



Doug Loneman

FUNCTIONABLE ART

**Bozeman craftsman David Coffin
blending Asian and Western styles**

The air in David Coffin's shop burns with the smells of cut lumber, fresh wood shavings and paint thinner. Files and awls line up above his work bench. Measuring tapes and hammers dangle



BY
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from a row of wooden pegs, and pencils of differing heights and sharpness stand inside an old soup can. Sawdust, swept but hiding in plain sight, sifts



Tom Ferris

Functional art along the floorboards. For the past ten years, Coffin has been making custom furniture — comfortable, livable furniture that might better be described as functional art. Ask him what drives his work and Coffin's intense blue eyes begin to glimmer. "Using the same techniques that have been around for thousands of years," he said, "and creating pieces that will last beyond my lifetime."

Coffin is hunched over his drafting table, sketching a pair of large wooden doors. The walls around him are a collage of pictures — tables, chairs, architectural details — work created by him as well as by other artists whom he admires.

"I'm totally visual," he said as he traces an almost invisible line on the paper. "I'm an accumulation of influences, subconsciously downloading everything I see."

His travels to countries like India, Mongolia, Nepal and Western China have all had an effect on his creations. "You can't help but be impacted by those places," he said. Commenting on the art and structures he saw on these trips he said, "The wood itself is inspirational."

Coffin's style, when he's not doing custom pieces for clients, tends to be a mix of subtle lines and gentle curves, an Asian feel with a Western base.

Because he works a lot with clients who have specific needs, he adapts his designs as he

Coffin custom designed this cherry dining room set. The chairs are ergonomically correct, with curved lumbar supports. On the opening page, David Coffin is surrounded by tools in his downtown Bozeman studio. He hand-made the delicate marquetry rose using paper-thin inlays of various types of wood.

works with them.

"I like to start by going with the client to the house," he said. "I have to see the space where the piece is going to live. Then I generate ideas and go through an entire process with the client."

David and Margaret Engle had Coffin create a number of pieces for their Bozeman home, including a dining room table with eight chairs, a bedroom set, an entertainment center and a chest.

"David Coffin is a real asset to the community," David Engle said. "He's an artist and probably one of the best furniture makers around. His work is beautiful."

The Engles found working with Coffin was very gratifying — not only because of his fine attention to detail, but because of his willingness to take suggestions.

"He's a good listener," David Engle said. "And very talented. The pieces that David did for us fit in nicely with our home. He was a pleasure to work with."

Each piece, like each client, is unique. From the ergonomically-correct dining room chairs with carved lumbar supports to the rustic

bathroom cabinet with Asian-inspired, arced legs to the simple sideboard with Early American hardware — Coffin's vision stretches from East to West, incorporating many new ideas and influences along the way.

"The challenge is finding the right wood," he said. "It's like a soup with a lot of different ingredients. I have to fulfill the aesthetics and the functionality and keep it in line with the concept of the rest of the house."

For the doors he's currently designing, Coffin has selected a stack of African mahogany planks, 14 feet long and 10 "quarters" (or 2 and 1/2 inches) thick. Coffin lifts one plank and carefully feeds it into a planer. The loud hum drowns out the jazz playing on his stereo. Suddenly, the wood is unveiled: the planer has stripped off the rough exterior to expose its feather-patterned, shimmery nature.

Coffin cradles the speckled, satiny wood, admiring the contrast. "There are so many aspects to wood," he said, running his hand down the finish like a blind man reading Braille. "Furniture making is like painting, sculpture, graphic arts and craftsmanship all put together."

The African Mahogany doors will open a new chapter in Coffin's life. Next month, Coffin is set to move his business across East Mendenhall into a brand-new space. *continued on next page*



Tom Ferris

Above, Coffin made this Asian-inspired coffee table out of African Mahogany and Tiger Maple for his own home. At right, a corner chest hides an entertainment center behind black cherry doors.



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Functional art

"It may just be across the street," Coffin said.

"But it's really a big step for me."

Not only will the new space house his custom design woodworking shop, Montana Custom Furniture, but it will also have room for a retail storefront. "Over the last 10 years, I've met some very talented people," he said. "And, although it will be my showroom, there will be work there from other regional artists."

The showroom will also give Coffin a chance to explore his own designs, without regard to anyone else's ideas.

Coffin walks to his desk and pulls out a slender piece of notebook-sized wood. It is a warm, yellow color, with a red rose inlaid into it. One of the new techniques that Coffin is playing with these days is called "marquetry," in which a handcut series of inlays are placed and glued into the wood.

"It's a canvas in wood," Coffin said. Each element of the rose is a different paper-thin cut of wood. The reds of the petals come from chakte kok wood and bloodwood, and the stems are made from poplar.

Coffin is hoping to use more of this delicate

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and detailed technique in his own work, to personalize his pieces.

"My style is coming together," he said, opening up a book where he keeps his sketches. It contains snatches of ideas — a sweeping line, a cutting from a magazine, a simple arch — that

inspire him in his projects.

"I'm finding my way," he said. "It's like a million subtle influences of my life and I can't really describe where it's going — it's just a feeling right now — and that's what makes it interesting."

"I've always heard that to be a fine furniture

maker, there is a 20-year learning curve," Coffin said. "I'm about halfway there — I feel like I'm just getting there. I feel like the best is yet to come." ©

Michele Corriel lives in Belgrade and is a frequent contributor to At Home.