

Apprenticed to Buildings

Caroline Sly '64 builds "new old" houses and furniture.

By Susannah Hauze Hogendorn '93

Caroline Sly '64 is a typical Swarthmorean: delightfully atypical. She is a professional woodworker, a builder of period houses and furniture, a woman in a field that's 96 percent men. What's more, she is almost entirely self-taught. Over 20-odd years of careful study and plain hard work, Sly has achieved a beautiful balance of historical accuracy and modern practicality—a balance other craftspeople and old-house-lovers would do well to emulate.

Sly majored in music—only the second person to do so at Swarthmore, she notes with just a hint of pride. After graduation she taught for four years then returned to her native Massachusetts, bought an old house in the town of Ashfield, and started classes at Smith College for a master's in music.

But as the academic year wore on, her enthusiasm for her studies was eclipsed by her passion for restoration. "The little house I'd bought was built in the 1700s by settlers who moved west from Cape Cod. It had been 'modernized' in the late Victorian era, so that little of the original woodwork remained. But when I opened up the walls to put in new heating and plumbing, I found pieces of the original molding. And it grabbed me. I liked how it looked, and I wanted to learn how it was made."



CAROLINE SLY

Raised panel doors and a window seat are among the handmade details that make Caroline Sly's work so true to its 18th-century roots.



Caroline Sly '64 (left) studies old buildings and makes them anew—from scratch, often with old hand tools. The distinctive Deerfield doorway and the paneled living room of this “new old” house in Massachusetts’ Pioneer Valley are typical of her work. She even made the gate-leg table.

PAUL ROCHAMBEAU



DAVID BOLLES, COURTESY CAROLINE SLY

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In the fashion of old, the house was built in stages. The oldest part is the half-cape at the center. A spacious music room is upstairs in the gambrel-roofed section at the left.

Another Course of Study

Sly did finish her master's—she still plays viola, clarinet, and bassoon—but she was already set on another course of study.

Her teachers have been houses themselves. Sly likes to say that she has apprenticed “to buildings, not builders.” And there is a difference: Houses can't talk, so she has had to be something of a sleuth. As a result she's achieved an extraordinary degree of self-reliance and a sensitive yet practical approach to her craft.

Plenty of people attempt historical accuracy in their houses, but most head to the lumber-

yard to buy stock moldings. Not Caroline Sly—she makes her own. To get it right, she's read books, consulted other craftspeople, and made innumerable pilgrimages to sites such as Old Sturbridge Village, Historic Deerfield, and Colonial Williamsburg. When necessary she has even made her own tools.

And Sly's attention to detail has paid off. In the past 25 years, she has splendidly restored two of her own houses and a dozen or more for paying clients. She has also built three houses from scratch, using period tools and methods as much as possible. Sly and a friend constructed the first of these in stages that mimic the history of Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley. They started with a half-cape that "dates" to the 1760s, when settlers first arrived in the region from Cape Cod. Then they added a more formal late-1700s gambrel-roofed addition, followed by a tiny "new kitchen" and finally a Victorian conservatory. The finished structure was featured in *Early American Life* magazine.

At the moment, although she's living in Massachusetts, Sly is building a 19th-century Greek Revival house outside Ithaca, N.Y. The Ithaca house is an excellent example of her practical approach to period work. It is just 800 square feet, and "nearly everything that shows" is done the old-fashioned way. Wood-ven siding on the front of the house is carefully joined flush, for a neat appearance from the street. Carved trim dresses the exterior, and the interior sports handmade wooden moldings and wainscoting. Walls are carefully plastered in the old-fashioned manner—or are they? "I used a neat technique for this part," Sly confesses. "I layered a quarter-inch of plaster over 'blueboard' (waterproof) drywall. It looks authentic but is much less work than plaster over lath. Any homeowner could do it," she adds modestly. Another concession to modernity: double-glazed windows that keep out fierce winter winds. "After all," she notes, "a building is to use."

Tools and wood

Sly's insistence on authenticity where it counts has had personal rewards besides the satisfaction of a job well done. She has developed an enviable rapport with her tools and with her medium, the wood itself.

At one time she used only hand tools, but these days, for reasons both ergonomic and economic, she uses power tools on the parts of a project that don't show. "I used to do all the planing by hand, even the rough work of getting boards to the proper thickness. But now my arthritis makes it difficult, so I only hand-plane in the final stages.

"Handwork is also very time-consuming. Electrical tools have taken the place of apprentices," she notes. "In a traditional shop, young boys would do the physically difficult chores—cutting boards to size and planing them flat and square—so that the master could give his attention to finer details, such as joinery and moldings. Today I couldn't afford to pay the help."

Still, you can count Sly's power tools on one hand—a radial-arm saw, a drill press, a table saw, a thickness planer. In her basement shop, she shows me. "These," she explains, "are my apprentices. These [she gestures toward her hand-plane collection with the slightest smile] are my pets." Sly has upwards of 30 antique hand planes. Most of them are "workers"—less expensive antiques valued for their utility, not their rarity. There are "scrub" planes for removing a lot of wood quickly; there are smoothing planes, and many varieties of molding planes for different decorative

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CAROLINE SLY

Sly owns dozens of planes, chisels, and gouges. In her skilled hands, each imparts a different shape to the wood. Yet, she says, some modern power tools have their place: They have "taken the place of apprentices," she says.