

Fair and Square

Measure Twice, Cut Once – February 2023

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During the holidays, my wife and I watched “No Time to Die,” the 2021 entry in the long-running 007 franchise. In one scene, James Bond and his superior, M, argue about Project Heracles, a covert program that Bond viewed as ill-conceived and catastrophic. To end the argument, M says “if this was a mistake, it’s on my shoulders **fair and square.**”

My mind wandered. Truth to tell, while James Bond movies are fun they don’t usually fully hold my attention. Was it possible that “fair and square” originated in a wood shop? After all, we want our boards and joints to be square and our curves to be fair.

My go-to site for such questions is Grammarist.com, which reports that

Fair and square describes something that is honest, fair, straight forward, something that is on the up and up. Often the term *fair and square* is used to describe the veracity of a contest, game or sporting event. In Britain, *fair and square* is sometimes used to mean in a totally accurate manner. ... The earliest known use of the phrase *fair and square* was in an essay written by Francis Bacon called *Of Prophecies*, written in 1604: “Faire, and square. The gamester calls fooles holy-day.”

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a giant in Western philosophy, mathematics, and science. Some people advance the theory that he was the actual author of Shakespeare’s plays. Despite his many achievements, I haven’t found any evidence that he knew his way around a workbench. About 300 years after THE Francis Bacon, we encounter one Francis H. Bacon, an American furniture designer in Boston. During his long career he worked with Herter Brothers, H.H. Richardson, and with A. H. Davenport. Presumably, his business dealings were consistently fair and square.

Several months ago, our web master and newsletter editor Vincent Valvo commented on the disparity between the way woodworkers view squareness in a positive light, but in common parlance square can also be a put-down, as in completely out of step, or uncool. Who wants to be known as a square?

Similarly, fair has numerous and sometimes contradictory meanings. We want judges and umpires to be fair, we want to be compensated fairly for our work, and we want to pay a fair price for the things we buy. We disapprove when the fair-haired boy receives preferential treatment, and we may cheer when the talking mirror tells the hideous, wicked queen that Snow White is “the fairest of them all.”

On the other hand, when we consult the reviews to select a movie, restaurant, or contractor, who wants to choose the one getting a rating of “Fair”? Did your teacher ever return a quiz or paper telling you that the work was only fair?

So, we may not want to be known as a square who produces work of fair quality, but in our projects, we see things differently. Fair curves are pleasing to the eye and elevate the appeal of a project. Square boards are essential to proper and sweet joints. With respect to these words, the whole exceeds the sum of the parts. While it may not be desirable for people to be square or work to be fair, being fair and square is another matter. What's more, woodworkers can see the positive aspects of each part. May your curves be fair and your joints be square.