

Furniture that PUSHES THE LIMITS

Designer, artist and master craftsman **Scott E. Armstrong** has had an intimate relationship with wood for more than 30 years. Tegan Foley finds out more about him here



FAR LEFT: Front view of 'Antelope' table

LEFT: 'Brandi Desk and Credenza' – commission set for a home office, which needed to be compact while making a big statement. "The pure modern lines are technically tough to build," says Scott. Made using cherry and ash. Desk: 762mm high x 1,829mm wide x 914mm dia.

Clearly a craftsman who strives for excellence in the design and execution of every piece he makes, Scott E. Armstrong is a studio furniture maker whose background lies in illustration and fine arts. Upon discovering a love of making things in 3D, Scott soon realised that his place was in the workshop rather than in the studio drawing things. Fast forward some 35 years and here we have a furniture maker who pushes the limits; whose love of natural materials is truly evident and whose contemporary pieces capture his personality and demonstrate wonderful skill in terms of their use of both traditional and modern materials and techniques.

Background

Born and raised in northern Wyoming, Scott spent a lot of time outdoors during his childhood, which has clearly shaped his love of nature and the raw materials it offers. Always interested in art and building things, his favourite indoor pastimes were drawing, colouring and putting together puzzles: "My high school art teacher was a friend of my parents so I got to spend some time in his home studio and he invented some advanced art classes for my senior year after I had taken everything that was offered," Scott says.

Upon finishing high school, he undertook a two-

year stint working on oil rigs until he could afford to go, and got accepted to, the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri, majoring in illustration and graphic design. Part of the curriculum of the design department had Scott taking industrial design courses, which involved building models and prototypes of his designs in the school workshop. "I knew almost immediately that I had found my home and switched my major from 2D to 3D design," he comments. Furniture design classes were the most fun and offered Scott what he thought was the best opportunity to be able to live and work wherever he wanted, be able to support a family, and have the artistic freedom he needed.

During his first year after graduation, Scott worked in the workshop of his furniture design instructor, John Noel, who on quite a few occasions with more than a hint of warning asked him: "Are you SURE you want to do this for a living?!"

With this advice falling on deaf ears, starting a family was the deciding factor behind the family's move out of the city and back to the west where Scott worked for two years in Utah as a technical illustrator for an aerospace company that made space shuttle rocket engines. During this time, Scott built furniture in his garage with a few hand tools and the help of the local university workshop through an adult education programme, while he looked >



ABOVE: 1/8th scale models for Scott's 'Chief Joseph' bedroom suite shown opposite. These scale models allow Scott to quickly adjust the basic proportions, overall form, and also point out any problem areas before he starts the actual build



Photographs by Elijah Cobb



ABOVE & LEFT: Scott's most recent commission based on the scale drawings shown opposite: 'Chief Joseph' bedroom suite, including bed, dresser and night stands. "I think these are a good representation of my efforts to design clearly contemporary forms that have a sense of the west," says Scott. Made from vertical grain (quartersawn) Douglas fir solids and veneers with walnut burl, figured cherry and reconstituted bird's-eye veneer inlay. The image on the head board of the bed is a local land mark, Heart Mountain, that can be seen from the bedroom window in the home where the set will live, and has a historical connection with Chief Joseph and his famous fight for the freedom of his tribe in the late 1800s

One of Scott's favourite pieces – 'Antelope' – a demi lune table that is contemporary in feel with traditional elements: the saber leg, dentil inlay and sunburst veneer lay up. Made using figured cherry veneer, cherry and ebonised maple: 1,016mm wide x 762mm high x 432mm dia.

TOP LEFT: 'Jimmy Co.' bedside table. Scott and Jimmy Covert got together to play with blending styles and this is the result. Made in juniper and cherry: 279mm dia. x 406mm wide x 559mm high

BELOW: Scott uses his Dowelmax jig extensively in the workshop

TOP MIDDLE: Commission for the First Bank of Wyoming President's Office, including desk, credenza, hutch, side chairs, small conference table, plus computer desk and glass doors. "This was a dream commission," says Scott, "the client told me he liked my work and showed me the space I needed to fill." The design direction was taken from the architecture of the exterior of the new building. Furniture made using maple solids, maple veneer and Macassar ebony

for work in the furniture industry. A move to Indiana was next on the cards, where Scott was offered a job as a designer/model maker for a large office furniture company in the area. Here he spent the next eight years learning advanced woodworking, design and engineering for production, as well as the history of furniture styles and periods.

After learning as much as he thought he could there, and not being allowed to build his own prototypes anymore, it was time to move back to Wyoming and set up shop, and there he's been for the last 23 years.

Designing furniture

In terms of how his style of furniture making has changed, Scott tells me that this went from a focus on straight lines to accent the grain and colour of the wood to an appreciation of the historic styles, which opened his eyes to the value of ornamentation. "The pieces I am making are still contemporary," he says, "but the forms are showing more historical influences, like a cabriole leg with exaggerated curves and no carving on the knee or foot, or an inlay on a table apron to represent dentil moulding."

Hugely influenced by the studio furniture movement that started in the late 1940s as well as the Art Deco period of the 1920s and '30s, Scott's favourite work was produced during the Biedermeier period of the early 1800s in Austria and Germany, a direct example of which can be seen in his 'Antelope' table, which carries strong similarities while still demonstrating Scott's unique flair.

Today, Scott works mostly to commission although these are varied. "Most years, kitchen cabinets have paid the bills with the occasional gallery piece selling and a few furniture commissions helping," he says, "then there is always the broken chair rocker, or the shift knob for a restored '60s Mustang, or a one-time commission to turn 300 candle sticks for QVC that comes along to make life more interesting."

When asked to explain the design process he uses, Scott comments that this varies according to what he is making - e.g. depending on whether the piece is for a specific client or if it is a studio piece, which often involves him challenging himself to build something he hasn't made before or trying a new technique.

"Once I have a starting point, I sketch lots of thumbnails to generate ideas and put them on paper to make it easier to sort the good ones from the not so good ones. Then, when I have chosen a general direction, I move to three dimensions in the workshop and build sketch models, usually 1/8th scale, sometimes larger." These help Scott work through basic proportion and scale issues and get the overall form closer. It is then on to working with full-size drawings, often drawing on to a sheet of MDF for more complex pieces. "The design process never really ends," says Scott, "as even after a piece is delivered, I still think of things I would do differently if I were to build it again."

Clearly a perfectionist in his craft, each of his pieces seems to have an individual character and I asked him whether this was accidental or intentional. He comments that despite having to produce pieces that sell, he ultimately considers himself an artist and believes the best art comes from exploration and playfulness: "I don't feel the need to try to make a form that I designed to be one thing, that I worked hard to perfect the details and form of, and try to stretch and pull it into something else." Scott acknowledges the fact that his designs should be functional and beautiful, that they should make you smile and want to touch them: "I think they should have a character and presence of their own; they should be individuals that fit into their environment; they should be confident but never loud. I want my designs to challenge what you expect furniture to look like but it should still feel familiar. And I have lately begun to think that they also need a sense of history and place."

Working smart

A huge fan of wood as a natural medium, Scott says it is very important for him to complement the figure of the material he's using, as all of these factors have a huge visual impact on the end result. "A lot of the time with contemporary design, the only fine detail or visual texture comes from the figure of the wood, so it is critical," he says. "In all cases, the figure or grain direction is important to the continuity of the form."

In terms of incorporating other materials into his work, Scott says that he's used some metal and stone in pieces but not very much, purely because it's just one of those design avenues he hasn't yet explored at any great length: "I guess it comes down to the fact that I am a woodworker first, and my first impulse when faced with a problem, design or structural, is to use the medium I know best," he comments.

Currently working on a large set of kitchen and bathroom cabinets that his employees are building for a client's new house as well as a king size bed and a 14ft dining table, Scott tells me that kitchens are what feeds their families but furniture feeds his spirit. "While the guys are building 80% of a cabinet job, I am working on a commission piece or a spec piece for a gallery," he says. At the moment of writing this, that happened to be the commission for the bedroom suite pictured on the previous page, which was made in a contemporary western style, a style he has been trying to develop for a number of years.

In terms of a making time frame, Scott says that large studio furniture pieces take upwards of 200 hours of design and build time, and that is usually spread over several months - sometimes a year or more - whereas commissions with a budget always take up the time estimated plus an 'ego' factor: "That time in a job when you are no longer working for the client but are working for your ego."

To make his pieces, Scott uses a mixture of both hand and power tool techniques, usually preferring power tools as they are faster and more accurate, and when time is money, then expediency has to trump the romance of hand tools. "I still hand cut dovetails and chop mortises for my studio work but I would be foolish to use a brace and bit when I have a drill press for daily production," he says. "I'm a firm believer that if Thomas Chippendale had've had a plunge router, then he would have thrown out his moulding planes!"

Although not a tool junkie or wood worshipper, this maker's favourite tool is the one that gets the job done fastest and most accurately. "I do have a vacuum pump for pressing veneer that my son and I built, and I really enjoy using my Dowelmax dowelling jig," he tells me, "that is one of the best engineered and built fixtures I've ever used; it is a pleasure to use."

When all of these techniques and practices come together perfectly, Scott is left with a stunning piece such as his 'Sideshow' table and 'Rockabilly' sideboard, both of which he is equally proud of in their own right. He is especially proud of the spiral veneer layout on the table, as well as the fact that the sideboard was bought by the Buffalo Bill Historical Center for their permanent collection, but perhaps he has the most admiration for the knockdown crib that he and his then eight-year-old son built together when his daughter was born.

Working space

Moving on to discovering more about Scott's working space, from the photos shown below you can see that this is a huge area filled with many industrial machines and equipment. Originally a 1930s chicken and egg processing operation, the workshop originally spanned some 1,200sq.ft, but has since been increased over the years to make a working space of some 1,500sq.ft. "It is a funky old amalgam of all the different tenants

"Working with wood stimulates all my senses. It looks great, feels great, and it usually smells great"



ABOVE: 'Rockabilly' sideboard - "I had this piece sketched as a way to juxtapose curves and angles; to give a feel of asymmetrical symmetry," Scott says. This piece won two awards at Cody High Style: Exhibitors Choice and The Switchback Ranch purchase award. It is now in the permanent collection at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Made using quartered sapele and mottled makore veneers: 991mm high x 1,829mm wide x 483mm dia.



BELOW: Various views of Scott's workshop

who used it through the years," Scott says. "It has mostly 8ft ceilings with large windows on the east and west, a modern finish area and lots of lights."

Equipment in the workshop includes Scott's sentimental favourite: the veneer vacuum pump built by him and his son from old parts, and the piece of equipment that has changed the way he works the most is his Performax 37in double drum sander: "It is an essential machine for sanding a set of cabinet doors but I also use it to bring bandsawn veneer to a nice smooth thickness. There is not one job in the 12 years I've owned it that goes through the shop without some part of it going through this machine," he comments.

The future

So, given that the future of furniture making will inevitably involve the use of CNC machining and more computer-orientated techniques, Scott is not worried by this and believes that traditional woodworking will always have its place: "I am already seeing younger exhibitors at shows displaying, proudly, pieces with extensive machine carving. That just means it will be even harder for someone with hand skills to compete for the limited amount of work in this field. I believe

there will always be a place for good old-fashioned woodworking craftsmanship, and the role and lifestyle of the artisan will still have the same romantic pull on others that it had on me," he says.

In terms of the future of his furniture making, Scott says that he intends to keep doing what he's doing now, even if that means moving with the times and being more adaptable. His pieces have a timeless quality and despite being contemporary in their appearance, are items of beauty that will always have a welcome place in many peoples' homes. With the allowance of more time, Scott says that he would also like to be able to explore some pure speculative work as well as some of the design avenues that he has glimpsed along the way but hasn't had the time to be able to follow as of yet.

Giving something back is also important to this maker, who has already done some basic woodwork teaching for his local community adult education programme, as well as giving presentations at colleges and museums. Teaching woodworking and furniture design courses is also an avenue he would like to explore, along with a group of other local furniture makers. Who knows what the future will hold but Scott is clearly a man with not one, but several plans, and we wish him all the best. **GW**

BELOW: 'Hopkin' table' – designed in collaboration with Carrie Hopkin. 1.8m diameter dining table made from sapele solids and veneers

TRADE SECRETS FOR ASPIRING FURNITURE MAKERS

"I think it is important to keep in mind that if you are in this business to make a living, then you have to separate the practical from the romantic. It may be thoroughly enjoyable to use a well-tuned jack plane to flatten boards, to watch that perfect shaving curl out of the plane, but unless you are able to sell that romance to the customer, or are willing to work for pennies an hour, then you and they are better off if you use a stationary jointer to do the job quicker and more accurately. It comes down to if you can find enough customers who share your feelings for the history and romance of the craft, and are willing to pay you for their vicarious enjoyment.

In my experience, in the USA at least, you have to produce work at various quality levels: what those are is up to you and your paying clients. One customer I have worked with for more than 20 years on a dozen projects has at times asked for all out top quality pieces with no set budget, whereas there are other times when price is an important consideration. Most of the time my customers trust me to make them the absolute best piece they can afford, but most couldn't care less if there are blind tenon joints or dowel joints, shop cut or store bought veneer, as long as the piece they are buying is, and will be, sound and beautiful for a long time"

RIGHT: 'Sideshow' table, which started from the idea to build a pedestal table using techniques Scott had developed to make small tripod tables. To make it more stable it needed another leg: "but four legs," he says, "is not much fun so I gave it five, which in turn gave me the name 'Sideshow' – step in and see the amazing five-legged table, and of course then it needed hooves!" The veneer layout on the top started as a traditional sunburst pattern, but Scott decided to give it a softer look, like fabric, which inspired the use of upholstery nails as a detail element. "One idea points me to the next one if I'm looking for it," he says. Made using cherry and canary wood solids with quartered cherry and reconstituted veneers. 1,270mm dia. x 762mm tall



LEFT: The vacuum pump made by Scott and his son, Josh – his sentimental favourite piece of workshop kit



FURTHER INFO

To find out more about Scott, his other work and pieces he's made, visit his website: www.scottearmstrong.com