

Production vs. Handcrafted/Custom Cabinets & Furniture

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By flyfisher2

Since the beginning of time, furniture and cabinetry has been built for homes by the architect or custom craftsman/woodworker to fit the style, size, and preferences of the people who commissioned the work. It is only since the industrial revolution that people have come to depend on production products. This is a reality and in these days a convenient, efficient, and fast way to furnish our personal environment. This development toward mass produced products has left out some of the uniqueness of character and style in our immediate living conditions. However, whether it is furniture, cabinets, a custom home, decorative glassworks or all the fine arts, there still is the option for handcrafted products.

There are countless products for which mass production is a practical necessity. The ability to find a product and take it home immediately is a luxury the majority of people have gotten use to. In our fast pace society, this is a convenience for us. We sometimes pay for this convenience by sacrificing quality, as well as style, materials, complete satisfaction, and the follow up service. However, for the homeowner, furniture and cabinets ought to be built for style and comfort; but always with quality joinery for durability kept in mind.

Throughout the country there are excellent artisans that build using "handcrafted" techniques in the true definition of the word. Even though there are many respected and popular cabinet and furniture "manufacturers" today, the craftsmen providing custom, handcrafted furniture and cabinets should not be overlooked.

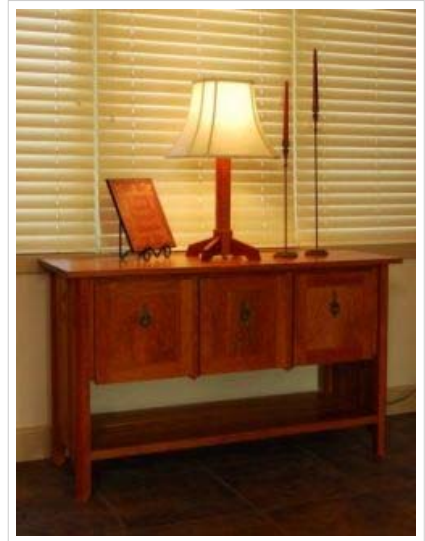
True custom, made to order, handcrafted work ought to be just that; built to fit style and aesthetics of your taste, built properly with correct construction, and built with materials to last forever. From the perspective of a cabinetmaker, this is what sets handcrafted/custom work apart from many manufactured products. A properly made cabinet or piece of furniture shouldn't involve shortcuts, such as staples, nails, and butt joints; that infringe on the strength and durability of the piece. Traditional joinery is time tested and aesthetically pleasing. Dovetails (hand or machine cut), pegged mortise & tenon joinery, fox tenons, tusk tenons, splined miters are some signs of good strong construction.

In addition, quality materials are a requirement for cabinets & furniture. In my opinion, furniture ought to be built in solid hardwood stock for all the traits I believe are necessary for fine quality work. Wood is a perfect medium. However, it is a volatile material, subject to movement, unsightly distress marks, and if not properly attended; subject to the sun, water, and wine. A custom woodworker understands this. He or she will work with the homeowner to come up with the best possible solution depending on many conditions, including where the furniture or cabinets will be placed (i.e., are they in the direct sun light or in a humid bathroom, etc?). Everyone has old furniture passed down through family that was built with strong traditional joinery and quality materials to last generations. These heirlooms were built as utilitarian and functional pieces, but at the same time matching the style of other furniture in the home. These pieces have been passed to this generation and generations to come, because of construction details.

Another misnomer is that custom handcrafted furniture and cabinets are much more expensive than stock pieces. This can be very misleading. Let's look at a few different approaches on this subject. First there is always the old adage of "you get what you pay for". Of course, in many instances you can purchase production pieces for less than a handcrafted piece. However, the price difference between custom handcrafted work and production cabinetry and furniture is insignificant in comparison to the difference in quality.

For an example, consider a production bed you purchased 10+ years ago. During the course of this time, the bed would have begun to show more signs of wear and will squeak more frequently. However, a handcrafted bed with strong joinery, will not be moving 10 or even 30 years later and it will look as good as it did the day you purchased it. The bed lasts, so you're not thinking of buying a new bed as a result of being fed up with the squeaks and other problems with your manufactured bed. Of course this means you are ultimately paying double for the production model, having to purchase 2 beds in the time frame indicated (a second one to replace the first bed). Everything depends on materials and intricate details involved in construction. This makes custom work a comparable competitive choice, whether it is furniture or cabinetry.

Custom Cherry 3 drawer file cabinet & lamp



Another thing that people don't realize is that a small shop does not have the major overhead that the large production furniture and cabinet manufacturers have. The handcrafted piece goes directly from the cabinet shop to the customer, so the customer only pays for the direct labor and materials. Because there are no additional overhead costs people are pleasantly surprised that the price for custom built furniture and cabinets are no higher than mid to high end manufactured pieces.

Custom Cabinetmakers understand the time, materials, and quality put into our crafts; whether it's fine furniture or cabinets. We need to educate customers, neighbors, community, and friends so they understand as well.

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