One of the most celebrated woodworkers and furniture designers of the 20th century, Californian Sam Maloof plied his craft from the early post-World War II era through 2009, the year of his passing. So original were his designs for chairs, tables, and stands that the world at large coined a new term: “Maloof style.” Sam’s furniture exhibits lean, graceful lines, sculpted parts that seamlessly blend into each other, and joints that evoke beauty as well as strength and durability. The Maloof rocker shown here is by far the most iconic piece created by this artist.

Today, many woodworkers are selling “Maloof-style” rockers, a tribute to this single famous furniture example. But for a truly authentic Maloof rocker, you’ll need to get in touch with Mike Johnson at the Maloof workshop in Alta Loma, California. Having studied under Sam Maloof for over 30 years, Mike has the knowledge, skill and (last but not least) legal permission to reproduce this furniture. Mike draws from a massive inventory of 8/4 (2”) and 16/4 (4”) stock. The rockers are typically made from black walnut, figured maple, rosewood, cherry, or zircote. Ebony serves as an accent for screw plugs and decorative bands.

Mike relies on Sam’s original plywood templates for the chair parts, tracing their shapes on selected stock. He bandsaws the parts, leaving enough wood for sculpting and blending. The scalloped seat is made from five dowel-joined pieces that are cut...
Preserving Maloof’s legacy, Mike Johnson blends the rocker into the front leg using a file and a well-trained eye.

Strength without bulk. Maloof designed a special dado and rabbet joint to anchor the rocker’s leg to the seat.

at slight angles to create the proper curve. To make the rocker’s graceful curved feet, 3/16”-thick strips are glued together over a form. The legs attach to the seat with a unique “dado-and-rabbet joint” that Maloof invented to maximize glue area and mechanical strength (see drawing). The significant sculptural work that gives the chair its signature appearance is done with a number of hand tools–spokeshaves, scrapers, and rasps. But air-powered sanders and grinders also come into play. Once the chair is assembled and sculpted to final shape, Mike and his son Steven sand it through 400 grit, finishing with an oil/poly mix and wax. Learn more about Sam Maloof, the company today, and his foundation at sammaloofwoodworker.com.
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