

Made in Vermont

Story by Nancy Humphrey Case

Photos by Carolyn Bates

The Connacher home in Stowe is an astonishing showcase for handcrafted furniture by some of Vermont's finest artisan woodworkers.

THE TIMING WAS PERFECT. When construction began on Mary and Jim Connacher's vacation home in Stowe in the early 1990s, an exhibit of Vermont handmade furniture

was running at the Helen Day Art Center nearby. The couple, whose main residence is in Toronto, went to see the exhibit and were inspired to furnish their new home, a contemporary interpretation of a covered

bridge, with furniture made by Vermont artisans from (mostly) local woods. Dr. Ned Lang, who had organized the exhibit, shared his perspective on each of the Vermont furniture makers he had come to know. He then gave the Connachers a list of artisans to visit.

"We got in the car and started driving around Vermont," Mary says. "We started in the dead of winter, and we found that people didn't necessarily live on the main





This page: The centerpiece of the entry hall is a spiral staircase of maple and oak, built by Rick and Cal Schneider of Vermont Custom Woodworking. The oak treads are three feet wide at the bottom and six feet wide at the top. At left: The entry also features settees by Charles Shackleton and a “trestle table” by Rick Schneider that mimics the home’s covered-bridge architecture.

A fine furniture festival

Check out the finest work of Vermont furniture makers and other woodworkers at Vermont's fifth annual Fine Furniture and Woodworking Festival on September 27 and 28 in Woodstock. This event features more than 40 exhibitors and emphasizes products created with wood from sustainably managed forests. Live music, food, demonstrations, and hands-on woodworking activities for children round out the program. Best of all, you can meet the artisans.

The festival will be held at Union Arena, on the grounds of Woodstock High School, west of town on Route 4, and at the nearby Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. both days. The Vermont Chamber of Commerce has named this event one of its Top Ten for fall 2008.

For information, go to www.vermontwoodfestival.org or call (802) 747-7900.

streets. It seemed like they all lived on the backside of a mountain somewhere.”

But the experience was one the couple would come to cherish. “It was a very creative experience,” Mary says, “and I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gave us to work with people who cared passionately about what they were doing.”

The passion for thoughtful design and superb craftsmanship was one the Connachers shared in creating this unique home on a gentle, wooded hill overlooking a wide meadow. It was the third home they'd built, so they had some very specific ideas about what they wanted. But that didn't prevent them from encouraging the artisans to contribute their own ideas for the pieces they were commissioned to build. In the end, nine Vermont artisans contributed about 40 pieces of handcrafted furniture to the Connachers' home. The results were astonishing.

Walking through the front door into the two-story entry hall is like walking into a gallery. A spectacular spiral staircase handcrafted of maple and oak flows from the wood paneling overhead to the slate floor, echoing the flow of water outside, where a stream gurgles its way under “the bridge.”

The first piece of furniture you see is

“I cannot tell you how much pleasure it gave us to work with people who cared passionately about what they were doing.”

Mary Connacher

a console table built to reflect the truss design of the home itself—a preview of the truss framing visible from the upper level. The wavy grain and shimmery look of the birds-eye maple tabletop also echo the water outside. Both the spiral staircase and the “trestle table” were crafted by Rick Schneider. His brother Cal collaborated on the staircase.

The entry also showcases a cherry sideboard with inlaid ebony, built by Dan Mosheim, and a pair of settees by Charles Shackleton. The furniture in this space is every bit as artistic as the paintings on the walls and the metal sculptures that flank the staircase.



The main level is divided by bold trusses, furniture groupings, and hand-forged chandeliers by Peter Krusch. A cabinet by Dan Mosheim of Dorset offers storage and hides the wiring.

Throughout the house, the handcrafted pieces are strikingly unique. In the master bedroom, for example, a pencil-post bed by Robert Bortree reinterprets a classic design with simple lines, so the striped grain of tiger maple takes the stage. In designing a bedroom desk for the petite Mary, Garrett Hack chose feminine proportions and details. A fine white stripe of inlaid holly traces the edges of the lower drawers, while above the cherry desktop, open compartments for paperwork fan outward from a set of diminutive drawers. The desk chair fans out at the front, and its steam-bent legs curve gracefully near the floor. Hack harvests much of the wood he uses from trees on his own land.



As we wind our way up the spiral stairs, they give a little, enhancing the feeling of walking in space. Three feet wide at the bottom and six feet at the top, the oak treads sound like a descending musical phrase as you ascend.

The top of the stairs opens onto a broad landing, backed by a wall of beaded cherry paneling. Here another stunning set by Garrett Hack—a sideboard and matching chairs made of pear wood—is shown to lovely advantage. It's hard to comprehend the amount of time and patience it must have taken to craft this sideboard. The curved front incorporates six drawers, each fitted with a unique geometry. Tiny inlaid fans of alternating ebony and holly adorn each corner of the tabletop, as well as the backs of the chairs. The pieces also bear Hack's signature details: a band of tiny vertical pieces of ebony and holly near the bottom of each leg, and a dot-and-dash inlay pattern outlining a panel of bubinga, an African wood, on the front of the sideboard. (Today, Hack uses a dot-and-dash pattern

For the master bedroom, Robert Bortree built a pencil-post bed with simple lines, which allows the striped grain of tiger maple to take center stage. Above: Built in the 1990s, the Connachers' vacation house was designed by a Canadian architect and built by Donald Blake of Morrisville. The exterior trusswork reflects the look of a classic Vermont covered bridge.



to sign his name in Morse code on each piece he builds.)

The long, narrow dimensions of the main-floor living space are divided by bold trusses and hand-forged Peter Krusch chandeliers overhead—and by furniture groupings. A massive dining table made of ash commands center stage in this dramatic space. Designed and built by Bruce Beeken and Jeff Parsons, it illustrates an originality and ingenuity born of the furniture makers' creative response to design needs.

To accommodate the Windsor arm-

“We started driving around Vermont. We started in the dead of winter, and we found that people didn't necessarily live on the main streets.”

Mary Connacher

chairs all around, Beeken and Parsons omitted an apron under the tabletop. The problem then was how to support the weight of the massive ash top, which is two-and-a-half inches thick. The craftsmen added two extra legs, one near each

end, joined to the center of the underside with invisible mortise-and-tenon joints. Also, to accommodate family gatherings, Beeken and Parsons created two matching half-round tables which can be added to the breadboard ends of the rectangular table or, in the absence of family visitors, pushed together to form a small round table for

Jim and Mary.

The delicate Windsor chairs made by David Sawyer balance the heavy look of the tables, and slide just under the tabletop, arms and all. Their seats, sculpted of two-



The spiral staircase leads from the entry hall, on the lower level, to this custom dividing panel on the main level. Garrett Hack made the sideboard and matching chairs of pear wood. Small inlaid fans of ebony and holly adorn each corner of the tabletop and chair back. The pieces also bear Hack's signature details: a band of tiny vertical pieces of ebony and holly near the bottom of each leg, and a dot-and-dash inlay pattern outlining a panel of bubinga, an African wood, on the front.



The lower level of the Connacher home includes the entry hall, the master bedroom and bath, a den, and a guest bedroom. (The main level, up the spiral stairs, is the “covered bridge.”) The floor of the entry hall and the walls of the master bathroom are made of Vermont slate, provided by Vermont Structural Slate Company of Fair Haven. The painting at right, “Typographical Landscape,” is the work of Mary and Jim’s son, Nat, an artist.

More resources

Besides the woodworkers mentioned in this article, Vermont is home to many artisans—and companies—who produce handcrafted, custom and fine furniture. We don't have space to list them all, but here are some sources if you're thinking of furnishing a home, redecorating a room, or simply buying one or two special pieces that are made in Vermont.

Guild of Vermont Furniture Makers

A trade association for 28 of Vermont's finest master furniture makers. Each has a page on the guild Website at vermontfurnituremakers.com.

Vermont Woods Studios

Vermont Woods Studios offers access to outstanding artisans who are passionate about quality and style, yet unable to afford conventional channels for marketing their goods. Their mission is to encourage this multicultural group of creative craftspeople by matching them with customers, both online and through galleries and expos. Each piece is unique, made in a small studio, usually by a single craftsman, but sometimes with help from a few apprentices (often family members). Go to vermontwoodsstudios.com or call (888) 390-5571.

Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association

Representing 125 Vermont companies that make everything from furniture and flooring to housewares and wooden toys. The Website includes a list of members, from solo artisans to Vermont companies that make custom and fine furniture, such as ClearLake, Cotswold, Copeland, Pompanoosuc Mills, and many more. Go to vermontwood.com.

Vermont WoodNet

A nonprofit coalition of 150 Vermont woodworkers; 70 of these artisans sell their work at the affiliated Vermont MapleWood Gallery in Stowe. Call (802) 253-8211 or go to vtwoodnet.org.

inch pine, make them amazingly comfortable. Sawyer wasn't entirely happy at first about the commission. "I still wish some of those chairs could be side chairs," he wrote to Mary on a postcard. "I worry about the clashing of all those arms, like stags fighting." His poetic approach endeared him to Mary immediately.

"They trusted us to design pieces that would interpret what they were doing with the house. That's a very, very cool thing."

Bruce Beeken

With such a long expanse (120 feet) of open space, and both exterior walls of glass, architect James Strasman of Toronto needed a place to bring wiring up through the floor for lamps in the living room. A custom piece of furniture provided the solution. Dan Mosheim built a wide cabinet that serves as a room divider, entertainment center, and enclosure for wiring. Yet the cherry piece, with its natural patina and checkered band at its top edge, is as beautiful as it is functional. In the living area, a large, put-up-your-feet coffee table and two slate-topped end tables by Beeken



The interior walls and ceilings are made of cedar, so the house has the warm scent of wood. The flowing lines of the staircase echo the flow of water outside, where a stream flows under the "bridge." The stairs give a little, and the graceful treads sound a descending musical phrase as you climb.

The Connacher file

The following Vermont artisans contributed handcrafted furniture to Jim and Mary Connacher's home.

Bruce Beeken and Jeff Parsons

Beeken Parsons
Shelburne
(802) 985-2913
beekenparsons.com

Robert Bortree & Associates

Morrisville
(802) 888-5545
robertbortreeandassociates.com

Garrett Hack

Thetford Center
(802) 785-4329
furnituremasters.org

Peter Krusch

Cambridge Smithy
Cambridge
(802) 644-5358
cambridgesmithy.com

Dan Mosheim

Dorset Custom Furniture
Dorset
(802) 867-5541
dorsetcustomfurniture.com

David Sawyer

East Calais
(802) 456-8836
windsorchairresources.com

Rick Schneider

Vermont Custom Woodworking
Bristol
(802) 453-3651
vermontfurnituremakers.com

Charles Shackleton Furniture

Charles Shackleton
Bridgewater
(802) 672-5175
shackletonthomas.com

and Parsons lend character and meaning to the upholstered grouping.

Obviously, handcrafted furniture costs more than, say, Pottery Barn. But Mary says that back in the 1990s, when many of these craftsmen were starting out, the price was comparable to that of fine fac-



Above: In designing a desk for the petite Mary, Garrett Hack chose feminine proportions and details. A fine white stripe of holly traces the edges of the lower drawers, and the steam-bent legs of the chair curve gracefully near the floor. Below: A massive dining table and matching half-round tables, designed and built by Bruce Beeken and Jeff Parsons, accommodate the delicate Windsor chairs by David Sawyer.



tory-made products. And the Vermont artisan furniture can't really be compared to anything else. Like fine art, each piece is an expression of its creator's original ideas, painstaking care, and even affection.

Mary opens a hardcover book titled *The Handplane Book* and smiles. The author's autograph reads, "To my favorite, most patient 'patrons'—who waited and waited for furniture while I wrote. Thanks—Garrett."

Bruce Beeken also speaks warmly of the Connachers. "They were some of the best clients we've ever had," he says. "They were not only enthusiastic but trusted us to design pieces that would interpret what they were doing with the house. That's a very, very cool thing." 🍷

Nancy Humphrey Case is a contributing writer to Vermont Magazine. She lives in Hyde Park.