

Precision with Patrick Edwards Transcription

Creativity: Hustlers, Fakers, & Thieves

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PE: Patrick Edwards

AM: Ali Meghdadi

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GR: Creativity, Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves.

Creativity is not the province of just a chosen few. Those who fear they have nothing to say or that it's all been said before can also grab the fire. But our ideas about practice, quality or failure shape our work. New artists, working artists, strugglers, those who've been at it all their lives grapple with these same concepts. This is the heart of our endeavor, finding the different and similar ways that artists work to be creative on Creativity, Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves.

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GR: Welcome. This is Gary Rogowski. I am joined by my apprentice, Ali Meghdadi. Hello, Ali.

AM: Hello, Gary. This episode, I'm going to talk about the concept of precision. And I'm going to talk with Patrick Edwards, a man from the 18th century. Or so it seems. I call him that because Patrick is involved with a form of woodworking called marquetry which is centuries old, but had a resurgence in the 18th century in France. And he practices the French Boulle style of marquetry that he learned in Paris. He takes veneers, thinner than a piece of shirt cardboard, very thin pieces of wood, and cuts them up on a special type of saw to make these amazing pictures in wood. He creates these beautiful, astonishing floral and geometric images to decorate all types of furniture from tables to clocks and chairs. When I first talked to him about the idea of discussing precision with me, he said, "What's so great about 90 degrees?" I went, "Well, you have a good point." But his exquisite work does show some extremely precise details. How does precision impact our work? And how does it change over time as someone gains experience? I know that this idea has changed for me. Ali, how has it changed for you, having now spent a few years at the bench?

AM: Yes. It's changed very much simply because I've gotten better. And it's one of those things that when you're first starting out, how much precision you're capable of or how much is required, right? When you're doing simpler stuff, you don't necessarily need to be at that 1,000th or 10,000th of a degree of perfection. You're not holding it up to the light you know to see if

there's just a glint of sunlight coming through.

GR: No, I get that. As our skills increase, as our practice time grows in hours, to months, to years, we get better. There's no question. But how does a master in his field feel about this idea? Let's get Patrick's take on this subject.

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GR: Hi, this is Gary Rogowski for Creativity: Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves. I am pleased and honored to have as my guest, Patrick Edwards. Hello, Patrick. How are you?

PE: Glad to be here.

GR: Great.

PE: So what's on the agenda?

GR: Oh, a little conversation. And you know we try out some stuff and talk about, I've been very interested in this idea of creativity for a while and how it affects certain people. You're a creative person. I try to be. And I know people who want to be and can't seem to find the trigger.

PE: I would object to you calling me creative because I'm basically a counterfeiter. I don't come up with new ideas. I haven't had a new idea in years. I counterfeit good ideas that I've seen other people do in the past. I don't know if that's a learning process actually as a technique, but the fact is if you asked me to freehand draw an image that I had in my mind, I couldn't do it or freehand play some music without the score. I couldn't do it or come up with some creative idea. You know anything I come up with would be 100% embedded previous ideas.

GR: Absolutely.

PE: That's why I don't do contemporary furniture. If I did a contemporary piece, it would look like something Wendell Castle did or Maloof did or Tage Frid or any of the guys I know exist doing contemporary furniture. It wouldn't be mine, you know?

GR: I believe that, okay, all right.

PE: That's the challenge for you. Prove I'm a creative person.

GR: Here's a quote. My browser opens every morning to a site by a guy named Anu Garg. He's up in Seattle, and it's called Word of Day. So this is a quote from John W. Gardner, author and leader. Never heard of him. "We must learn to honor excellence in every socially accepted human activity, however humble the activity, and to scorn shoddiness, however exalted the activity." An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society that

scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

PE: That's the metaphor.

GR: Yeah. And that's the, I think that a plumber needs to be creative. That's my broad definition of creativity. You get faced with a problem. You're under the sink. You only have these tools with you. You need to solve the problem.

PE: Yeah.

GR: Fine.

PE: Well, problem solving, I can understand that being a challenge that's solved by creative thinking.

Absolutely. That's something I face every day when I fix a broken chair or some other object that's been badly repaired and poorly designed because you can only do so much with a bad design, it's going to fail no matter what you do. And if you have the parameters of a furniture conservator, everything has to be within those limits of originality and intent and aesthetic appeal. And so you are constrained by those parameters and still you have to make it work. The client wants to sit in the chair. And the client weighs 350 pounds and likes to lean back after dinner with a drink. So you know that is the extent of my creativity. In a design field, I got zero. I got zero. I know good design when I see it. It's like pornography. I know it when I see it. And I have a great eye for great design. And the pieces I've made that have got me all this fame, those were great pieces to begin with that I just copied.

GR: There is a whole branch of art called Classical Music. Yeah. And there's not a handful of people who improvise classical music.

PE: That's me. I play classical music. I'm in an orchestra and I can't, if you take the music away, I can't play.

GR: Right. And that's not a creative act?

PE: Well, no, that's reading words out of a great book. You have a Dickens in front of you and you can read the words is no different than putting Tchaikovsky in front of you and you play the music.

GR: Yes, but.

PE: I mean, you can put inflection into the words. You can put tone and all that. Same thing with

music.

GR: So how large is your orchestra that you play in?

PE: 60 people. It's a big orchestra.

GR: Big orchestra. And there's a woodwind section.

PE: Oh yeah, we got bassoons, we got timpani, we got the whole thing. I'm in the viola section. Kristen's in the cello section. We sit five feet apart.

GR: And my point is that that effort, which I consider to be a creative one, is different on a different scale than if it were a kazoo band, let's say.

PE: Yeah. I mean.

GR: You change the music by how it's played. The music is changed by the director.

PE: Yeah, however, you take a good jazz group. They're improvisational. They're playing jazz licks that they put together. And it's not written down, but they all end up at the same point. Because they understand the jazz.

GR: It's practice though.

PE: Yeah sure.

GR: I mean, some of it does come at the moment, a note here or there and it may be a phrase, but improvisation is also practice. I don't think it's...

PE: Well, I'll tell you this, both of those exercises take a risk. And going back to Pye, my life has been the workmanship of risk. And music is a great example of taking a risk, especially if you're playing an instrument with no frets. You put your finger down it's sharp or flat. That's a risk.

GR: Right. So you just referred to David Pye.

PE: Yeah, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. It was '68, 1968.

GR: Yeah. Yeah. Interesting. We're we're in my online group, online mastery group, we're talking about the nature and aesthetics of design. But yeah, there's a lot of risk involved in being on stage. I always love the quote by YoYo Ma saying he didn't relax until he had made his first mistake on stage. And no one would notice.

PE: Yeah, well,

GR: Kristen wouldn't notice. Or if she did, she would go, "Oh, that's Yo Yo Ma. You let that go."

PE: Yeah.

GR: Who was it? Oh, it was Fred Astaire who said, you know, when you get to be a certain age, your mistakes become your style.

PE: That's a good point.

GR: Yeah. Yeah, that really is true.

PE: However, a flat note is still a flat note.

GR: Yeah, that's true. And here we go. What do you think it takes to master playing a Beethoven quartet?

Wouldn't it be precision?

PE: No, it's more intimate than that. When you're in a quartet, you breathe together. You understand each

other's movements, just peripheral vision and everything comes into account. How do you come, how do you phrase everything sympathetically with the other people? There's only three other voices with you and you can't stand out, you can't disappear, you have to be equal. So as the emotion of the piece rises and falls, everybody has to understand it. And you don't realize it unless you've played in a quartet, but they begin breathing together. And you hear among the group, not in the audience, but among the group, you'll hear the cellist go eeh, and that's your way of knowing that he's ready to come in and you respond to that. It's the most intimate thing I've ever seen on a public stage.

GR: Interesting. Yeah. Yeah. I think you're arguing my point, and I want to thank you for that.

PE: Like minds, you know?

GR: When I first started, I tried to be so precise. I would spend a half an hour setting up my joiner. And now I look at it and go, "Yeah, okay, whatever." I barely, barely set things up because I know how to fix things.

PE: Yeah

GR: And I also know a couple of little tricks about that tool. So I'm more precise as I've gotten older and sloppier. It's interesting. You're trying so hard when you first start out to be, you know, gnat's ass perfect, and it's impossible. You just don't know enough.

PE: I never had that experience.

GR: No.

PE: No, I was just like, "Let's get it done. How is it done? Let's do it." And I used to tell people the difference because I lectured an awful lot. And I would tell people the difference between an amateur and a professional is they both make mistakes, but the professional knows how to fix it. And that's just what you suggested is, you know, you just, in the enthusiasm of trying to do something, everybody makes mistakes. But a professional says, I understand from the mistake, I can learn from this, and I'll know how to fix it. Like Pye says, the simplistic approach to those two choices of risk and certainty is the relationship between the worker, the tool, and the material, which are the three things that are involved. And so with Pye, the worker holds the tool and pushes it against the material. With certainty, you hold the material and feed it into the tool. And so the relationship has changed, which means in my world, you pick up a backsaw or a chisel or any kind of tool like that, you have to master the tool, which is in your hand. For me, it's installing upholstery tacks on an 18th century Bergeres chair along the edge of the gilded frame where I have to hammer the tacks in without hitting the frame, without hitting the gold or my fingers or something like that. A lot of people don't know how to hammer. Everybody uses a hammer. It's a simple tool, but the more variables you put into the hammering, the more likely it is you're going to miss the nail. So an upholstery hammer has a curved head, which is the radius that you have to have for the arc, which means you hold your arm against your body and your pivot point is your wrist. And that eliminates any other deviation for the hammering. Now, that's completely different for carpentry where your arm becomes the radius. But they don't understand a simple tool like a hammer and the physics of how, the mechanics of how the damn thing works properly, you know and they end up hitting their fingers.

GR: I find that there are so many similarities between different fields of endeavor and this need for precision in, but I think sloppy work shows and . . .

PE: It'll fail.

GR: I hate it. I can't let it out of my shop.

PE: If you don't have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?

GR: That's a good one.

PE: That goes back to my physics days.

GR: Oh, yeah. My quote these days is, slow down. I'm in a hurry. That usually helps because when I'm speeding up bad things happen. You are a historian, trained conservator in the Boulle technique of marquetry?

PE: Yep. I think my partner and I are the best in this country for French marquetry techniques. I

think we are. Me, I just tell people I'm a furniture conservator in private practice, which leaves it open to whatever I want it to be. Right. But furniture conservation is my business.

GR: Do you work with museums?

PE: I work for museums, but I'm not employed by them. That's where the independent practice comes in.

GR: Right. I just watched this movie I had heard about, but I'd never seen *The Red Violin*.

PE: Oh, it's a good movie. Well, now your idea of precision comes into play when you are a luthier. That matters, raising the bridge, a half a millimeter, the adjustment of the angle of the fingerboard, everything about an instrument requires absolute precision.

GR: And yet, the first time I saw a violin maker, Paul Schubach at his shop in Portland, use a small violin maker's tothing plane. It was like he had an adze, like a whacka, whacka, whacka.

PE: That's what you do with a tothing plane.

GR: Hammering away at the inside of the back to thin it up to the property. But I was just astonished. I thought, oh, it'd be all these careful, precise strokes.

PE: Save the precise strokes for creating the scroll.

GR: You have a massive library. I will call it massive.

PE: Yeah. That's just one wall of books.

GR: Right. And I thought, you know, well, I have a pretty good library. I came to your shop and looked and went, "Nah I don't."

PE: I have a similar library at home, which is not marquetry or woodworking, but it's rare books.

GR: Uhhuh. How do you pass this along?

PE: Boy, I don't know. I have Patrice, who is my partner and half my age, and he's quite good at what he does. And I have my students that, 5% of them may become professional marquetry people. And at some point, Patrice and I are going to write the book we've always promised to write. That's why I'm envious of you having done so.

GR: On?

PE: Oh, it'll be about French marquetry and the history of marquetry from a maker's standpoint.

GR: It's an enormous undertaking. I can tell you that.

PE: Yeah

GR: And worth doing. But it takes over your life. I think that once you get the hang of your art, your craft, that Precision walks with you, whether you want to acknowledge it or not, that through everything that you do. And that's what informs craftsmanship, I think, is that sense of doing it right, doing it better each time, if you can, and staying very precise. That's how you get to the results that you're after.

PE: Yeah.

GR: I would be remiss if I did not ask you, which of those descriptive nouns best fits you? Are you a hustler, a faker, or a thief?

PE: If I admit to stealing designs from previous masters, I'm a thief.

GR: Well, I don't think we're born with these ideas in our head. We open our eyes. We're mimickers.

PE: I only steal from dead people.

GR: And only steal from dead people who have also stolen from famous dead people.

PE: Only steal from famous dead people.

GR: Well, thanks very much for chatting today. I really appreciate your time, and this was a lot of fun.

PE: Yeah, we should do this more often.

GR: Okay. I'm game.

PE: I don't mind. It's no pain off my back. Yeah. And it's good talking to you, Gary.

GR: Thanks, Patrick. This was fun.

PE: Okay, I'm gonna sign off now.

GR: All right, me too.

PE: Bye bye.

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GR: Well, that was my interview with Patrick Edwards, an incredible woodworker, Cartouche Award winner from the Society of American Period Furniture Makers, well recognized as an expert in the field of marquetry and yet sidestepping the issue of Creativity and Precision. I found that quite interesting. Ali, what did you think?

AM: Yeah, well, I'll say this. You know, when he was saying that at the beginning of the interview, he was like, "Oh, I'm not creative. I'm just you know doing stuff that's already been done." It's like, "Well, yes, we're all just making chairs and tables. We're all doing stuff that's already been done, but you decided to pick the hardest stuff that's ever been done and do it in the most immaculate way that nobody else does." And it's just like this, like I appreciate your humility and it's really nice you know in the age of the Instagram narcissism and all of that to have somebody who's just being like, "Look, no, I'm not anything special you know in that creative sense. I'm just carrying on a tradition." And I thought that was a really interesting possibility of the way that you can look at the interpretation of tradition and how you do it.

GR: Yes, but one continuing theme I think we find is the value of doing this work. Whether you consider your work creative or not, the value of working with our hands on these objects confers something onto the maker. And even through the struggles and the mistakes that we make, the failures that occur, it helps us to make sense of this world. The farther away we get from actual physical doing, the harder it is for us to remain sane. I won't say we are becoming less human now, but we are becoming less sane. We're allowing so much stuff to push into our lives now that was unthinkable 20 years ago. Ali, your thoughts?

AM: I think it's a good point. I think that that's a broader theme that's overriding a lot of these conversations is how the work that we're trying to highlight in the people that are doing this stuff are part of longstanding traditions, and they are exploring them in still very tactile ways. And they might be a dying breed.

GR: Probably are. But even so, I will continue to argue for the value of doing this creative work. Here's a quote from my book, *Handmade*: "The pace of walking is suited to our way of thinking. It is the rate at which we are supposed to be thinking. I believe we evolved as animals who climbed trees and strode across the prairies who walked from one camp or city to the next until we learned to ride on animals or on one another, on conveyances.' Wendell Berry, in *An Entrance to the Woods*, says, "Our senses, after all, were developed to function at foot speeds, and the transition from foot travel to motor travel in terms of evolutionary time has been abrupt. The faster one goes, the more strain there is on the senses, the more they fail to take in, the more confusion they must tolerate or gloss over, and the longer it takes to bring the mind to a stop in the presence of anything."

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GR: Thank you for listening. This has been Gary Rogowski. My thanks to Ali, and a particular thanks to Patrick Edwards for joining me today. Please check out his website, wpatrickedwards.com. We'll have links to his place as well on our website, Creativity-hft.com.

GR: And please join us for a Creative Conversation this Sunday, January 7th at 1:00 p.m. Pacific Time on Zoom. Ali and I, my apprentice and I, will further discuss this topic of Precision and how it relates to Creativity. This should be good fun. Catch the one hour live stream on Zoom, and there will be a link posted on our website, Creativity-hft.com to get you there. And if you missed this live stream, it will also be posted later on YouTube on the Northwest Woodworking Studio YouTube channel. That's Northwest Woodworking Studio, all spelled out. Thanks very much for joining us on Creativity, Hustlers, Fakers, and Thieves.

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