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With chair caning, practice makes perfect

Home Spotlight

by Carrol Krause
May 20, 2006

Herald-Times Homes

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Almost 25 years ago, Amy Thurman sat down in front of an antique chair with damaged caning, determined to learn how to master the timeless craft. Despite having little experience with other handicrafts, or with fiber arts such as knitting or weaving, she found she did a good job of caning her own furniture.

Today, after working on "probably thousands" of chairs for other people, she's a valuable resource for anyone who has a cherished piece of furniture that needs repair.

"It started out as a hobby," Amy recalled. "I like working puzzles and putting them together, and in a way chair caning is a lot like that. You see the finished product and say, 'oh, wow!'"

Canework is essentially a form of basketry that has been used in furniture-making for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Caning employs materials such as reed, fiber rush and ashwood splints. Some furniture requires hand-woven caning that's threaded through holes in the frame. Other furniture uses sheets of pre-woven caning that must be held in place with glue. Still other chairs and benches have seats woven from twine-like fiber rush, or slender wood splints.

Whichever method is called for, Amy knows how to fix it.

"When I first started, it took a long time," Amy admitted. "That's because I was reading the directions at the same time that I was working." She chuckled. "Now, I just go in and do it. I'm much faster."

Amy showed her visitor how caning is done. First of all, the damaged cane is cut away and removed. If the caning is pre-woven, the spline around the edge needs to be pried up and the old glue dug out of the groove. The groove must be completely clean before it receives a new sheet of cane, or the new seat will not be flat. Amy uses vinegar to loosen the old glue, rather than employing solvents. Depending on the amount and type of glue, this can be a lengthy process.

"I've come across some seats that are stapled in," she said ruefully. "Those are really hard to get out. You come across a staple, and you have to get out the pliers."

The edge of the new cane sheet is then tucked firmly into the clean groove, and a new spline is glued down to neaten the appearance.

But what if the seat needs actual re-weaving, as antique furniture invariably does?

Seating herself on a stool in front of a handsome old chair in her garage workshop, Amy pulled out a length of cane and ran it between her fingers.

"One side of the cane is rougher, and it will splinter more in one direction than the other," she explained. "That's something they don't teach you in the books! It's not hard to do once you get the hang of it, and it's hard to make a mistake if you're doing it right. If you feel resistance, then you're doing it wrong."

Essentially, the cane wants to be threaded in one direction only. It also needs to be woven so the smooth side is on top, to prevent the new seat from snagging on clothing or skin.

"The materials have their own ideas about how they want to be woven," she said, smiling.

Once this has been sorted out, it's time to start weaving.

Using pegs to keep the cane tightly stretched between the holes in the chair frame, Amy adroitly threaded the cane from the front to the back, over and over, all the way across the seat. Then she threaded the cane from side to side until the seat had a second layer of cane strands. Then she repeated the front-to-back and the side-to-side process, this time weaving over and under the existing strands. Then it was time to begin the diagonal threading. When the diagonal canes are being woven into place, the decorative open-hole pattern that is distinctive to chair caning finally emerges. The edges are then covered up with a binding that conceals the holes in the frame.

Amy gets all her materials from a specialty supplier in Connecticut. Pre-woven cane can be obtained at crafts stores locally, but she's not happy with the quality and prefers to mail-order a top grade.

"What I like about handwoven cane," Amy pointed out, "is that because of the continuous cane, there aren't lots of splices like in the prewoven cane."

Amy used to take a photo of each piece of furniture she worked on, but soon found she had an entire shoebox filled with photos. She works solely by word of mouth, and does caning work for the local furniture repair company, Monroe Furniture Restoration. She has re-caned many chairs for Nashville restaurant The Ordinary. This fall, in September and October, she will teach two chair-caning courses for Bloomington Parks and

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Over and under, then back and forth, then diagonally, the cane strands are woven. Photo by Carroll Krause



Amy Thurman deftly weaves a new strand of cane into the chair seat. Photo by Carroll Krause

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"As far as I know, I'm the only one locally doing this work," Amy said. "I don't have any helpers. That way, I can stand behind my work."

Amy says that after she does her repair work, any piece of caned furniture will be in "perfect" condition. She has never had a complaint about the quality of her work and she does a large amount of repeat business for satisfied customers.

That said, caning can't be guaranteed to last forever. Just like upholstery, caning has a finite lifespan.

"If you take care of it, it'll last for years," Amy said. "But if you stick your knee through it, that's your problem!"

Need chair caning done? Amy can be reached at amymth@peoplepc.com, or 323-2108.

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