

YEARS OF EXPERTISE > Bruce Kieffer has been working with wood for 30 years.



The Art of Wood

Bruce Kieffer brings his craft to Edina.

BY SARAH COLBURN PHOTOS BY MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG

It's a unique form of craftsmanship, hundreds of years old, and Bruce Kieffer is bringing it to life in his Edina shop.

It is there he spends hours planning, studying wood grains and envisioning the final masterpiece. He is the man behind Kieffer Custom Furniture Inc., and he not only adds a little flair to each handmade piece, he doesn't back down from complex details. "I do what most people won't do," he says. "I really want the challenging work."

Kieffer has spent the past 30 years working with his hands and with wood. His portfolio includes pieces he created for renowned furniture artist Ira A. Keer based on Keer's drawings. He also built the sanctuary furniture

for St. John Vianney College Seminary on the University of St. Thomas campus.

Kieffer doesn't work in a specific style or genre, but yearns for intricate projects other woodworkers will not tackle.

SELF TAUGHT

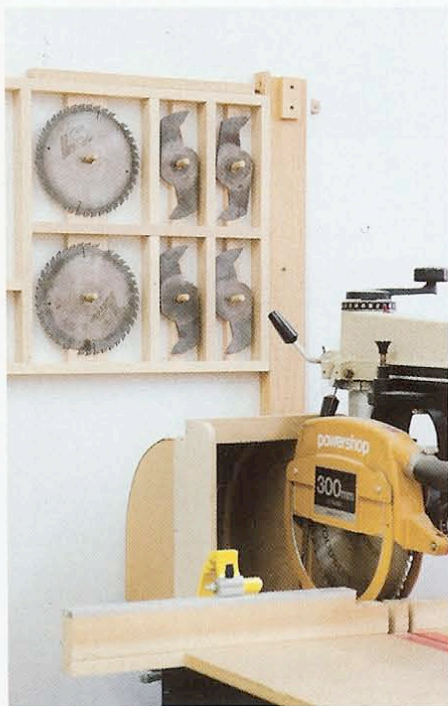
Working with wood comes naturally to Kieffer who grew up under the unintentional tutelage of his father who worked in construction. Helping with projects around the house was expected, and Kieffer and his brothers learned by spending time in their home work area.

Kieffer's first real woodworking success came in earning the Boy Scouts honor of best-constructed Soap Box Derby car for two years

running. In college, he set woodworking aside and opted to study studio arts—photography, metal work and welding. "Although I could manipulate them, it was never quite satisfying to me," Kieffer says. "To weld is to scar."

Woodworking found him again after graduation. He was working for a Saint Paul company designing games and toys. Another student he knew from school also worked there, and he had been granted permission to do some wood sculpting in the company warehouse after hours. Kieffer watched as the artist refined the pieces, making them perfectly smooth. As he watched, he grew more and more intrigued.

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Dream Workshop

Bruce Kieffer remodels his Edina home.

Bruce Kieffer and his wife Marnee have spent the better part of their married life searching for the perfect property on which to build Bruce's dream workshop. Two and a half years ago, Marnee's brother passed away and left his rambler to his sister. The couple moved from Saint Paul into the Edina home.

In October 2006, Bruce and Marnee removed the aging garage from the property to make room for an addition. They expanded the home's living space and added an 1,100-square-foot workshop.

Bruce says he took painstaking measures to ensure the addition wasn't blatantly visible from the street. He designed the entire addition himself and contracted out the work. It's complete with 9½-foot ceilings and windows to provide a handsome view of the landscape. Everything inside the shop is handmade by Bruce, from the fixtures to the cabinet for the sink to the lumber rack. Even the floors in the heated and air-conditioned shop are made of tongue-and-groove plywood. The workbench that flanks one of the walls rivals the built-in buffets of years ago in its class and distinction.

Now, Bruce is able to keep his craft close to home. — sc

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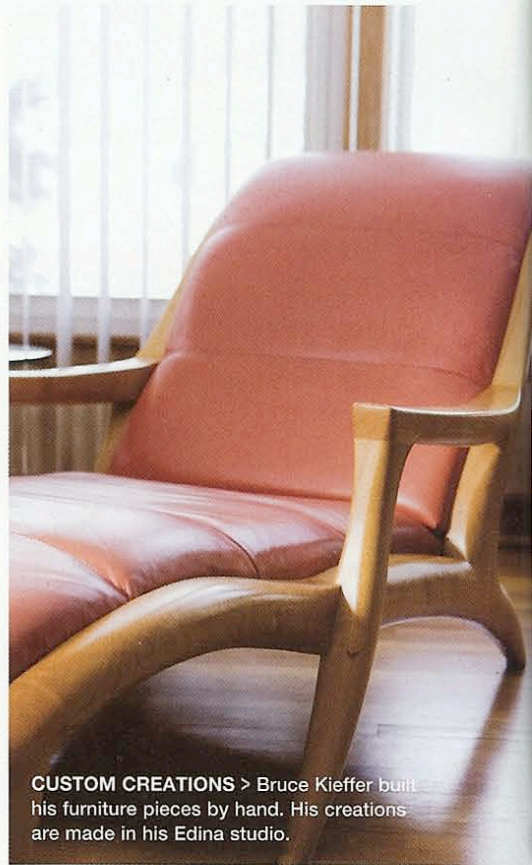
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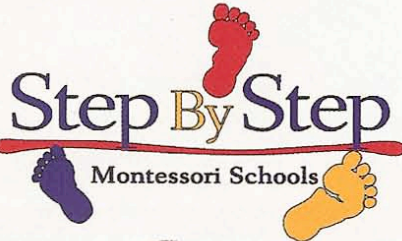
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people | BRUCE KIEFFER



CUSTOM CREATIONS > Bruce Kieffer built his furniture pieces by hand. His creations are made in his Edina studio.

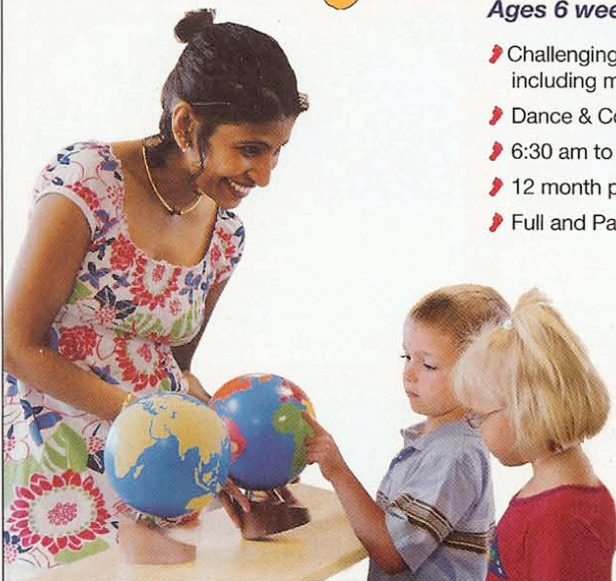


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With the guidance of his colleague, he constructed his first piece of furniture—a coffee table that still takes center stage in his living room. He built more furniture for his virtually empty apartment—a stereo cabinet, lamp, a small table—all pieces he still has in his home.

Kieffer's business today is multi-faceted. He spends about 20 percent of his time on custom furniture building, he says. He also creates furniture for woodworking magazines, writing about the step-by-step process and providing photography of the tasks. In addition, he does technical drawings, some consulting work and some manufacturing used in the production of canoes.

TREND OR DYING ART?

There is a lot of discussion within the trade about whether custom furniture building is a lost art or a craft resurging.

"My parents' generation, they valued a piece that was handmade, something that had more quality than something they could buy in the store," Kieffer says.

He isn't alone in his strive to build high-quality furniture or achieve a level of perfection in his woodworking. He finds camaraderie within the Minnesota Woodworkers Guild, an organization he co-founded more



than 25 years ago. When the guild began, woodworking was a booming business and the founders felt they needed a way to collectively promote themselves.

Today, the guild is growing. In fact, membership is more than 1,200, making it the second largest woodworking guild in the country—second only to San Diego’s organization. According to Minnesota Woodworkers Guild president Mark Laub, that’s double the membership of just five years ago.

The difference, he says, is that the majority of the members are hobbyists. Custom woodworking is fairly rare, but Minneapolis is considered to be one of the hot spots for the trade. He knows of about a dozen custom furniture makers in the Twin Cities, including Kieffer, who make a living at it. In order to sell custom furniture, Laub says, you have to be selling art.

“[People are] looking for something they simply cannot find in a store,” Laub says. “That means it’s something artistic, and it’s got certain features on it that can’t be produced in a factory.” **B**

Sarah Colburne is an Otsego-based freelance writer.

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