front porch

Crafting Legacies

Former NASA Space Shuttle engineer Scott Morrison creates beauty through wood, and the results are out of this world.

WHEN IT BEGAN Rediscovery is bliss, especially if it involves a childhood passion. Such is the saga of Scott Morrison, who adored woodworking as a child. The Montana-based craftsman worked for two decades as a space shuttle engineer and co-founded a software company. "My kids were grown and had left home to begin families of their own, and my wife, Valerie, and I had stressful lives with demanding careers," Scott recalls. "I began working with wood again and building chairs. Unlike computers and software, chairs are tangible. I could run my hands over them and show my family what I'd done. It was something I could be proud of."

Gentle encouragement from a friend prompted Scott to enter his work in a local art show that boasted rigorous acceptance standards. Not only did his work get accepted, it sold well, too. Orders for his chairs poured in. Over the next few years, Scott and Valerie toyed with the idea of quitting their jobs and launching their own full-time woodworking business. Finally, they took the plunge.

"It was exciting and a little scary," says Scott. "But we've never regretted our decision, nor would we ever return to our former lives."

MATERIAL MATTERS For a craftsman like Scott, the nuances of the hardwoods he uses (everything from cherry and maple to more exotic species such as African rosewood) make all the difference, and he forms a connection with each piece he works on. "Of all the wood I use, Oregon black walnut is my favorite. I love the way it feels after sanding, and the rich color and dramatic figure is hard to beat," he says. "I always become attached to whatever chair I happen to be working on."

BEHIND THE SCENES Creating one of Scott's "butterfly" chairs is tantamount to producing a sculpture, since every line is elegantly carved. But the big difference between the two crafts, of course, is that Scott's work must support the weight of a person for decades.

"Each chair begins with drawings and sketches, sometimes dozens of them," he says. "I sketch a range of viewpoints and angles, and I concentrate on reproducing the overall look and feel of the piece. If I get lucky, it may take only a few weeks; if not, it could be years. For example, my rocker cradle took three years before I had a design that satisfied me."

Once Scott has reference drawings, he builds one or more prototypes of a chair out of scrap, or what he terms "lesser wood." A chair might look great on paper, but the true test is sitting in it. If it's comfortable, he then builds a "master" chair.

INSPIRATION POINT Artistic muses take many forms, but Scott's is fairly simple: The Big Sky Country that surrounds him. "Montana is gorgeous, and I'm endlessly fascinated by the majesty of trees, mountains—all of nature," he says. "I try to capture that beauty and honor the materials in my work. Neither people nor trees have harsh right angles, so why would I make a chair that does? My work mimics nature: soft and easy on the eyes."

BUY IT Handcrafted pieces range from $150 (footstools) to $10,500 (rocker cradle). Scott crafts each chair to a buyer's specifications, which he'll discuss before making sketches. Contact him at 406-322-1132, or visit his web site at finewoodworker.com.

—Michael McCarthy

clip this tip

HEALTHY FIRES The key to a healthy and hot fire is using properly seasoned wood. Freshly cut timber contains up to 80 percent moisture, and should be dried to 20 to 25 percent moisture before burning. To do this: Cut and split logs into stove-sized pieces, stack them so air can circulate on both ends of each piece, and let them stand in the sun and wind all summer (six to nine months). Obviously, you want to keep your woodpile dry, so shelter from rain is essential. High-density hardwoods like maple and oak are better for burning in the winter, while softer woods like pine and poplar are better for mild days since they burn quickly.

— Rachel Machacek