Emil worked furiously to complete their items!

A major part of Emil's later career involved his friendship with Andrew Willner. Andy, a highly respected furniture maker when he and Emil met at Peters Valley in 1972, subsequently moved to a location near Emil's in Pennsylvania and stayed in that area until 1981. Their different backgrounds, Andy's training in the design and construction of whimsical furniture, and Emil's two-decade history of shaping wood, complemented each other throughout their woodworking discourse. Andy's beautifully written, poignant eulogy to Emil in the Letters column of the November/December 1985 (#55) issue of *Fine Woodworking* is highly recommended reading.

Around 1980, Emil entered a period of decline. Having given up driving several years earlier, he was dependent on others for transportation from his remote location. Friends, relatives and neighbors were willing to assist, but Emil's isolation increased. In compromised health, he lived in primitive conditions in an uninsulated, poorly heated house where frozen pipes cut off the water supply. The gregarious Emil of earlier years became quite reclusive.

For most of his career Emil signed his work "Emilan" in script, along with the common name of the wood species. A small part of his output also included "Thompson Pa." and an even smaller number showed the year. A two-compartment bowl (9) is one of the rare dated pieces. It is marked "85." Emil died in April of that year. Even in poor health and probably

quite discouraged, he was still capable of creating a fine piece.

Maybe Emil should best be remembered as a superb instructor, relying on demonstration as his primary teaching style. He was known for his kindness towards students, emphasizing positive comments and constructive criticism as he encouraged workshop participants to complete projects and leave with a finished object. The teaching was geographically confined, but his influence spread as students disseminated the knowledge and skills he had shared. Emil's approach to woodworking affected the careers of many woodworkers, including the authors of this article.

Emil's house was long ago burned as a fire department practice exercise. The barn that housed his studio is dilapidated and likely to be demolished (13). Soon nothing will be left to mark the workplace of this unique participant in the American woodworking scene. Perhaps the barn's timbers can be salvaged for re-use. If so, they would parallel the story of Emil's Milan's life, once neglected, but now being rescued.

In February 2008, the authors began to create a biography and archive for Emil. Readers who are able to contribute information or materials are urged to contact us at: infoemilan@gmail.com. Continuing research about Emil Milan will be supported, in part, by a grant from the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design. The authors gratefully acknowledge this assistance.