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'Artistry in Wood'

Sonoma County Museum exhibits works of local master craftsmen

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To most of us, furniture is something we buy in a store. We sit in the chairs, we put dinner on the table and beyond that, we don't ponder the subject much.

But for master woodworkers, making fine chairs, tables and other furniture is practically a religious experience.

"It's the natural thing for me to do," said custom furniture maker Les Cizek of Fort Bragg. "It's a spiritual thing. Working is the sacred part of my life now. The time I spend in the shop just feels so right."

The Sonoma County Museum will showcase work by Cizek and other Northern California woodworkers in the 21st annual "Artistry in Wood" exhibition, opening Friday.

Cizek, 80, came to his craft late in life, leaving behind his career as an insurance salesman in Miami to take artisan teacher James Krenov's nationally known woodworking classes at College of the Redwoods in the early '90s.

"When I look back at myself as an insurance man — and sometimes I still have insurance-man dreams — I am just astonished. I can't believe I did that," Cizek said.

Another Krenov devotee, David Marks of Santa Rosa, went on to open his own woodworking school with his wife, Victoria. Marks has hosted two cable TV series on the subject, first on the Home and Garden channel and later on the DIY network, ending last year.

"I've been a woodworker for all of my life," said Marks, 57. "It's a passion. I think most of us are drawn to it just for the pure, natural beauty of the material. People love the beauty of the grain and the patterns in the wood."

Custom furniture maker Griffin Okie of Santa Rosa likens his love of the raw materials to a benign addiction.

"I call myself a wood-holic. I'm such a wood freak. You look at some of the grains in the wood and it's magical. So my furniture is pretty much about the wood. I might do brass or



ERIK CASTRO / FOR THE PD
Craftsman Griffin Okie leans on a desk made of Hawaiian Koa wood at his workshop in Santa Rosa.

silver inlays, but I collect so much beautiful wood I usually just showcase that," he explained.

While some of the woodworkers have trained extensively, others have learned mostly by working.

"I've been a woodworker all my life," said Okie, 65. "I didn't have any formal training. I had to learn by doing it the wrong way a few times and then I caught on."

This is not work that can be rushed. After Okie lovingly selects freshly logged walnut, acacia, black oak, eucalyptus or elm, he has to let it dry for several years.

"Woodworking requires a huge amount of patience," Marks said. "It's something you have to be drawn to."

The exhibit features primarily furniture, such as Okie's game table and a desk made of Hawaiian koa wood, or Cizek's coffee table made of curly Swiss pear wood and his frames for a pair of convex mirrors.

But there also will be other objects, including a wood-turned vase Marks made from a maple burl.

Many of the participants in the "Artistry in Wood" show are members of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association, and some also belong to the Baulines Craft Guild, a nationally recognized association of artisan teachers.

Cizek finds it a long trek from Fort Bragg to Sonoma County Woodworkers Association gatherings, but still worthwhile.

"These people do a lot of fine furniture work," he said, "but it's also a variety of interesting people."

Some of the woodworkers insist on hand-making every piece, but those who make furniture for a living find it more efficient to use power tools as needed. Still, everyone taking part in this juried exhibition is expected to meet a high standard.

"The surface should be smooth. There shouldn't be table-saw marks, any mill marks from running the board through a planer. You have to hand-plane or sand those marks away. The joints should fit tightly," Marks explained.

"These woodworkers try for the higher levels of craftsmanship," he added. "Proportions are critical, and the overall design of the piece. If you go to museums, you see that throughout history. Fine furniture is a reflection of someone's good taste."

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