

# LIFESTYLES

magazine

FLAGLER COUNTY'S PREMIER MONTHLY

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# Wood Revisited

HOMES ARE EMBRACING A NEW GENERATION OF WOOD, FULL OF ENDEARING IMPERFECTIONS AND SOLID CHARACTER

BY BEV BENNETT



Wood has the allure that draws you to gently caress a surface or take a lingering glance.

No wonder – after years of stainless steel, slate and other cold materials, wood, cherished for its warmth and beauty, is gaining a starring role in home décor.

The wood that's showcased however, bears little resemblance to the typical furniture of 20 years ago. Instead artisans, along with major chains like Pottery Barn, are embracing wood in all its unique variations to create whimsical, sleek, gnarled or environmentally sound pieces.

“One of the charms of wood is that you can think of it in so many ways,” says Leah Woods, assistant professor with the School of Art at Illinois State University in Normal. Woods, who instructs woodworking and furniture design students, describes her own work as studio furniture. “The genre refers to those who design and build their own furniture,” says Woods.

Wood furniture and accessories can project virtually any style, mood or aesthetic. Here, an arty modern shoe rack, left, combines function and whimsy. A rustic wood console table, right, displays a range of decorative accessories.

She is gaining a national reputation for her pieces that combine art and function. “Footloose and Fancy Free,” is an example. The maple-and-cherry piece of sculptural art and shoe holder makes a statement about women's relationship with their shoes.

“My inspiration was ‘Sex and the City.’ High heels are funny but women also adore them. They spend lots of money on items they'll only use several times. This [piece] shows off high heels as objects while keeping them in an organized setting,” says Woods.

By contrast, Brian Maples, a local Palm Coast craftsman and furniture maker, often looks to Japanese or contemporary pieces for direction. He's inspired by other artists such as George Nakashima and Sam Maloof, looking for the clean lines, contrasting style and asymmetry.

“Nakashima, who is very popular now, broke ground in using trees and wood that weren't perfect. That's part of the asymmetry,” says Maples.

His own work, such as cabinetry, bookcases and sideboards, has a quiet strength and simplicity.

Beyond the design and function, furniture makers and shoppers also are looking at wood for its sustainability and even its history.

“There's a lot more interest in natural products,” says Kevin Fristad, a noted author on fine woodworking and a professional woodworker himself.

In fact, some of the trendiest furniture resembles vertical tree slices. “The buzzword is ‘live edge.’ You take a tree and split it the long way, leaving the natural edge of the tree. The board, called a fitch, has the undulating edge of the tree,” says



Bench by Brian Maples

Fristad. Brian Maples has one flitch of Sassafras that he has stored for 15 years waiting for the right inspiration and is currently working on a foyer bench table in Black Walnut.

Salvaged wood is also drawing attention. Fristad, who has a gallery in Washington, notes “We have a new artist who specializes in using salvaged Northwest Douglas-fir. He salvages timber that’s standing but dead and looks for twisted, knotted wood. He slices the wood two inches thick and makes conference tables

with the imperfections, including worm holes, in place.”

Paul Baliker, who has a studio on the A1A just north of Bings Landing, has made his reputation by carving large pieces of driftwood and stumps into exotic sculptures and furniture. Using knotted and tangled pieces of cedar rescued from islands and swamps over by Cedar Key, on Florida’s west coast, Baliker creates pieces that flow with the shapes of the roots and branches, but are transformed into natural scenes with carvings of birds, fish and

mammals.

“I enjoy using wild patterns and grains, freaks of nature, not found elsewhere and my customers have always been very receptive to that,” says Baliker.

Even nature’s mistakes can be appealing. Most artisans will look for and use imperfections in wood to add character to the piece. These imperfections are even being embraced by large companies such as Pottery Barn in their New Naturals line – “the tradition of wabi sabi, the perfect imperfect,” says Leigh Oshirak, director of public relations for Pottery Barn Brands. If you want something that is all bland and without character maybe you should consider Formica.

Go beyond the traditional furniture shop when looking for unusual wood pieces. Local craft galleries, specialty furniture stores and woodworking studios provide a wealth of interesting, often one-of-a-kind furniture.

Because pieces can range in price from several hundred to several thousands of dollars, learn how to select a well-made item.

Although styles and colors can change with trends, furniture that’s skillfully crafted will hold up through years of use, Brian Maples advises “Look at the craftsmanship, the precision with which something is made,” The joinery, how the pieces fit together, is one of the first things to look for in a piece. “The joints should be perfect with no gaps,” he says. “I use hand cut dovetails and mortise and tenon joints” ■



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