



STUDIO WORKS

'I really think my work began to take off the more I looked at artwork and not at other furniture.'

— Jon Benson



Benson acknowledges the influence of the Futurists, a group of early 20th Century Italian painters who attempted to capture the energy of motion in their artwork. This granite-topped coffee table features the undulating curved veneer for which Benson is known.

Furniture in Motion

Jon Benson designs and builds furniture that seems to capture motion through his use of curves, bent laminations, turned elements and textured woods.

by Brad Walseth

Jonathan Benson is a man in motion. While recently working on a hall table for a customer in Maryland, he also was in the process of finishing up his second book. His first book, *Woodworker's Guide to Veneering & Inlay*, came out last March, and he has nearly finished the *Woodworker's Guide to Bending Wood*. He also writes magazine articles and conducts woodworking seminars at places like the Marc Adams School of Woodworking. And he has started yet another book, this time on kitchen cabinetry — writing it as he remodels his kitchen in preparation for moving his family soon from West Des Moines, IA, to Washington, DC.

This latest move, to accommodate his wife's career as an economist, is just the latest in a series of journeys the artist has undertaken in his life. From his youth in Iowa, Benson traveled to the desert Southwestern United States, where he says he was "bitten by the woodworking bug" while working in a cabinet shop. The stark beauty of the desert, with its rolling sand dunes, Navajo bead work, muted colors and ever-changing landscapes stayed with him and remains an important element in his creations.

Realizing he needed more education to pursue his dreams, Benson returned to Iowa. Upon graduating from college, he then moved east to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, where he studied under the legendary Tage Frid, among others. There, he was exposed to furniture design styles like Danish Modern and Arts and Crafts, as well as to great artwork outside the furniture design field, especially painting. The kinetic works of the early 20th century painters of the Cubist and Futurist Schools were the ones that primarily caught his eye.

"I really liked the way they were able to express motion on canvas," he explains. "I wanted to incorporate those ideas of motion

and energy into my work without actually having moving parts."

Benson credits his interest in such other forms of art as an influence on his furniture designs.

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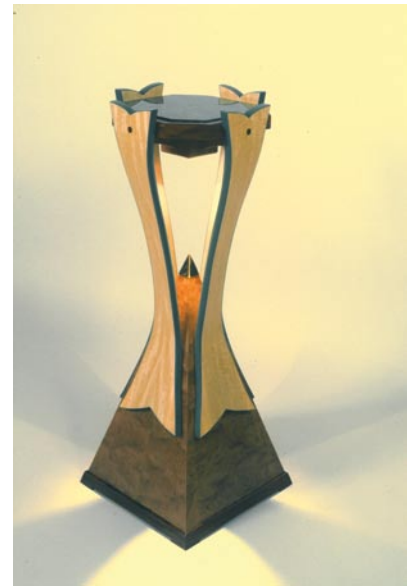
The wandering continued, with a return to the desert, as well as time spent in New England, before he returned to the Midwest. Now, working alone out of an oversized garage, with another building the same size for storage, Benson does most of his business through his Web site and the Artful Home catalog and Web site (www.artfulhome.com). He also shows his work in galleries and says location has been an important factor in obtaining sales. A gallery in Aspen was especially lucrative for high-end commissions, he says, while he does well with his Southwestern pieces in Santa Fe, NM.

In creating his pieces, Benson often uses a substrate of 1/8-inch bendable plywood, which he clamps and glues together in a shop-made press. The form is then covered in veneer using a vacuum press or a hand-held iron. Benson looks for interesting, unusual and colorful veneers and says he spends considerable time tracking down exotic woods and species, such as redwood, with interesting grain patterns and burls.

Although he always has new ideas on the drawing board, Benson says he also gets inspiration from working with his customers on ideas they come up with. A "Pyramid Pedestal" with a lighted capstone to display artwork is one example of a customer-inspired design.

In the midst of his whirlwind of activities, Benson imparts a credo that reflects the power of motion as practical business advice:

"The way to stay in business is to be diverse and ready to move around."



Benson's "Pyramid Pedestal" is designed to showcase a special piece of artwork. It has a bubinga base, vintage African satinwood sides, cocobolo and bubinga trim, a granite top and a light that illuminates the gold-plated capstone.



Benson's time spent in Santa Fe, NM, contributed an American Southwest influence in works like this "Desert Sun" sideboard — created using vintage Brazilian rosewood, curly maple and ebony veneers.