Master craftsman reproduces Early American furniture

by John O'Connell

With power equipment and antique hand tools, woodworker James King toils daily to preserve the techniques and furniture styles of the master craftsmen of early America.

In his home in rural Hudson, Ill., King, 51, builds reproductions of fine furniture produced by artisans in this country from 1700 to 1850. Period-inspired furniture and historical reproductions are the focus of King's business, Post and Beam, which he has operated full time for eight years.

He receives orders from museums, businesses and homeowners from across the United States - the majority from the northeast part of the country. His work can range in price from $800 for a small table to $15,000 for a copy of an 18th century highboy.

NEW ANTIQUES - Craftsman James King of Hudson, Ill., has a talent for creating historical reproductions of furniture and cabinets, including this award-winning piece. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. DETAIL DRIVEN - The detailed wood carvings of a reproduction are the signature of James Kingâ€™s furniture. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. FIGHT TO THE FINISH - James King inspects the finish on one of his cabinet reproductions that features a tombstone design. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson. PRECISION - James King makes nails, hinges and handles by hand for his Early American reproductions. They are costly but add to the precise detail of the furniture. CNS Photo by Ron Johnson.He recently was commissioned to build a reproduction of a 1775 Chippendale-style looking glass for George Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Va. He also built a 19th century Shaker sewing chest for Fruitlands Museums in Harvard, Mass.

A self-taught craftsman, King has been a woodworker since the 1970s when he started making acoustic guitars. During his high school days in Aurora, Ill., and later as a student at Illinois State University in Bloomington, the tall, thin woodworker performed bluegrass music in coffee houses and other places.

HISTORIC ROOTS

"I grew up in a house full of antiques," King said. "My parents were both history buffs. I guess that's were I picked up my passion for history and furniture."

King has a library of books on woodworking. He has developed his skill to an art form. In 2003 and again in 2006 he was selected as one of the 200 top craftsmen in the United States by Early American Life Magazine, a national publication that focuses on architecture, decorative arts, period style and social history from colonial times through the mid-19th century.

For the magazine's selection contest, King submitted digital images of a copy of a 1700 chest-on-frame that took the craftsman three months to build and antique. The artisan found the original chest-on-frame in a book of historical furniture. The original piece was on display in a museum in Marshfield, Mass.

"I actually went to the museum and examined the original," King said. "Normally, they won't let you touch a thing. But the curator, who graduated from the University of Illinois, let me have access to it. I spent a lot of time looking it over. I took detailed measurements. I even did some tracing."

King's copy was judged by a panel of 18 experts - curators from such institutions as Historic Hudson Valley, Old Sturbridge Village, Rhode Island School of Design and Shelburne Museum, as well as antique dealers, independent scholars and professional instructors.

WHO KNOWS?

"It's an anonymous contest," King said. "The judges don't know who you are."

The piece is judged for authentic design and workmanship, according to Tess Rosch, publisher of Early American Life.

"Scholarship, as well as use of period tools and techniques, is particularly valued in this competition," Rosch said in a statement following the selection announcements last spring.

King was listed in the magazine's 2006 Directory of Traditional American Crafts in June. The directory has been used for more than two decades by curators at living history museums, owners of traditional homes and motion picture producers who seek artisans to make period-appropriate furnishings.

"Our goal of the directory is to help preserve traditional handcrafts, part of our culture that is rapidly being lost in the digital age," Rosch said. "Many of these skills were passed down from master to apprentice for hundreds of years, but now few new people choose to learn and master them. If our traditional arts are lost, we have forgotten a part of who we are as Americans."

King has entered the contest three times. Twice he has been selected for the directory.

AUTHENTICITY COUNTS

"What's important in making reproductions of historical furniture is to remove all the evidence of machine marks," King said. "I typically start with power tools and finish with hand tools. The goal is to achieve an authentic reproduction. You want it to look as if it's been through 200 years of service."

In building his furniture, King uses a collection of antique hand tools, some dating to the late 1700s. King follows all the old ways - traditional dovetails and authentic mortise-and-tenon joinery. When he uses nails, they are authentic hand-wrought or cut nails.

Building period furniture is only half the work. Antiquing is the other half, the artisan said.

"You age furniture primarily through finishes, but there is some mechanical distressing, too," King said. "A lot of times there are 10 to 15 layers of finish on a piece. There are a lot of tricks to aging furniture. For instance, the inside of drawers will darken as they oxidize over time. To mimic oxidation, some use acids. Another method is to coat a piece with a light coating of shellac and set it on fire. That darkens it, too."

King graduated from Illinois State University in 1979 with degrees in biology and anthropology. For 16 years he worked at State Farm Insurance Cos. in Bloomington, Ill., where his wife, Jami, is a director of the Information Technology department.

CAREER CHANGE

"While I was working at State Farm, I was building furniture as a part-time business," King said.

In 1998, the artisan built his home - a three-story reproduction of an 18th century New England-style dwelling. The home is furnished with some family antiques and King's historical reproductions. With his home built, King went full time with his business. The craftsman might build and sell 10 large pieces of period furniture a year.

"I'm a one-man shop," he said. "I basically work seven days a week. Frequently, I'm in my shop 12 hours a day. You don't do this for the money. It's truly a passion with me."

In addition to making authentic reproductions and period pieces, King also does non-Early American work to supplement his income.

"I will build customized entertainment centers, kitchen cabinets - whatever a customer wants," the woodworker said. "But the focus of my business is Early American."

King's connection with history is more than constructing period furniture. His family has traced its lineage to southern Connecticut in the 17th century and boasts of ancestors who fought for independence from Great Britain.

On his Web site (www.postandbeamperiod.com), King writes that he considers his business "something larger than just woodworking. It's helping to keep a thread of our national heritage alive."

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