



Through the Trees

By Kelly Potts

No matter the niche, luxury woodworkers rely on creativity, innovation and expertise.



Artisan Boatworks
artisanboatworks.com

These artisans are using their imaginations to create unique, high-quality wood specimens. It takes an understanding of how to make their products efficient and functional, while still keeping them beautiful and aesthetically stunning.

Alec Brainerd, president of **Artisan Boatworks**, grew up sailing small, wooden boats. Later in life, he found a passion for yachting and spent some time cruising around the world, until his passion became his career. “Eventually, I bought my own boat that was built in the 1940s and I wanted to fix it up,”

says Brainerd. “I realized I had no idea how to put it together, so I went to boat school.”

Artisan Boatworks, based in Rockport, Maine, specializes in custom designs and restorations of wooden boats, with a unique niche of building replicas of classics. Brainerd notes that whether his team is working on an 8-foot rowboat or a 50-foot power boat to cruise around the world, “It’s all about the craftsmanship and attention to details that we can embody.”

Brainerd says he finds the process of designing and building custom wooden boats to be fulfilling, and similar to building a custom house. He always starts by asking his clients



a series of questions — do they want a fast or slow boat? A modern boat or a classic? What do they want to do with the boat? What kind of boat do they picture?

“A big part of what I bring to the table is helping a client get the best possible boat and guiding them through the decisions,” he says, noting that you wouldn’t take a classic 1920s boat and put a modern radar and GPS on it, because it would destroy the look and feel. “There’s a lot of art that comes into how things are laid out, and the shapes and proportions.”

Though Brainerd knows that fiberglass is great for manufacturers, he’s always en-

joyed the benefits of a wooden boat. “The feel of the boat is much different,” he says. Wooden boats absorb sound and vibration in a much more pleasing way and water doesn’t condense inside the hull, so it doesn’t sweat.

In addition to the smooth ride and feel, wooden boats are a piece of art in their own right. “On a wooden boat, the structure of the boat really is the finish,” says Brainerd. “There’s rarely anything ornamental on a wooden boat; the stuff that’s there to hold it together is what’s beautiful.”

Paris-based luxury floor manufacturing company **Oscar Ono** prides itself on going



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Oscar Ono oscarono.fr/en



beyond what is standard. Peter Muys, one of the founders of the company, says, “If somebody says ‘that can’t be done,’ it grabs our attention and motivation to get it done.”

In the 1990s, the founders of the company looked at the wood industry with a modern eye; all founders came from different backgrounds with expertise in different industries, but they all shared a passion for wood and interior design. “We understood the needs of the design specifiers and simply responded to those needs in a very flexible manner,” says Muys.

Muys notes that in the manufacturing realm, the hands are of the utmost importance to the process, but can also be the biggest

challenge. “The downside is that we are all humans and can make mistakes,” he says. “Of course, the upside is that we can achieve things that seem impossible.”

Oscar Ono did just that for its project in The Odeon Tower in Monaco, designed by architect Alberto Pinto. Muys explains that for this project, they needed oak trees grown in a sustainable manner that would meet their specifications to cover the flooring of the entire tower, a task that at first seemed impossible.

However, the company found an innovative way to complete the project. During its three-year sourcing process for this particular plan, the company visited 90 percent of all FSC-certified

Gene Kelly gkellywoodworker.com

forests and sawmills to find oak trees that would meet their criteria, and utilized the wood in other projects at the same time to minimize waste. Muys says, “We were able to tackle this project in a sustainable manner, where we processed 100 percent of the wood without any pressure on the environment, guaranteeing that twice as many oak trees were replanted throughout Europe.”

The company has showrooms in seven countries, including five in the United States.

Luxury craftsman **Gene Kelly** has been working in wooden furniture since he took a woodshop class in seventh grade. Though he admits that he wasn’t too good back then, he always enjoyed what he was doing and worked hard at it. Now, Kelly creates furniture, trimmings, carvings, sculptures and anything that involves wood in an artistic

sense. “I just always go back to working with wood,” he says. “Furniture is an artistic expression for me.”

During the design and building process of his furniture, Kelly relies on a combination of imagination and understanding how it can be done. Some of his designs are inspired from other makers, both historical and modern, but some just come from imagination. “I wake up in the middle of the night sometimes and it’s just all of a sudden, ‘oh, there it is’ and I have to get up the next day and do something about it,” he says.

Once Kelly has a basis for a design, he figures out how to make it come together by putting it on paper or doing a mock-up, but notes that sometimes you can imagine things that may not be possible to build.

The Sacramento, California-based arti-

san just finished creating a surprise gift for his daughter’s 30th birthday: a music stand. A perfect and fitting gift for the music teacher, Kelly said that he found the project very interesting since he’s never created one before. He says, “It’s very organically designed but functional for her needs.”

Kelly notes that furniture and art seem to be in two different categories in people’s minds, because furniture is three-dimensional and practical. His designs, though fully operable as furniture, are also pieces of art. While most makers will create linear furniture, he prefers a sculptured look so it flows with no hard edges. “I stay within my design parameters,” he says, “but at the same time, those parameters are meant to be flowing like an organic piece that not only looks pretty but also feels good to be seated in.”

VASE AND FURNITURE PHOTOS BY GENE KELLY