

Hands On

Cody gallery features artists from Colorado and other Western states creating functional art objects crafted in natural materials

By **Claudia Carbone**



Dan Rieple calls his writing desk “The Least of These” because it’s made from scrub oak, the least of the mighty oaks.

IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY, WHEN William “Buffalo Bill” Cody founded the town that bears his name in northwestern Wyoming, the world-famous showman brought with him a certain Western panache. His distinct style paved the way for early leaders in design of the American West. Thomas Molesworth’s furniture and Edward Bohlin’s saddles defined Western functional art in the 1920s through the 1950s.

Over the years, the movement grew with the help of Cody furniture mak-

er Mike Patrick, who launched the Western Design Conference in 1993, showcasing the best Western design to the world. Today, the epicenter for and about Western functional art is at By Western Hands, a design center and gallery that opened in June, 2019 in downtown Cody.

Western design, as described by Patrick, is “casual, warm, friendly, utilitarian, and makes wonderful use of materials and native traditions of the West.” For example, elements like lodgepole pine and fir, leathers, antlers, horns and other natural materials are key components of Western design and appear in unexpected ways. Today’s artists also integrate steel, iron, copper and stone into their works.

Western functional art is not like the fine art or jewelry you find, say, in Santa Fe or Scottsdale. And it’s not a craft. Rather, the genre incor-

porates aesthetic objects that serve utilitarian purposes, such as a purse, a chair or a saddle. The mission of the non-profit By Western Hands is “to educate, conserve and perpetuate the legacy of Western design and craftsmanship.”



Keoni Carlson’s work reimagines wood as woven and beaded basketry.

THE DETAILS

By Western Hands

1007 12th St.
Cody, WY 82414
307-586-1755
bywesternhands.org



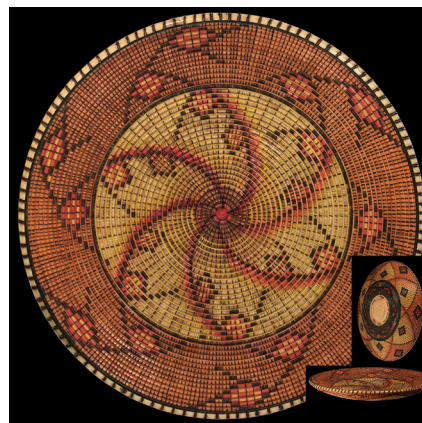
Lisa and Loren Skyhorse dedicated this one-of-a-kind saddle to Buffalo Bill. It was entirely stitched, painted and carved by hand.



“In a disposable society like ours, it is refreshing to make, as well as to own, timeless pieces of furniture with soul.”

—Dan Rieple

The knobby and crooked trunks of the gambel oak are fashioned into an elegant chair by Dan Rieple.



Fire, ink and sharpened steel are used by Keoni Carlson to create basket-like pieces.

Three sections comprise the design center: a gallery where you can view and shop the juried works of member artisans, mostly from the Western states; a back room for internship training programs; and a museum displaying a permanent collection of legacy pieces.

I marveled at these unique heirloom-quality pieces when I visited the gallery the week it opened. I learned that five of the artisans are from Colorado.

Award-winning Lisa and Loren Skyhorse have crafted more than 1,000 one-of-a-kind, meticulously carved saddles in a career spanning more than 46 years. Now living in Durango where they built their own house and furniture, the Skyhorses are in their early 70s and have no plans to retire, though the work is physically demanding. They can fashion a saddle for a specific rider or particular breed of horse or type of riding, then carve a personal symbol into the leather for an heirloom piece of rideable art. “When someone orders from photos on our website, they can mix and match and design their own,” Lisa Skyhorse says.

Though he’s been creating professionally since 2017, Keoni Carlson of Colorado Springs began wood-working at age 9 and continued off and on throughout a business career, never losing the love of lathe work and turning. “I make touchable illu-

sions—wood, re-imagined,” he says. Woodworkers from Appalachia who were soldiers in World War II brought this distinctive technique from the Pacific Islands to the Eastern U.S. In the late 1980s, others around the country began discovering the skill that’s “crazy hard.” Now, about 50 to 60 artists practice the method at a high level, each a bit differently. Carlson’s intricate designs are inspired by tribal cultures around the world, giving voice to often-forgotten traditions and heritage.

Dan Rieple also “fell in love” with woodworking at a young age and honed his skill studying industrial arts at Colorado State University. He likens creating a piece of art to having a baby: “First there’s conception, the idea; then comes gestation when that idea becomes clearer and more

defined,” he says. “Eventually, you give birth to that idea.” Rieple lives with his wife, Susie, who works with him on 40 acres of a timber ranch homesteaded in 1800s near Larkspur. He’ll often harvest fallen timber, but he also cuts down trees. “I’ll make that tree live longer than it will in the forest between bugs, drought and storms,” he says. One of Rieple’s clients is the actor Morgan Freeman, who asked him to “surprise” him with a creation for his chess hobby. So he fashioned a table from scrub oak with a felted recess top for a chess board. Regarding commissioned pieces, he said, “When your vision becomes my vision, hopefully I nail it and you’ll say, ‘Wow, you exceeded my expectations.’”

Stephen Winer built custom homes and furniture for 30 years before he



Photo: Warren Diggles

Stephen Winer’s Western dressing stand with oval mirror in walnut and tiger stripe maple.

decided to “create something special” and show his work. “Mainly it was to be among incredibly talented people who give me competition to improve,” Winer says. His work is not just western but a combination of styles. “I try to keep myself open for ideas that come up while working on a piece.”

Winer lives with his wife, an old dog and eight sheep that he breeds on acreage near Fort Collins. He travels to Missouri once a year for wood—walnut limbs and logs for rustic work—and trees that have fallen from ice storms. The rotting process is called spalting. “I get really interesting wood from deteriorating trees with different types of fungi that make incredible designs,” he says. “They’re really cool, good for accent pieces like drawer fronts.”

Denver-based Claudia Carbone is an award-winning journalist whose work appears in The London Telegraph, The Denver Post, ColoradoTraveler.com, and her blog Sleepin’ Around lives on GoWorldTravel.com.



This saddle is one of four pieces in the Skyhorse Collection series featuring Yellowstone National Park animals.