

A Return to a Woodworking Renaissance

Custom woodworker Matt Williams works closely with designers to produce high-end custom furniture exhibiting 'Old World' styling.



This octagonal poker table features a tabletop, apron and pedestal base veneered with figured quartered mahogany and a hand-carved pedestal of basswood. By reaching under the table and pushing on the poker chip trays, they can be flipped to make an apparently solid-top dining table, with the drink/cigar tray pullouts sliding back into the apron as well.

BY BRAD WALSETH

Matthew Williams is a master craftsman who has found his niche producing high-end custom furniture for the trade. Although the Hawkins, TX-based Renaissance Custom Furniture business showcases its custom pieces in two showrooms in Dallas, one in San Diego, CA, and on its Web site, www.renaissancecustomfurniture.com, Williams says he gets 90 percent of his sales working directly with interior designers.

"I prefer being able to talk with the designer and see what he wants, as opposed to the [staff in the] showroom saying what the designer wants and me having to filter through them," he explains. "It can be a bit of a difficult thing at times to get everyone to understand what's involved and get all the expectations worked out."

The ideas for the designs sometimes come from unusual sources.

"Someone may give me a picture out of a magazine, or maybe a company has gone out of business or is no longer offering a piece," Williams says. "Sometimes, the picture is hard to see and requires lots of interpretation on my part for the minute details."

The pieces Williams creates are generally based on styles from the Old World. "It seems like the business I get is from people who want a European look – whether it is French, English or Italian. What people are buying from me is the stuff that was made in Europe a couple hundred years ago – in my opinion, some of the pinnacles of furniture design."

Williams has developed a rapport with several designers through his work and by "exceeding expectations," he says. "That's the great thing about interior designers, they can be your clients for 20 years.



Williams specializes in furniture that recalls the classic European styles of the past.



Williams uses "imperfect" wood and distresses it. Glazing is added to simulate centuries-old patina.



Williams has discovered that dining room tables and entertainment centers (such as the one pictured) are often the "coup de grâce" of a new home.

It's not just a one-time sale."

What the designers are looking for are often what Williams calls the "coup de grâce" of the house – dining room tables and entertainment centers. "They've got an entertainment center they need to build around the equipment to fit the room, or they need a dining room table with a specific size and specific wood – you can't just go and buy that, so they come to me."

Renaissance is currently located in a 900-square-foot shop, with plans for a bigger facility soon. Williams employs one assistant – a graduate of his apprenticeship program. Equipment used includes a Jet table saw, Grizzly joiner, Mini Max 20-inch bandsaw, a Makita 12-inch dual sliding chopsaw, a DeWalt 13-inch planer, Woodmaster drum sander and a large vacuum bag in which he does veneer and tabletop work.

It is the finish that Williams says brings him the most compliments. He uses imperfect wood "with knots and swirls in it for character," and often hand planes the large boards with a small planer to make them somewhat uneven. But it is the hand-rubbed finishes that really sell the pieces in the end.

"It's a multiple-step process," he explains. "I manually distress the wood. Then lacquer is applied in steps, with glaze between some of the layers, before I rub out the finishes to give an appearance of age." His technique has been gained through extensive reading and has been tweaked to develop his own processes.

"I've been told time and time again that it is the finish," Williams says about his most important selling point. "The designers comment all the time about the finish. They want a beautiful piece that's well-proportioned, and they want to touch it. If the finish feels and looks good, that is what makes them happy."

Williams is not only a master woodworker, but also a teacher who remembers his time as a young man uncertain of his career. He has sought to pass his knowledge on to young woodworkers by offering an apprenticeship program through his shop. "I noticed there were schools charging \$20,000 to \$40,000 for these programs, and I thought I'd be happy to teach people for free if they'd come work for me. It benefits us both."

The teacher also imparts important advice he has learned through his years in business, as well as teaching practical skills. "They get an opportunity to learn the design and style of the masters of Europe," he says. "And if they're not interested in that style that's fine, because when they leave here and want to do, say Mission-style furniture, they'll find that's a heck of a lot easier than the Italian furniture they learned to build here."

Despite his great skill, Williams remains humble. "People look at my work and say how beautiful it is," he says. "But frankly, the beauty is already there in the wood, and our Creator has made it that way. I'm just blessed with the opportunity and ability to be able to bring it out and highlight it and expose it for all to see." ❄