

# A breath of fresh heirloom

Les Lively's work is a fusion of different styles, which emphasise elegant lines and intricate details such as inlay, double dovetail corners and mortise & tenon joints

Photographs by Michael Peters



Les' inlay process

**D**escribing himself as a 'veteran woodworking artist', furniture maker Les Lively's passion for handcrafting custom furniture and accessories is clear to see. Not content with producing many of the same item, but rather choosing to keep his pieces unique and 'one-of-a-kind', Les gets his kicks from selling his work to individuals who truly appreciate artistic furniture. He is disheartened by the proliferation of inexpensive, dispensable furniture available nowadays, with no regard for quality or craftsmanship: "I want to make furniture that will be considered heirloom, and can proudly be used for generations," he tells me. Having discovered that this maker is entirely self-taught, Les informs me that he first became exposed to woodworking when he was at high school back in the 1960s: "It immediately became my favourite class," he says. "I was drawn to its challenges, the rewards of working with my hands, and the entire creative process. I soon discovered that I not only loved working with wood, but I also seemed to have a natural talent and an eye for design."

### Creative process

Once he left school, Les only discovered furniture making again out of necessity. After graduating, he lived with a group of young men and they had no furniture – this was before the likes of IKEA and competitively priced flat-pack furniture was available, so Les started making his own tables and beds out of 2x4 scrap pieces of wood: "I always enjoyed the creative process, and this gave me the outlet to do that," he comments. Since then, he has designed and built a variety of things, including bread boards, rolling pins, game boards, boxes, dressers, beds, and tables. "My work has evolved from the basic, functional pieces to much more elaborate and artistic, but still functional, work. When I build furniture, I know that it will be of the highest quality and proudly displayed in someone's home."

Before becoming a furniture maker, however, Les worked as a residential construction contractor, so he has always worked with his hands. Occasionally he still finds himself remodelling a home, and says that the same creative process still applies and in this



'Craftsman Style Side Table'. The inspiration for this side table came from the wheat fields of eastern Washington, where Les grew up. The top inlay is fashioned in the tradition of the Arts & Crafts movement and is representative of a sheaf of wheat. Made using maple, Peruvian walnut, purpleheart, yellowheart, Osage orange, wenge, zebrawood and lacewood – 470 x 734 x 660mm

situation, he calls upon his ability to envision the possibilities. He always practised furniture making in his spare time, but it's only been recently, as he gets close to retirement age, that he's had the time to concentrate solely on making furniture and other artistic pieces.

This maker's creative talents don't just stop here, though: he tells me he's always been interested in music as well, having played the guitar, drums and a little bit of keyboard

throughout the years: "I've played the guitar almost as long as I have been working with wood – it is what I do with my hands when I need a break from woodworking." Les doesn't read music, he just plays by ear and can spend hours on the guitar, which is just another one of his creative outlets.

When asked how being a self-taught furniture maker/artisan shapes his designs, Les tells me that he has a creative eye: all he has to do is





'Side Table With Drawer'. This distinctive side table with a front drawer has double dovetail joints and beautifully curved legs. Geometric inlay is on four corners of the table top. Made in maple, cherry and exotic hardwoods – 279 × 635 × 101mm

look at a piece of wood and sometimes he can automatically envision what it can become – what a great skill! This can be any number of things, from the particular grain of the wood to deciding if its unique characteristics can be

complemented if used correctly. "Being self-taught has involved a lot of practice, many years of experience, and learning creative ways to turn the inevitable mistakes into a new discovery," he explains.

### Inspiration

Just looking at his pieces you automatically get a feeling that this maker has a love of Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Arts & Crafts as well as modern design, but Les is very clever in that he tries to fuse all of these styles together to produce something that is truly unique: "The designs of the Art Deco craftsmen have always intrigued and inspired me. I have always admired Gustav Stickley – furniture designer, architect, and leader of the Arts & Crafts Movement in America." Stickley's furniture reflected his ideals of simplicity, honesty in construction, and truth to materials. Unadorned, plain surfaces were enlivened by the careful application of colourants so as not to obscure the grain of the wood and mortise & tenon joinery was exposed to emphasise the piece's structural qualities.

The international Arts & Crafts movement in the decorative and fine arts stood for traditional craftsmanship using simple forms, often calling upon folk styles of decoration. This style emerged from the attempt to reform design and decoration and the reaction against contemporary styles that the reformers associated with machine-production, which were ornate, artificial and ignored the qualities of the materials used. Art Nouveau furniture was popular in the late 19th century, and its designs were usually very complex, with curving shapes that were expensive to make. It was inspired by natural forms and structures, not only in flowers and plants, but also in its curved lines.

Les says he finds it hard to classify his exact style as the pieces he produces are born out of a free-form design, influenced by Art Deco and the Arts & Crafts traditions, with a bit of a modern twist thrown in. "In my work I strive to combine both the quality of Stickley along with some Art Deco flourishes in my inlay work and curving lines." In short, his work is a hybrid of a number of different eras.

### Natural surroundings

Les lives in the Hood River region of Oregon, a scenic and historical area known for its beautifully detailed Craftsman-style homes, many of which date back to the 1920s. He says that living in such a visually stunning area gives him inspiration, some of which is reflected in his inlay designs: "One of my tables has inlay that is representative of a sheaf of wheat, a homage to the wheat fields of eastern Oregon and Washington, where I grew up. Many of my inlay designs look geometric, but represent my abstract impressions of the beauty surrounding me."

### Design process

When asked how he goes about deciding upon a design, Les says that he usually draws something first, before experimenting with different designs, then finally searching for the appropriate piece of wood: "I will spend a lot of time drawing, but it is not unusual for me to

change the design slightly once I start actually cutting into the wood, revealing its character. But if I see a particular piece of wood that has distinctive characteristics, or unusual markings, it will inspire me to create a piece that showcases its particular beauty."

As he explains above, when looking for potential pieces of timber for his projects, Les always looks for the wood which has the most beautiful grain, along with prominent colouring and patterns: "Occasionally I'll find discarded wood, or pieces that have defects. It's very satisfying when I can discover beauty in those flaws and turn them into a work of art."

Les says that when designing a piece, he prefers to trust his creative process and eye for design, but will certainly work with someone to create a special piece for their home, reflecting

'Floating Top Side Table'. The illusion of a floating top is created with copper pieces set under the top. Delicate inlay surrounds the edges and follows the graceful curves of the legs. The table top has been bookended to create a stunning image. Made using cherry, walnut, maple and exotic hardwoods – 457 × 457 × 635mm

their style as well as their budget: "I will communicate closely with clients to ensure their satisfaction. Many of my clients are inspired by a particular piece of furniture that I've already made, so that's a good starting point."

Les says that he's recently finished a very unique side table for a show entitled 'The Best of The Gorge', which will be held at the Columbia Center for the Arts Gallery in Hood River, Oregon. He's now getting ready for another show at the same gallery, which will focus on smaller items for the home, such as bread boards, cutting boards, rolling pins and other functional but beautifully crafted items: "I just acquired a beautiful piece of bubinga that will soon become a side table. Bubinga is sometimes known as African rosewood, which varies in colour from pinkish-mauve to golden blondes and oxidises beautifully to rich darker tones over time. Bubinga features a host of stunning grain figures, such as flamed, pommele and waterfall, which helps to make this wood truly unique."

When making a piece, Les says it's extremely important for him to preserve the integrity of the wood, using the highest quality products and giving great attention to every detail to create heirloom-quality furniture. As a result, he doesn't use any stains, but rather depends on the natural colour variations in the wood and distinctive grain patterns to contribute to the design. "There is such a natural beauty to wood that should be highlighted in each piece you make," he comments.

### Working space

Les' workshop takes up the entire basement of his home and is kitted out with all the



'Reclaimed Wood Coffee Table'. All the wood for this coffee table came from a 100-year-old fir beam. What makes this wood unique is the tight wood grain, free of knots and defects, that was revealed after many hours of sanding







'Treasure Box' – a whimsical box to hold jewellery, trinkets and treasures, made using curly maple and cherry – 125 × 241 × 165mm high



'Zenith' side table – won Honourable Mention in the '2015 Best of the Gorge' competition through the Columbia Center for the Arts. Truly a stunning piece of work!




necessary equipment and lots of wood. He keeps all the leftover wood scraps as he always tries to use these for his inlays, utilising as much of the natural resource as he possibly can. When asked about his favourite tool, Les told me that he couldn't pick just one as all are so important in helping him to create the finished product. When working on his pieces, the time it takes to complete one very much depends on the size of the piece, with some taking anywhere from 2-4 weeks to finish: "Since my workshop is in my home, I tend to spend very long days working on them. The process can be exhaustive, requiring a steady hand and lots of patience, but it is so rewarding and I love doing it!"

When he is producing his inlays, everything is cut with routers and a scrollsaw, but all the sanding and finishing is done by hand: "The hand work definitely takes a lot of time, since everything has to be sanded and hand rubbed multiple times to achieve a glass-smooth finish," he tells me.

### Award-winning pieces

Unsurprisingly, Les' stunning pieces have won their fair share of awards over the years, most notably his 'Zenith' side table, which won Honourable Mention in 'The Best of the Gorge' at the Columbia Center for the Arts. The gallery hosts this two-month art show celebrating the best artwork produced by mid-Columbia River Gorge residents, an annual event that brings visitors from around the world to experience some of the finest art in the region. Les' table was chosen for its uniqueness, the quality of the woodwork, and its graceful lines, with the materials used being cherry, maple, wenge, walnut, yellowheart and purpleheart.

In terms of the piece he is most proud of, that would have to be his large dresser, made entirely of solid wood – one of the most challenging pieces he has ever made: "All the runners are wood, and it required precision and exact cuts to make everything fit perfectly. I love a challenge, and the sense of accomplishment I feel when a piece is finished." In terms of his plans for the future, Les wants to continue perfecting his craft, always striving to learn new skills while increasing his client base so more people can enjoy his fine furniture.

As far as tips for the readers go, Les says that unfortunately, there are no secrets or short cuts – producing fine furniture takes a lot of patience, a lot of practice, precision, as well as a lot of years of experience, but as he has shown here, the sheer joy he gets from producing such pieces cannot be ignored and surely that is a great message for any maker to take away. 

### Further info

To see more examples of Les' wonderful work, visit his website: [www.livelyfinefurniture.com](http://www.livelyfinefurniture.com)