

# HOME & GARDEN

**FINE DINING:**

Craig Collins crafted this dining room table and sideboard out of maple, birdseye maple and ebony for Victoria Grasso of Tiburon.



*This San Rafael craftsman went from building boats to carving tables, chairs and chests*

## Wood works for him

By **Beth Ashley**

*IJ senior features writer*

A wooden boat hangs from the ceiling of Craig Collins' furniture studio in San Rafael, a reminder of his other life.

Fresh out of college, Collins, now 39 went to sea.

Sailing on wooden yachts for six years led him into boat building. Boat building then led him to turn his skills to designing and creating furniture, which he's been doing off and on for 10 years.

Last month, to his delight, he won the Niche magazine award, presented at the annual Philadelphia Crafts Show for outstanding creative achievement

by an American craft artist, giving him faith that he's found a career to stick with.

Sitting in his bright studio showroom, he points with satisfaction to the finely crafted tables, chests and bedroom suite he built himself out of gleaming and sometimes richly patterned woods.

"It's very gratifying," he says. "I build things that are probably going to outlast me."

His clients are equally pleased.

Says Michael Carboy of Pacific Heights: "He can listen to a client's ideas and express them with elegance and simplicity. There's a harmony in his design."

Says Victoria Grasso of Tiburon: "At my request, he signed the underside of our dining table, because I consider it a work of art."

Both Carboy and Grasso have bought numerous pieces from Collins, each a one-of-a-kind design made especially to fit their needs and tastes.

Collins says he became fascinated with the properties of different woods as a boat builder and then as a neophyte furniture maker.

Now – according to Carboy – he is remarkably insightful about how a piece of wood will appear after various polishings and coatings.

Many of his pieces incorporate rich solid-tone woods with elegantly patterned ones like lacewood and fiddleback maple.

Among his favorite woods are cherry, an American hardwood that ages really beautifully,” maple, and Swiss pear. He uses touches of ebony for an occasional stripe or door pulls.

But wood alone doesn't explain why he loves his work. “I enjoy the design aspect as much or more than the actual crafting of it,” he says.

He doesn't think any more about going to sea.

As a young man, Collins bowed to his parents' wishes that he finish college before taking up sailing: He studied math at Colorado College in Colorado Springs.

Then he followed his dream for six years, sailing along the East Coast, the Caribbean and once to England and back.

He came to San Francisco hoping to win a berth in the Transpac race to Hawaii, but “I didn't get a ride.” He got a job instead at a wooden boat center in a Los Angeles area marina, “doing whatever clients wanted.”

Fourteen years ago he moved to Marin and enrolled in the Center for Wood Arts in San Rafael, a boat building school.

“Then I worked the waterfront in Sausalito as a shipwright on my own. I joined a shipwright's co-op and hustled work. As a newcomer I did mostly repair jobs, building a cabinet here and there.”

It wasn't a lifestyle he enjoyed.

“I was using a lot of goops and adhesives and solvents. I was



Photo/Marian Little Utley

**FURNITURE MAKER:** Craig Collins poses with his lingerie chest – titled “Diamonds and Lace.” It is made from lacewood, cherry and ebony.

crawling around in limited space, often upside down in the boat.”

He found he preferred building from scratch, not repairing what others had built.

So he went to work at a custom furniture store in San Francisco and right away, “I got really excited about the furniture business. I could use the skills I had learned.”

He briefly joined forces with a furniture maker in Sausalito and nine years ago moved to his present space in the industrial area off Francisco Boulevard East in San Rafael. That's the space where the 11-foot sailing dinghy he made 10 years ago hangs like a mascot from the ceiling.

His goal was to shift out of cabinets and get full-time into making

furniture of his own design. He had meantime met and married Sharon Eager, a development specialist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

So he took night courses at the University of California at Berkeley in furniture design, where he learned to sketch pieces that incorporated client ideas.

He found himself using an amalgam of styles: the Craftsman period (a la Gustav Stickley), plus an Asian influence and a lot of traditional. "I am not trying for 'art' furniture," he says. "A lot of what I do is listen to the client."

Grasso says he listens well; the furniture he has designed for her and husband Joe "matches us."

"He has made pieces that match our personalities and our environment."

She first met Collins when visiting a VCR repair shop next door. A dining table she had ordered just before her home was to be on the Belvedere Kitchen Tour "was just horrible," and when she spotted Collins' showroom, she went in.

The upshot; he designed and delivered a dining table – "really gorgeous" – and subsequently a headboard, dresser and nightstand, a complete office, and a TV unit for their family room.

"A well-known furniture designer saw our office and flipped out," Grasso says. "His work is just spectacular."

Carboy praises Collins' ability to hear a client's wishes, then integrate them into elegant designs. "We like things simple, without too much ornamentation, but we like them to be interesting," says Carboy. "Craig is wonderful with visible joinery."



**CUSTOM BOOKCASES:** These bookcases were made by Craig Collins for a San Francisco Client out of maple, pearwood, and ebony.

Carboy has ordered chests, two bookcases, storage boxes and an entry table from Collins.

Business has stepped up since Collins opened his showroom three and a half years ago. He's very busy at the moment, but sometimes has time on his hands.

"It's a tricky business. Obviously people do not buy furniture of this quality very often. Not everyone can afford it, although I am finding that more and more people want the real thing and will buy one piece at a time."

He points to a particularly intricate lingerie chest of lacewood and cherry with six drawers made from scented Spanish cedar. It took 55 man-hours to make.

Prices vary with the size, materials and work involved. A lamp table of Honduras mahogany, pomele macore and ebony costs \$775. A towel rack of quilted maple and copper is \$395. A coffee table of

mahogany and burnished copper is \$1,500.

By selling directly from his showroom, "I am trying to make my work more affordable."

He is also trying to become more visible: He had a piece in the California Design '97 show in San Francisco earlier this year and collaborated with Jack Cruz on a bedroom and bathroom for last year's Marin Designers Showcase.

Happily, he sees a rosy future. "I think there's a resurgence of appreciation for craftsmen and artists. People are recognizing and appreciating fine furniture."

He was pleased to hear from a client recently. "She said she was dusting the armoire I had made and just called to tell me how much she loved it."

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