

Fashion Woodworks

How a traditional carpenter developed his business into something outstanding



Mr. R. Shanmugam grew up in Manarkudi, a small town in Tamil Nadu. As a boy, he was taught the family business of carpentry by his father, like so many local carpenters all across India. Today, Mr. Shanmugam has developed his carpentry business, called “Fashion Woodworks”, into an internationally known, mechanised industry with over one crore in annual turnover and a list of famous clients, both in India and overseas. He has a showroom in Chennai where visitors can marvel at his designs, which range from traditional carved teak doors and puja rooms to modern furniture and a variety of bespoke work based on unique customers’ designs.

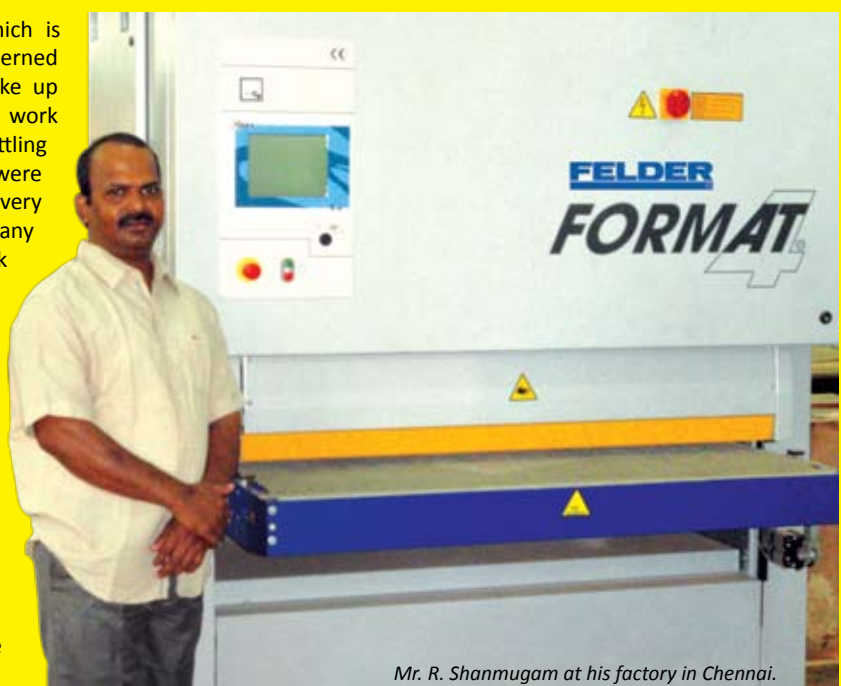
The question is: What is different about this man, who has had so much success while others have continued their carpentry businesses in much the same way?

I recently visited Mr. Shanmugam’s showroom and factory in Chennai to find out. A quiet and humble man who quickly gets fired up with enthusiasm when talking about his work, Shanmugam is known among his peers for always taking a ‘hands on’ approach, for putting a great deal of thought into designing and planning before the work starts. A few of his more well-known works are based on ideas that came to him in dreams. This provided the first clue to his nature, as he seems to have a more artistic nature than most of us – but there is more to the story.

What really defines this man is his focus, which is completely on the work itself. He is hardly concerned with making money or other concerns that take up most of our lives and remains dedicated to the work itself, always seeking perfection and never settling for less. “My forefathers for many generations were carpenters. From a young age, I was always very interested in working with wood and I have done many experiments. I also take on highly customised work which sometimes requires expensive special equipment”, explained Shanmugam.

Like so many small carpenters in India today, R. Shanmugam has adapted his traditional methods to incorporate modern technology. The first step was naturally the use of the hand router, which is a great time saver and one of the most popular woodworking tools. However, as soon as he had purchased his first Bosch router, he immediately started thinking and experimenting to find more effective ways to make use of the tool. He found that by carefully preparing an MDF template in the exact shape he

wanted, nailing the template to the timber and carefully cutting around it with the router, he was able to achieve almost 100% accuracy, get the work done quickly and with the added advantage of being able to easily produce multiple, identical pieces using the same template. “With templates, I can complete 60 pieces per day. Without the templates, I could only complete two. The quality is also perfect”, he said.



Mr. R. Shanmugam at his factory in Chennai.



planing machine, thicknesser, spindle moulder and wide belt sander. However, the carving is all done by hand to achieve the highest quality level. Starting from raw timber, a door can be completed at the machining stage in a day or two, but the carving may take from 3 to 6 months depending on the job.

Shanmugam also attributes some of his success to the quality of his workers. From over 50 workers, he gradually separated the cream from the rest and only kept the good ones on. He pays them a relatively high wage in recognition of the value of their skills.

Not every carpenter has the capital to invest in all these machines and in Shanmugam's case, it was a gradual progression in increasing technology over the years. In 2008, he made a big investment in high-end European machines. He was able to finance the investment by selling some land, and with some help from the bank. Shanmugam expects to have paid off the whole investment by 2015.

I asked Mr. Shanmugam what benefit he has obtained from the machines. He used the example of a solid padauk door, which requires planing, tenon and mortise joining, guide ways, moulding, fixing and sanding. He explained, "Previously it would have taken two workers around 8 days to complete the job and using the machines, the same two workers can do it in just 8 hours. Moreover, the cutting is 100% perfect, the planing is achieved without any chipping and the finished product is of much higher quality. The reduced labour cost means I can sell the door for a lower price."

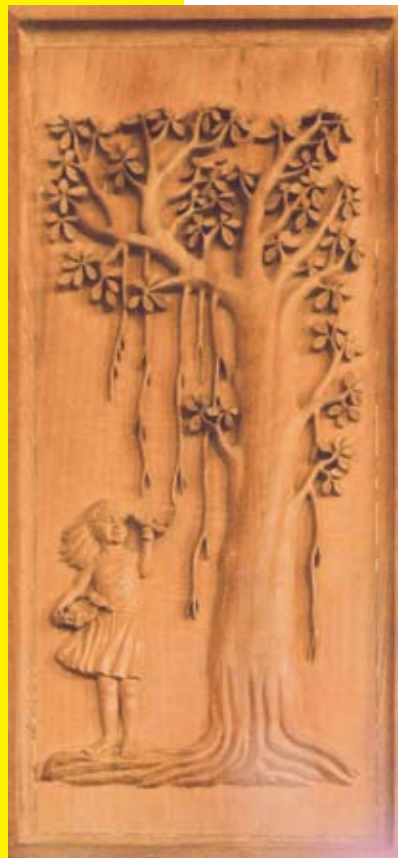
This one method was a huge boon for his business, so much so that he decided to share it with others. When the tsunami hit in 2004, a nearby fishing village called Nalapattanam was devastated and many survivors were left with no livelihood. A Government programme provided some of the villagers with equipment and training for carpentry and Shanmugam helped them out by going to the village and teaching the locals how to make and use the templates, which they continue to do to this day. "I think carpenters all over India who are using routers would benefit from this technique", he said.

Nowadays, Fashion Woodworks has a Format - 4 spindle moulder machine and the MDF templates have been replaced with metal guide rings. The work is even more accurate and faster than using the hand router.

Most of the work undertaken by the company is done by a staff of 18 skilled workers, using a range of machines including sliding table saw,



A highly detailed traditional carved door.



A dream-inspired design (front and back)



A wide range of unique designs.

“Earlier, only the ‘below the neck portion’ was working, now only the ‘above the neck portion’ works”, he added.

Of course, having the capacity to get a greater volume of work done opens the door for bigger jobs. These days, Fashion Woodworks is doing kitchens, doors and furniture for whole apartment blocks, among other things. Yet, Shanmugam still turns down many job offers and tends to only go for the ones in which the work itself is interesting to him.

Fashion Woodworks has also benefitted from a bit of luck along the way. In one of his dream-inspired designs, Shanmugam invented a wooden puzzle – the kind where you have to remove a ring from a contraption of wooden sticks, balls and rope. This caught the attention of a local Tamil magazine, *Ananda Vigatan*, which put his picture on the cover. An NRI living in California happened to pick up the same magazine at a time when he was planning to do some work in his home and was impressed. He got in contact with Shanmugam and the two worked together on the designs for a variety of furniture and interiors work, which was undertaken by Fashion Woodworks.

This work was of such high quality that Fashion Woodworks’ name began to be passed around among the NRI community around the world, providing several more opportunities for Shanmugam. He has since completed several prestigious projects for Tamil celebrities such as film director K. S. Ravikumar, Vice Chairman of TTK Prestige Ltd. T. T. Raghunadhan, Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu M. Karunanidhi and others. His work has continued to attract media attention and has been featured in a number of other publications, including *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* newspapers.



A detail of some fine carving work.



A unique door design made from waste wood pieces.



This collection of templates has been a boon to Fashion Woodworks’ productivity.