

As Best I Can

BY MARK LUZIO

Perfection is elusive. Good craftspeople make mistakes, but most of the time, we are the only ones who see them. That has been mostly true over my career, except for the curious case of one client who, against all odds, could see every detail of my work.

I learned my trade working in various custom millwork shops in New York City. After about six months in one shop, I was given my first project to build to completion. It was a test by the shop owner: Could I be trusted to take a set of drawings and complete every detail of an entire paneled library room with mantel and crown molding? I dove into it and completed the shop work, and then we loaded the van and headed to an apartment on 5th Avenue for the installation. In the elevator, my boss told me that the client was a writer of both novels and nonfiction. He was born in India and blind from a childhood disease.

Before I began work, we went over the drawings with the client, Ved, and spent about an hour checking all the details of the room. Ved wanted to know my plans for dealing with the usual problems of existing windows, doors, and HVAC registers. I was impressed with his questions and his knowledge of interior trim and the details of the room.

The install took about six days, and each morning Ved would be waiting with a coffee. We would spend about 30 minutes in conversation about what I had completed the previous day. I quickly realized that each evening, Ved used his fingers to touch every inch of the work. I began to really enjoy our morning coffee time, listening with amazement to his input and appreciating his understanding of how each detail would fit and how it would all work once the library was complete. We made a few changes during the install, and he listened to my input on a few details. He agreed with me that we should do miter returns in two places on the crown molding and that my solution would “look” good.

Little by little, this experience made me shift how I think about what we really see. Frank Lloyd Wright was known to emphasize to all his apprentices that they should be able to visualize all the details of any design in their mind’s eye before picking up a drafting pencil.

Now, looking back after 40 years and countless builds, I realize that Ved was the client who saw the most about my work, including my mistakes. I think of him even now when fixing a mistake on site or in my shop, especially one of those mistakes that I know the client will never “see.”

But this remembrance of Ved is layered, and links to another notion about quality. What drives me as a craftsman is not what

others—even the rare client who actually sees my work—will look at. Nor is it about an inner sense of, or striving for, perfection. It’s “als ik kan.”

I first learned about this Dutch expression—which loosely translates to “as best I can”—from studying the work of the American furniture-maker Gustav Stickley, who used it in his maker’s mark. The term is widely seen as a statement of his aims in creating simple, unadorned furniture—work that presented a stark contrast to the ornate and indulgent European-style of furniture popular in the 19th century.

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Stickley learned about “als ik kan” from William Morris, the founder of the English Craftsman movement, who wrote about it after seeing “The Man in the Red Turban,” a painting thought to be a self-portrait by the 15th-century Dutch painter, Jan van Eyck. Van Eyck had carved the term into the portrait’s frame, and for Morris, this served as apt commentary on the honest portrayal, complete with wrinkles and blemishes, of its subject. Morris celebrated the term as a sharp turn away from the sterile perfectionism that characterized portrait painting in his day. Both Morris and Stickley seized on the term as an antidote to idealism and a declaration of purpose in their trades.

For me, “als ik kan” is both an acknowledgment that my work isn’t perfect and a testimony that stands in contrast to the low bidders in our trades who aspire only to get work done as quickly and inexpensively as possible. Perfection is a fool’s errand and expediency a rogue’s calling. Quality in a work is found not simply by looking, but in seeing; it is achieved not just by building, but in building as best we can.

Mark Luzio owns Post Pattern Woodworking based in Brooklyn, Conn.