Transcript:

[Intro Music]

Host, Chip Van Dyke: Welcome to the PEMcast, conversations and stories for the culturally curious. I am Chip Van Dyke, and here with me always is...

Host, Dinah Cardin: Dinah Cardin.

Chip: Dinah, let me ask you a question. First of all, welcome back to the PEMcast.

Dinah: It’s been a while.

Chip: It’s been a long while. We’ve been working tirelessly with Rob Rosenthal of the HowSound Podcast on making this a better podcast for you, so apologies for the wait, but I think it was worth it. So Dinah, I have a question for you. When you look around your home at your home furnishings, what name comes to mind?

Dinah: Hm, my mother? Some of it comes from her. And maybe the names of my neighbors whose trash I picked.

Chip: Yeah, I think probably for me it would be my wife’s mother, and, uh, my grandfather. I have a piece from my grandfather...

Dinah: Me too, yeah.

Chip: ...But I think what I meant specifically is, do you know the names of the artists that worked on those pieces of furniture?

Dinah: My IKEA rug? Nope, I can’t say.

Chip: Yeah, who are the IKEA artists? And can we give them maybe a golf clap or two? They sometimes do good work.

Dinah: I love the cube sitting next to the desk in the office. You know, it’s just so clean.

Chip: The reason that Dinah and I are talking about home furnishings today is because the museum has just closed a show called In Plain Sight: Discovering the Furniture of Nathaniel Gould, and on this episode of the PEMcast, we’ll bring you up to date on what has happened since and on the way Gould’s influence lives on.
For those who aren’t familiar with Nathaniel Gould, picture Salem, Massachusetts in the 1700s at the dawn of the American Revolution. [SOUND EFFECTS OF SEAGULLS, OCEAN WAVES] It’s a city bustling with volatile politics as well as some of the countries first global traders and earliest millionaires. Amid all of this, a talented craftsman creates fine furniture for his wealthy patrons. Chests of drawers, desks, tables, chairs, and even cradles and coffins. His distinctive work is characterized by ball-and-claw feet and beautifully carved pinwheels and scalloped seashells.

And yet, even though Gould produced furniture of the highest quality, he’s been relatively unknown for over two centuries. In fact, a lot of his work was simply attributed to “Salem cabinetmaker.” There just aren’t a lot of ways to trace a desk back to a specific 18th-century workshop. Unless, of course, you have a ledger – a ledger can tell you who placed the order, how many pieces of furniture they ordered, what materials were used, whether or not the bill was paid. As luck would have it, Gould’s ledgers were discovered in 2006 at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Buried among his lawyer’s legal documents were three bound ledgers detailing thirty years of orders fulfilled by Nathaniel Gould. High-resolution scans of these ledgers can be seen in the exhibition’s catalog. And for those of us who can’t read the flowery script of a pre-colonial cabinetmaker? The book also includes the contents of the ledgers transcribed and cataloged in its appendices.

I recently took a copy of the catalog across the bridge from Salem to Beverly, to the Furniture Institute of Massachusetts.

I looked at the book with founder Phil Lowe.

It’s sort of interesting, as I perused some of the names, some of these, uh, names and families are still in the area, and I have, uh, some of them as clients.

Names like Gardner and Cabot, names that are still part of the Salem community.

Which is sort of interesting to think that, you know, Gould was working for their families way back when, and here I’m doing the same thing.

Along with the identity of Gould’s patrons, the names of his apprentices were discovered in the ledgers. Sometimes, Gould’s orders included hundreds of pieces, so it’s no surprise that Gould didn’t work alone. On a desk and bookcase, the name “Gould” was mysteriously scratched out, with the words “not his work” written beside it. For many years, people debated whether Gould made the piece.

Exactly. It might have been he had somebody in the shop that was working with him, and, you know, a bad day between the two and he scribbled that on the side of the case before it went out the door. [LAUGHTER]

This wasn’t the only time scrawled writing on a piece of furniture from this era left a mystery to be unraveled.

It had a very, very obvious signature on the rail – on the under side in very, very large chalk – that said the word “Frye.” And, you know, I tried to find out who Mr. Frye was.
Chip: Tim Leavy is a collector of things we have in abundance here at the museum: Asian export art, American furniture. He purchased a drop-leaf table about a decade ago at a little known auction house in New York’s Hudson River Valley.

Tim: The name of the auction house was North Star. You know, I had nothing to do one day, and I took a ride out there the day of the auction, and I had plenty of time to examine the table very, very closely. Ultimately I bought the table; I was able to win it. And what happened next was just that the table went into my house and was used on a regular basis.

Chip: Tim isn’t just a collector who leaves things in a warehouse or an untouched room.

Tim: No, well, I use all my pieces. I mean one of the things that—one of my criteria for collecting is I’m not a museum and I don’t pretend to be, so everything that I have will get used. I mean, we use the table, for example, at Christmastime. It comes out and we put on family photos from every one of our kids’ Christmases. We have a photo from the year they were born all the way up until their teenage years, and my oldest is in college right now, so the table—the table, I have a soft spot for it.

Dinah: Last Christmas, Tim asked his wife for a copy of our Gould exhibition catalog. He saw something familiar on page 173.

Tim: You know, I’m flipping through the book on Christmas day, and I noticed a drop-leaf table in there with the feet that looked very, very similar to the feet that are on my table, and I said, “huh.” And I flipped to the back, and lo-and-behold, there was a reference to a customer named Frye. And at that point, you know, I contacted you guys at the museum.

Dinah: And we connected him with the original researchers, the ones who made the Gould discovery in 2006. Since the book came out, researchers have also learned of a chair and desk that they are reasonably certain came from Gould’s shop.

Tim: Clearly they were trying to shine a light on him and show that this was a very talented craftsman, and the more we can find out about him, the better off we’ll be – this is an opportunity, you know, a key that we can use to unlock other examples of his work.

Dinah: Has this ever happened to you before? That you’ve, um, you know, had a discovery like this about a piece that you’ve bought before.

Tim: Um, you know, I have had discoveries like that before, but nothing, nothing on this level. This was really cool, and it was serendipity. You know, I was flipping through this appendix to this book never expecting to see, you know, something that would unlock this. It was a great, pleasant surprise coming ten years after I had bought it.

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Chip: Fast forward to today, Gould’s legacy lives on in the sawdust covered workbenches of Phil Lowe’s shop at the Furniture Institute of Massachusetts. But craftsmanship like this doesn’t end with Phil Lowe. He is teaching a new generation by conducting apprenticeships.

Phil: Well, I do restoration and conservation. Actually, all these chairs that are on the wall are ones that I pulled out of the trash. You know, when I see these things, I want to save them. When the students are thinking about making a project, I have these examples that I can go to and say, oh,
well this is how they would have done this technique in the old days, and show ‘em a chair that’s hanging on the wall.

An older gentleman helped me along, and that’s no different than what the apprenticeships were in the old days. It’s trying to pass on the knowledge of how to construct and build things, and how to think about design and shapes and types of woods and the combinations of all of them.

[SHOPS OF SAWING & HAMMERING IN THE SHOP] Not necessarily tell them how to do it, but how to think about how things are supposed to be made.

[SHOP NOISE. Background voice: Wow, it’s really dancing. Phil: Well, it’s because of the thickness of the wood. We’ll be able to get in there with a rat-tail file and clean that up...]

Phil: You know, it’s carrying on a tradition. I say to these fellas that when we look at Gould’s work, this was the contemporary furniture of its day. And they’re carrying on that tradition, even if they put their own little interpretation or they put their own little bit of carving and so forth onto a piece.

TC: Sometimes it’s an exact replica of things that are already made. Sometimes it just starts with that, and you can modernize it to your touch.

Dinah: T.C. Manetta is 25 and from Topsfield, Massachusetts. In this digital age, he’s learning pretty much the same techniques Gould would have learned in the 1700s.

TC: Yeah, I traditionally go through a historical background for the pieces that I make, at least what I start with. Um, I like to go through museums like Peabody Essex and others around here, as well as the books that we have in the library. Every time you come to work, you get to do something different. From what started with rough lumber, a couple months later you have a beautiful piece, and you get to see every step along the way.

Calvin: Yeah, I mean, working with stuff that’s hands on physical, you get to see what you accomplish, what you do. There’s always a reward.

Chip: Calvin Todd is a 26-year-old military veteran with an art degree. He drives several hours from New Hampshire to spend eight-hour days with Phil Lowe. He’ll do this for several years to learn the trade.

Dinah: And you treat it like a job?

Calvin: You have to. I mean, if you come in and just think it’s a class and you’re gonna goof around, you’re not going to get much out of it, you know. It is a loose shop, but you have to kind of set goals and see it as, you know, this is the way you’re going to generate income, so you have to get the most out of it.

Dinah: What would be your ideal way to generate income with woodworking?

Calvin: I mean, I think everyone’s ultimate goal is to work for themselves and kind of do what Phil does and work in that sense, but working in a cabinet shop, working for somebody else, whatever sort of keeps you in that type of work is fine with me.

Phil: How things were put together haven’t really changed at all in all these years. You know, a tenon and a mortis is a tenon and it’s a mortis, and, you know, it’s actually been going on quite a bit longer than the 18th century. So, it’s pretty remarkable.
[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Chip: That’s our show. Thanks for listening. If you have questions, comments or stories to share, please write to us at our new email address, mailto:pemcast@pem.org. Check out our blog connected.pem.org for more content related to this episode. And find us on iTunes, Soundcloud and any podcast app.

Dinah: Special thanks to Rob Rosenthal of HowSound, the podcast that gives us the backstory to great radio. I met Rob at the Third Coast International Audio Festival in November, and he has since visited us here twice in Salem to work on the PEMcast. Thank you, Rob.

Chip: Yes, thank you, Rob. One last thing, the PEMcast is also up for an award! We’ll find out later this month whether it’s gold, silver, bronze, or honorable mention when the American Alliance of Museums gives out its coveted Muse Awards. Stay tuned.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

Chip: Music for this show is by Inspector and Blue Dot Sessions. You can find links to all of their work in the show notes at connected.pem.org. Thanks for listening.

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