



ASPEN SOJOURNER / MIDSUMMER 2011 / FORM AND FUNCTION



## Form and Function

STORY BY STEWART OKSENHORN



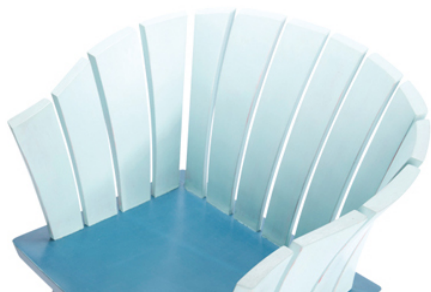
Photography by Michael Faas

Local Furniture makers create useful, beautiful art.

If David Rasmussen's chairs, tables, and stools have the qualities he describes—seductive, appealing, smooth, pleasing to touch—it starts with the way he approaches the wood. Rasmussen gives his pieces a hand-rubbed finish with his own custom blend of oils rather than putting a surface coat over the materials. The technique not only makes the furniture durable, but it ensures that owners who love the look and feel of wood are getting their full arboreal fix.

"Touching the furniture, you're touching the surface of the wood," he says, noting that walnut is a favorite.

In other aspects of his furniture making, Rasmussen goes for a more balanced approach. While function is priority no. 1, he looks to employ artful touches of paint and sculptural elements. "My work is a balance where functionality is the constraint, and, within that, I put in the more artistic stuff that I do," he explains.



Rasmussen possesses a painter's feel for color, which he often uses as a contrast to the natural tone of the wood. That knack, Rasmussen says, led Theatre Aspen to choose him to create a series of benches for the theater group's new tent: "They wanted something bold, something that would stand out, a more modern touch. They have a

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"But I don't want furniture to feel like it doesn't belong," the artist explains. "There should be contrast; it should draw your eye to it. But it should also feel like it's at home. It should fit in with the flow."

**Brad Reed Nelson's furniture is always asked to pull double duty.** His pieces need to do more than look smart, they need to function well. And their look must not only connect back to the history of furniture design—but also bring the eye into the present and even hint at the future. His work evokes elegance while also conveying a sense of lightness, even humor.

"I like to have duality," says the forty-three-year-old, who has been making furniture for twenty years, the last twelve in Carbondale (where his home, naturally, doubles as his shop).



Nelson's Windsorrondack chairs are the ideal example. His signature creation, having been displayed at high-profile shows, they hearken to the familiar Adirondack chair, with wood as the prominent material. But his chairs feature the contrast of metal, often in a vivid purple or blue, allowing the piece to jump out visually. The metal also provides durability and a smooth rock not usually associated with traditional Adirondacks.

"A chair loses you the moment you sit in it and go, 'Ughh....,'" Nelson says. "These, you sit in it and you have an 'aha' moment. It doesn't sit like it's wood. It's soft."

A recent design, a coffee table, has its own duality: a trough at the center serves as a built-in bookshelf. Nelson's lwear racks are cute, small, and simple—but function beautifully as eyeglass holders.

Given this penchant for multifaceted furniture, it's appropriate that the motto for Nelson's Board by Design company reads, "Tight maker and loose cannon." One side just isn't enough.

**Jason Schneider doesn't want his furniture to gain attention simply because of the material he uses.** That's a tough battle, considering his pieces are made primarily from corrugated cardboard, a material more commonly discarded than prized. But Schneider's work—like his circular set of stacked drawers or his spinning tables—draws the eye based on its catchy design sense and the patterns brought out of the cardboard texture. And despite their apparent lightness, the pieces are surprisingly sturdy, thanks to the complementary use of wood.



Five years ago, around the time he became the coordinator of the



and woodworking program, Schneider came across a bunch of cardboard boxes destined for the dumpster. Instead of throwing them away, he experimented—laminating them, sawing them, shaping them. What began as an exercise in recycling became a love affair with the material. Schneider's

latest designs emphasize not the oddness of cardboard but its beauty and functionality.

"It's elevated this low-status material that we handle every day into fine furniture, even sculpture. It's an interesting material that has a lot of character," Schneider says, noting that Frank Gehry has designed chairs out of cardboard. "When people see the furniture, they think first that it's beautiful wood. But I don't want it to stand out just because it's cardboard. I hope the overall presence of the piece will stand out."

**Andrea Wendel is the rare woman in the male-dominated field of furniture making**, yet femininity isn't the first element evident in her work—usually solid and sturdy combinations of wood and metal.

"It's big and beefy and heavy," says Wendel, who studied welding in her formative artistic years. "My back goes out, and it's dirty work. I like a masculine design."



But there is a feminine aesthetic beyond the brawny surface. The elegant, carved lines of a dining table are influenced by her affection for jewelry and jewelry making, and Wendel's preference for the handmade over the machine-manufactured tends to leave her furniture with a woman's touch. Her lines are clean, sleek, and uncluttered, meant to blend into a room rather than demand attention.

"The current trend is that consumers want a break from cookie-cutter furniture," she says. "They want there to be a stamp on what they buy. It should be artful, special." Achieving that non-cookie-cutter end is made easier by Wendel's preferred way to work: collaborating with a homeowner, to share ideas until a common aesthetic ground is reached.

"That always sends me off into a different realm that I wouldn't have thought of on my own," says Wendel, who also designs tableware, including her unique, sculptural napkin rings. "And the homeowner gets pieces that look like they are meant to be there."

**Wood is practically sacred to Pete Hajdu.** Altering a piece of wood is done carefully, unobtrusively. As a result, his furniture



“Wood has a dignity. You turn it into something it’s not, that’s taking the dignity away,” Hajdu says. “I make pieces where you don’t alter the wood much, you let the wood speak for itself. Covering it with a plastic finish—that doesn’t seem right.”



Hajdu’s tables, then, often bear the natural shape of the wood as he found it. The edges are not always cut down to a straight line; the joining pieces have their quirks left intact. The elements Hajdu adds are small, but thoughtful. It is not uncommon for a piece of raw material to sit and sit, as he figures out what the wood wants to be.

“I’ll have a piece of wood in my shop and I won’t touch it till I know what I’m going to do with it,” he says. “The wood’s been here a lot longer than we have, and it will last a lot longer. I’m not going to take anything away from it.”

Hajdu, who began working with his father, a tool-and-die designer, as a kid, believes the integration of his technique with a belief in the material produces furniture that not only looks good and functions well, but feels right.

“Call it karma or whatever, that energy gets in there, and it’s bound to make someone happy,”

he says. “If it’s good energy going in, that’s what’s coming out.”

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