



Carving It Up

A new breed of furniture makers whittles away at the competition.

BY WILLIAM KISSEL

THERE IS A PURITY AND DELICACY about craftsman Mark Levin's Handel Leaf desk, which appears to have formed on its own from the oversize banana leaf that inspired it. The undulating cherry wood "foliage" that makes up the desktop gently rests on four sinuous legs bent upward like plant stalks reaching for nourishment from the sun. If you didn't know it was sculpted by Levin's severely calloused hands, you might think Mother Nature herself had created it. The entire desk seems to sway in the breeze; the detail is that precise.





Mark Levin is inspired by everything from nature to starlets in his designs, ranging from fruit tables, below, to his Marilyn Monroe Leaf Shelf, opposite below, and Chocolate Nouveau table, above.





"When people look at my woodworking they envision me with a chisel in hand, chipping away at the wood," says the amiable Levin, whose isolated Ilfeld studio sits on a 40-acre plot halfway between Santa Fe and Las Vegas, N.M. But fantasy quickly fades, he says, "and they become broken-hearted when they find out it's nothing like that." The desk—similar to Levin's side tables made to resemble oversized apples and coffee tables reminiscent of petrified tree roots—began its life as a six-inch-thick, 400-pound slab the furniture maker created from sandwiched layers of walnut wood. "Then I start sculpting it away with chain saws and automobile disk grinders," says Levin, who, early in his

30-year-plus career, discovered the relative ease by which a 16-grit disk grinder can eat at a chunk of wood. "It sort of blows it out fast," he says, noting that the subsequent sanding and finishing work is the most time-consuming and takes the biggest toll on his hands.



Michael Cullen prefers a more old-fashioned approach to creating his hand-carved designs. From his workshop in Petaluma, Calif., the youthful craftsman uses a mallet and gouge on mahogany, walnut, and cherry wood, letting his hands and imagination guide each finished piece. The carvings on Cullen's chests, dressers, tables, and benches range from whimsical to the primitive, and most are drawn

Michael Cullen's Lilies table, top, is crafted from Bubinga wood; his walnut coffee table retains the integrity of the wood's natural structure.

freeform, with what he refers to as “precise irregularities.” Believing traditional handcrafted furniture to be “static and almost boring,” Cullen started hand-carving to give his furniture more life. “The carving caught the light in a certain way so that the piece actually became more dynamic; a movement was created that gave the work a subtle playfulness,” says Cullen, who calls his latest blanket chest design Spring Rain. “The circular pattern carved on the chest’s surface is based on seeing rain impinging on puddles in front of my shop,” he says.

Although Levin’s and Cullen’s work differ, both wood-carvers are among a relatively undiscovered talent pool of American furniture makers whose studio work—as opposed to mass produced pieces—is beginning to attract collectors and the attention of museum curators alike. The mounting recognition and appreciation for such individualistic design stems from the growing popularity of works by the likes of George Nakashima, Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, and Wharton Esherick, among other pioneers, who founded the craft movement in the early 20th century.

What gives validation and intrinsic value to the work of these and other noteworthy next-generation craftspeople—among them partners Bonnie Bishop and J.M. Syron, Andrew Mulligan, Scott Grove, Rob Hare, Brad Smith, Peter Handler, Richard Judd, and even George Nakashima’s own daughter, Mira—is a matter of opinion as well as personal style and taste. “It’s generational,” says Levin, noting that established furniture collectors often equate quality with the rarity and execution of the materials, especially exotic woods; while younger patrons are open to modern design that incorporate inexpensive materials like plastics and polymer clays applied in innovative ways. Nevertheless, most agree that the best new American designs share many of the attributes that made works by Nakashima, Maloof, and others so highly collectible, including ingenious forms ranging from primitive to ultramodern, a continuity of stellar craftsmanship, a unique combination and use of materials, and, more often than not, a sense of humor.

To wit, Catskills-based Michael Puryear’s upholstered



Top and center: A buffet and Flat Iron table by Michael Puryear. **Above:** Scott Grove’s Polyidol table is covered in a “cloth” made of hardwood.

leather and Bubinga wood Barrow chair is sleek and elegant. But if you look closely you can see how it got its name; the chair was modeled after a wheelbarrow resting outside the furniture maker’s studio. Torii Tansu, another of his designs, evokes a traditional Japanese tansu chest but seems to be floating on air. “It has no visible legs other than the supports that hold up the arches,” says Puryear, whose early work recalls simple craft pieces by the late Wharton Esherick and the recently retired Jim Krenov, a Swedish furniture maker working in California since 1981.

Likewise, Scott Grove uses *trompe l’oeil* to create amusing and colorful mosaic table tops in the state of being uncovered by a “cloth” made of richly detailed hardwoods. Many critics have likened his work to Castle’s earlier illusionary designs. However, Grove’s furniture seems to possess a hidden meaning—not unlike American craft furniture itself—that goes much deeper than that of his predecessor. “For me it’s about furniture design exposing its inner beauty, as well as that *ahhh* sensation someone gets when they see it,” says the Rochester, N.Y.-based craftsman, whose commissioned pieces have more than tripled this year. Among his recent designs is a \$30,000 seagrass mahogany bed with attached lacewood ribbon side tables, a \$20,000 redwood burl, walnut, and bird’s-eye maple dining table, as well as a \$125,000 home entertainment center inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl.

More than highly imaginative—like Pennsylvania-based Brad Smith’s pitchfork chairs and shovel-handle benches or Wisconsin-based Richard Judd’s bentwood ribbon chairs and tables—most of these offerings are also one-of-a-kind or limited editions. And like early craft pieces, many of the newer works employ inventive finishing techniques as well as unexpected manufacturing methods. For instance, Cullen coats his hand-carved chests, cabinets, and tables with milk paints—an old-world compound, reportedly used by ancient Egyptians, that is culled from milk proteins mixed with lime, clay, and earth pigments such as iron oxide and ochre. Environmentally safe and nontoxic, the paints give Cullen’s furniture a colorful, aged appearance right off the workshop floor.

Another pair of American craft designers, Bonnie Bishoff



Below: The Lotus bench from Andrew Muggleton's Macassar series. Bottom: The Ilseboro buffet in bass wood and ash, by Bonnie Bishoff and J.M. Syron.

and J.M. Syron, substitute tinted polymer clays (similar to PVC plastic pipe) in place of typical wood veneers over many of their hand-carved furniture pieces, including the couple's well-received Ilseboro series of chests, dressers, credenzas, and buffets. "We use a *millefiori* [meaning "thousands of flowers" in Italian] technique typically used in glass where multicolored canes, or loaves, are cut into slices and stretched. Then we butt them together like puzzle pieces or cut them into complex patterns like marquetry," says Bishoff, who, with husband and business partner Syron, develops the polymer clay veneers that enhance their woodcutting skills. "The result is highly detailed surface design with considerable depth and exuberant color."

For Andrew Muggleton's new Macassar collection—among the highlights of this year's International Contemporary Furniture Fair (ICFF)—the furniture maker avoided traditional methods of joinery when crafting his Macassar ebony and stainless-steel chaises, benches, tables, and bar stools. Instead, the England-born, Colorado-based Muggleton creates curvaceous veneered forms, such as his intriguing interlocking console tables that slip together like puzzle pieces and are held in place only by the forces of gravity. "The unique part is that I don't use any dovetail joints in the design. The two pieces simply fit into each other and the weight of the top curve locks them in place," explains Muggleton. His sinuous designs—which require a time-

consuming and complex process avoided by most furniture makers—are often inspired by the perfection he finds in nature. For instance, Muggleton's new Lotus bench, interpreted from a lotus blossom, is made of bent Macassar ebony, while his earlier designs were influenced by straw blowing in the wind, the movement of the sea, and pebbles on a beach.

"It's the small stuff—leaves, fruit, flowers—that have a certain perfection to them versus something overwhelming, like a mountain range," adds Levin, noting how natural elements equally transform his work. Levin's shapely leaf desks and tables have earned the artist numerous design awards and the admiration of collectors, if not always that of curators and critics. Thankfully, he says, "collectors are very powerful. They hold berth over the curators." So when one of Levin's leaf tables was bought by a serious patron of the arts, it found its



way into the Cincinnati Museum of Modern Art. "I've been very successful leveraging collectors to get me through the door," he says. □

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