

ARTISTRY IN OLD WOOD

Woodworking links us to the past with pieces crafted from historical woods.

BY KIM COOK
Associated Press

The time-honored skill of woodworking appears to be enjoying a modern resurgence among collectors and designers.

Amid the tony crowd at this year's Architectural Digest Home Design Show in New York, the guys in jeans and work boots were like rock stars chatting to their fans. Many works were showstoppers, among them pieces crafted from historical woods or repurposed antiques.

Virginia-based Bill Jewell brought his exhibit, "History in the Making." His firm, Historical Woods of America, acquires trees and turns them into beautiful objects. But these aren't ordinary trees. They're called "Witness Trees" — witnesses to history — and although they've lived for a couple of hundred years, nature ultimately reclaims them.

They come from presidential estates and other historic sites, such as the Ellwood Plantation, where two generals made their headquarters during the Civil War.

Jewell offered 20 of the world's best wood artists the opportunity to choose a specimen that inspired them, and craft it. He hopes to take the show across the country if he can gather funding.

"I'm not a rich guy, but I feel there's a direct and valuable connection to our past through these trees and timbers," he said. "Each of the artists brought their unique vision to the woods they chose and really gave them a second life."

For the project, Jacques Vesery made a small but intricately worked sculpture out of a piece of Mount Vernon cherry. Textured to look like bark, there are amazing trompe l'oeil antique maps embedded on the sculpture.

There are several furniture items in the exhibit, including Thomas Hucker's side tables made of walnut from Washington's whiskey distillery, and

Garry Knox Bennett's writing chair, made from Monticello tulip poplar. "It's my understanding that Jefferson actually had something to do with adding a writing arm to a Windsor-style chair," says Bennett.

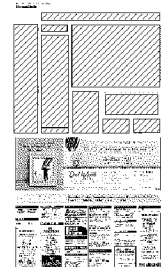
Jewell himself made a console from storm-downed walnut with two supporting arms of centuries-old Sonoran Desert saguaro cactus skeleton. The gnarled cactus and the grain pattern of the walnut create a symmetry, and the piece is named *Balance*.

At his booth, Rhode Island artist Jeff Soderbergh pointed to a cherry and steel side table. "The top of this is a Victorian heat grate I found in Mystic, Conn.," he says. "I had a lady say that she remembered these grates from her childhood home — how her wet winter boots would hiss on them."

Repurposing pieces from the past is a passion for Soderbergh. He has made tables out of such disparate materials as bowling alley flooring and soapstone counters from a school chemistry lab.

For those keen to learn the craft of woodworking themselves at the hands of masters, consider a week's vacation in Auburn, Maine, where Thos. Moser furniture company runs a "Customer in Residence" program. Participants spend a week working alongside a professional, leaving with a piece of furniture they've helped build.

Pat Rosen and her husband, Arthur, from Lafayette, Ind., made an American Bungalow Bed. The experience was "a high point"; the bed was a bonus, Rosen says. "It's a treasure, and even more special that we made it ourselves."



Woodworking resources

historicalwoods.com: Learn more about the Fredericksburg, Va., program that is focused on "the reclamation, salvaging and creative repurposing of historical trees and timbers."

jeffsoderbergh.com: Artist Jeff Soderbergh of Newport, R.I., works with clients' personal pieces, or they may choose from his antique architectural inventory.

thosmoser.com: The "Customer in Residence" program runs April through November; \$4,500 per couple includes lodging, two dinners with the Moser family and staff, transportation between inn and shop, etc. Furniture cost and transportation to Maine are extra. Individual packages also are available.



Photo courtesy of Jeff Soderbergh

Artist Jeff Soderbergh created the Dublin Bed by piecing together a Gothic church window from Dublin, Ireland, that dates to about 1875, Japanese water glass, Pennsylvania walnut and 200-year-old hand-forged iron gate scrolls from Rhode Island.



Historical Woods of America acquires trees from historic sites, like presidential estates, for the company's unique pieces. Pictured here, from top to bottom, are: William Jewell's foyer table titled *Balance*, Garry Knox Bennett's Post Windsor Writing Chair and one of Thomas Hucker's pie crust tables.