



# WOOD *Couture*

Custom Furniture, Bittners  
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# MADE BY HAND IN KENTUCKY

Everybody in Louisville knows Bittners, the modern, elegant and fashionable interior design firm.

When you walk into the Bittners showroom on East Main Street, you're romanced by the warm color palette and the beauty of the furnishings.

What you may miss, near the entrance, are two images hanging on the wall. Each is of a pair of hands, chiseling, planing, carving and engraving a piece of wood into a piece of furniture.

The wordings on the pictures are, "Made by hand in Kentucky since 1854" and "Old world craftsmanship for the modern lifestyle of Bittners."

Straight ahead, in the building's gracious outdoor garden, is a sculpture cast in bronze that upon closer inspection resembles the curlicue of a wood shaving. It's by local artist David Bibelhauser and called "Maitre Artisan."

The suspicion is that these are purely decorative pieces of art. But they're much more. In fact, they tell the real story of Bittners – an interesting bit of history that goes even deeper than choosing fabrics and wallcoverings to create a living space.

"It's our heritage," says Bittners president Douglas Riddle. "It's who Bittners was long before it became known for residential and commercial design."

Bittners was founded in 1854 by Gustave Bittner, a German immigrant who set up a cabinet-making and design business on East Street (what is now South Brook Street). During the course of the 20th century as the design business flourished, so did the Bittners reputation in many of the best parlors and drawing rooms in town.

Bittners is proud of that heritage, and the name of Gustave Bittner is still all over the firm's marketing materials and its web site, featured prominently in its showroom. But less well-known, perhaps, is that a thriving production facility still operates in the back of the building. And much of that outstanding furniture in the company's showroom – chairs, tables, headboards, sideboards and the rest – was made there.

Smell the shellac. See the sawdust on your shoes. Touch the smooth edges and run your hands around some of the intricately carved filigree. This is a real wood shop.

Running the shop is master craftsman Brian Keenan, who came to Bittners in 1985, just out of vocational school, as an apprentice to Hubert Schuway, the master craftsman then in charge of the operation.

"It was a pretty intense learning experience," Keenan recalls of his Swiss-born-and-trained mentor. "I couldn't use a power tool for a full year. I had to do everything by hand. When it came to leveling a board, he'd say to me, 'get out your hand plane and chisels.' I still have the same original tools."

That kind of trial by file, rigorous as it might have been, guar-

antees that the hand-crafted quality of the Bittners product will survive.

"Very few shops do what we do anymore," says Keenan. "Mass-manufacturing has consumed the market, so fewer hands touch every piece. But there's something to be said about hand work, where you can see and feel the sculpturing in everything, see the strokes of the blade, see where human hands have touched it."

Not only does Bittners produce custom furniture, it's also a full-service shop. It will repair, refinish or restore any of its pieces, no matter how old. And, in fact, it will repair anything, whether or not Bittners originally made it, whether or not the customer is an existing client.

"We've replaced single chairs within a set so that you don't even know which is the replacement chair," Riddle says.

And not only will they restore, repair and refinish, they will also do alterations and conversions – say you want to turn an old armoire into an entertainment cabinet.

"We'll even work with reclaimed lumber," says Keenan. "Bring us the wood and we'll make something out of it for you."

Of course, everybody has to get in line, regardless of the nature of the job. The shop is operating pretty close to capacity, so busy in fact that Keenan is looking to add a sixth set of hands to his current crew, which includes master cabinet-maker Gary Head; finishing expert Sandi Krider; repair specialist and cabinet-maker-in-training Manuel Lopez; and shop project manager Pat Elzy.

But, given the demand to get product out the door, Keenan can't afford the time to extensively train an inexperienced beginner. "Even the finishing job is not simply opening a can and slapping on some varnish," he says. "Our average finishing process is seven steps– achieving the right color, matching it, distressing the wood. You have to have an eye for color and feel. It's an art and a science. There's a lot of chemistry involved."

That's the price you pay for quality. And everyone at Bittners is very proud of that. "We like to take customers back to our woodshop and show them the process," says Riddle. "They like to be involved, to watch as the piece is being made, to follow the progress, even selecting various types of wood or inlays during the process."

And, he says, "We like it being known that our pieces are locally made, in Kentucky by Kentucky craftsmen."

"It's all about service," says Keenan. "So if someone comes to us with an important rush job, we might ask 'do you have an event coming up?' In which case, I say to the guys, 'Here comes a Saturday.' Or we might even loan a table to a customer while we're repairing the existing one or creating a new one."

The heritage of Bittners is still alive today in their handcrafted furniture. 

























