

Contemporary Collectibles: Tools that are just plane collectible

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

I once had a neighbor who collected old woodworking tools. He displayed them lined up very precisely on backlit shelves like primitive wooden sculptures, and their simple forms and worn patina made them look just like that. The one type that particularly stands out in my memory is his long line of antique wooden planes.

Recalling a time when many artisans shaped their own tools by hand in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and took great pride in doing so, old wooden implements are highly collectible. Planes are just one of five basic categories - in addition, there are saws, measuring implements (such as rules, calipers for measuring thickness, and levels), augers, bits and other boring devices, and implements with blades, like axes and chisels.

Most desirable are those made of exceptionally fine wood - such as imported rosewood or mahogany - and might be enhanced with brass, or have ivory inlays. The value also increases if they are in working condition or exhibit a signature, especially of a known maker. Outstanding among the latter are 18th century Wrentham, Mass., makers Francis Nicholson, his son John and their former-slave associate Cesar Chelor, all of whom stamped their planes with their name and the words "living in Wrentham" - although John later moved to a nearby town and changed his stamp to "living in Cumberland."

Within the category of planes, there is a fascinating range of types, made to perform specific functions. There is the unusually long trying or jointer plane; the rabbet plane formed specifically to cut grooves or "rabbets"; the rare cornice plane, used for shaping cornices and other moldings; the tothing plane, with an almost-vertical serrated edge for roughening wood so that veneer would adhere to it; a router plane (found in Europe) especially designed for smoothing bas-relief sculptures; the rounder or rounding plane, used to shape wood into cylinders for the forming of pegs, ladder rungs and dowels; and the horn smoothing plane, whose handle did resemble a horn.

Other planes were devised for cutting grooves when making carriages, there were small planes used by makers of stringed instruments and, for wheelwrights, squirrel-tail planes.

In addition to handcrafted tools, there is also a market for early machine-made tools, which arrived on the scene in the mid-19th century due to an increased demand for quality tools at the commencement of the age of industrialization. Among the most desirable in this area are the planes made by the New Britain, Conn., firm Stanley Rule and Level Co., founded in 1857 and then and now a leader in the field, including its 5 1/2-inch No. 1 plane, made for about 70 years, as well as such oddities as a 15-pound plane that could perform 75 different functions.

Also collectible are the products of D.P. Sanborn, Littleton, N.H.; levels produced between 1867 and 1900 by the David Level and Tool Co. of Springfield, Mass., and by Stratton Brothers and Co. of Greenfield, Mass.; chisels made from 1853 to the early 1900s by Buck Brothers Inc. of Millbury, Mass.; and saws from the

Philadelphia factories of Henry Disston's Keystone Saw, Tool, Steel and File Works.

The value of a woodworking tool will depend on rarity, material, condition and type - the most prized, in general, are planes and bit braces.

Here are some recent prices for planes reported in the current edition of "Schroeder's Antiques Price Guide:"

- Wooden dog-shaped plane with tail forming the handle, good patina, no blade, 11 inches - \$435.

- Circular plane, Stanley No. 20 - \$200.

- Plane, bull-nose rabbet, Stanley No. 93, 6 inches: \$155.

- Circular plane, Ohio No. 020, Atlas Tool Co., tapered cutter: \$150.

- Smooth plane, Stanley, with rosewood handle - \$100.

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