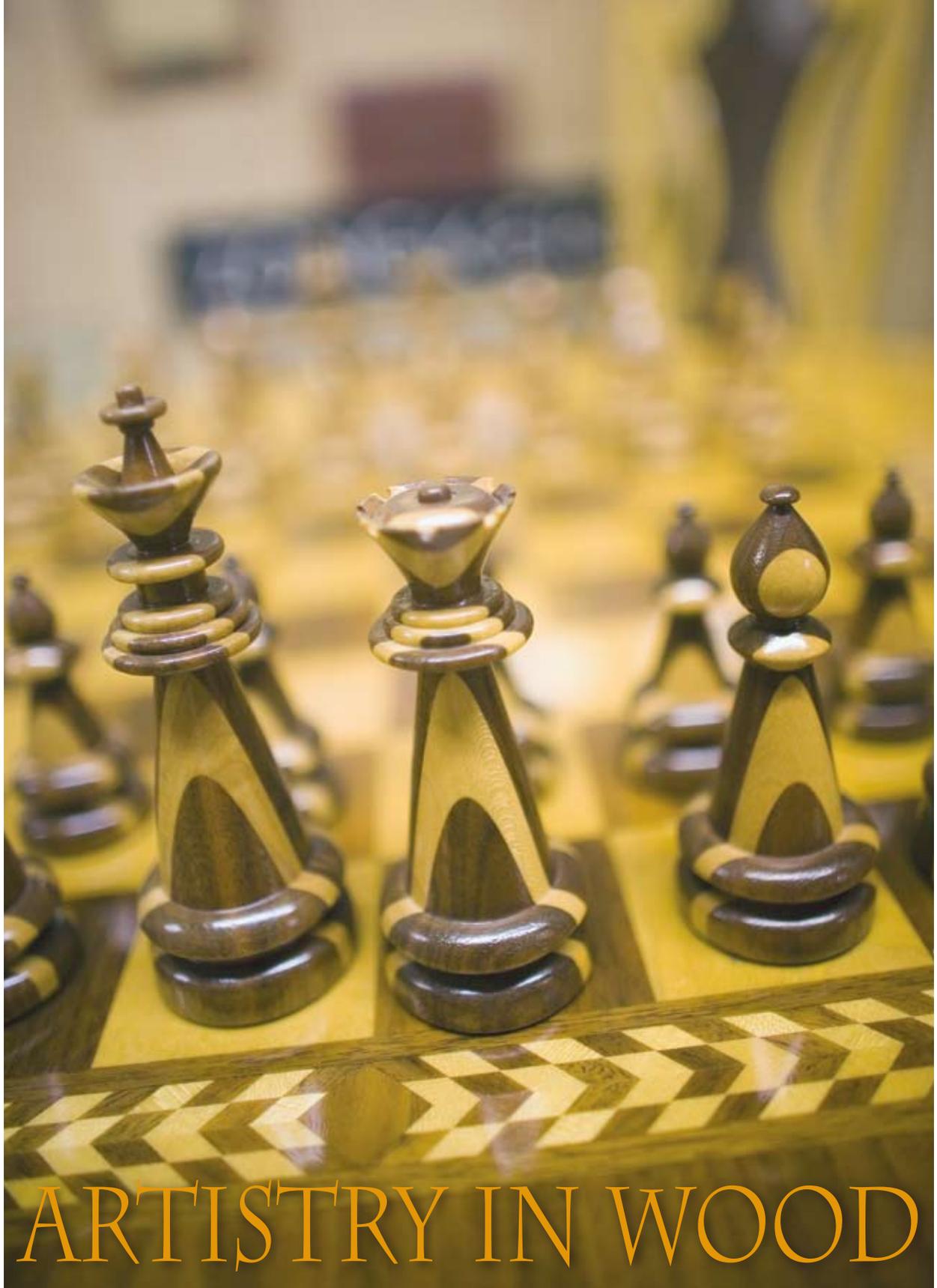


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ARTISTRY IN WOOD

Furniture becomes art in the hands of
Omaha's Zongker brothers.

By TINA KING Photography by ALYSSA SCHUKAR



The Zongker brothers, Dan in background and Dennis in foreground, are two “South Omaha boys” who approach furniture design and building as fine art. Left, Dennis spent more than 1,200 hours building his parquetry chess table and chairs. Below, six layers of wood rose petals fit together like a jigsaw puzzle to form this marquetry design.

IN AN OLD OMAHA BREWERY down by the river, amid screeching saw blades and the aroma of wood shavings and polyurethane, two brothers are turning wood into art. Dennis and Dan Zongker lead the 11-member team of Zongkers Custom Furniture. Their shop, in the former Metz Brewery, is tucked in an out-of-the-way spot between the busy Old Market and Henry Doorly Zoo.

Furniture made here is shipped around the country. Some pieces are bound for NASA and Air Force conference rooms. Others will find homes in church sanctuaries or family dining rooms. Each will become a focal point of whatever room it occupies. Zongkers furniture is of the “ooh and aah” variety; there are no wallflowers here.

Dennis and Dan like it that way. The brothers, who describe themselves as “South Omaha boys,” spent their first 10 years after high school working for a cabinet maker. But they wanted to do more. In 1989 they started making specialized pieces on the side, working from home. Instead of paying themselves, they used their profits to buy equipment. A year later, they moved into the brewery.

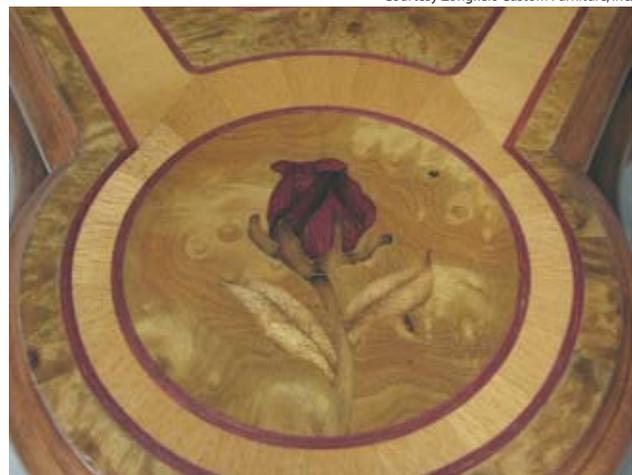
Since then, they’ve sold more than \$20 million worth of unique, non-assembly line furniture. “Everything is one of

a kind,” Dan said. “We kind of look at everything as a piece of artwork.”

Dan, who at 47 is the big brother by two years, is passionate about art history and architecture, and works with customers to design each piece. He’s also in charge of marketing and website development; the company draws customers from 34 states.

Dennis is the engineer, taking his brother’s designs and plotting out ultra-detailed shop drawings for the craftsmen to follow. His shop is filled with carving knives, practice pieces... and two cats who keep him company.

Courtesy Zongkers Custom Furniture, Inc.



“I think we can build just about any piece,” Dennis said in his low-key way. His proof sits nearby: a majestic end table whose completion required more than four years of spare time labor.

Three carved lindenwood lions support the triangular table. Each lion has eagle-style wings and violin scroll legs. The tabletop includes carving and marquetry, which involved cutting six layers of rose-petal-shaped veneer on a scroll saw and then reassembling them like a jigsaw puzzle. The veneers are sanded with silica sand to create a three-dimensional appearance. Dennis rattles off the woods he used as if giving the names of friends: “Purpleheart, myrtle burl, fruitwood, maple burl, bloodwood, beech, walnut and red burl,” he said. “I do a lot of work in here.”

Outside the door sits a hard maple and American black walnut

parquetry chess table and chairs set with more than 1,200 work hours in it. Although Dennis built it for himself 10 years ago, it has yet to make it to his house. Maybe it will move in when his youngest child leaves home, he said.

The glass-like table top includes 18 layers of hand-polished polyurethane and more than 1,000 pieces of cut and inlaid hardwood. The table’s bottom center spindle is the king piece upside down, and the feet are knights with leveling guides hidden inside. The chairs feature the queen’s crown and bishops.

Obtaining a custom Zongkers piece can be pricey – from \$200 to \$50,000 – depending on the time and detail involved. A recent three-piece dresser set sold for \$6,000; a media cabinet with 64 hours of design and construction costs \$4,500. Some clients have



Courtesy Zongkers Custom Furniture, Inc.

THE PROCESS

Dennis Zongker used traditional marquetry to cut six layers of veneer for the rose on his majestic end table, shading the veneer with silica sand to create a three-dimensional look. He carved the winged lions from lindenwood. It took more than 1,100 hours to complete.



a new style in mind, while others hope to recreate an antique or discontinued piece.

“It is built with a quality that you don’t see in readymade furniture today,” said Omaha interior designer Doris Buell of DB Interiors. “Their finish work is exceptional.”

“Dan is very, very good at design and figuring out how things work,” she said. “When Dennis translates it into shop drawings, there are no mistakes. Everything is perfect.”

Zongkers’ V-shaped boardroom conference tables are popular for video conference meetings. After making furniture for Offutt Air Force Base, word-of-mouth led to a 28-foot by 10-foot table for an Air Force base near Boston and a table for NASA. Electrical components are hidden behind easy access panels; casters allow the table shape to change.

The brothers know that custom work is a niche market. “We’re not here to fit everyone’s needs,” Dan said. “We’re here to fit the gap.”

After each craftsman finishes a piece, he signs and dates it via a brass plate attached inside. The idea is that the work will outlast



Craftsmen like Curt Starr sign and date their one-of-a-kind furniture pieces on hidden brass plates.

its builder. “When I design and build a piece of furniture,” Dennis said, “my intention is for the piece to last 100 years or more.”

About the author – Tina King lives in Omaha. She wrote about the Omaha Royals in the May/June 2008 issue.

HANG OUT ON THESE CLIFFS *Valentine and Cherry County*



Outdoor winter activities are not for the faint of heart in Cherry County. Adventures include ice cliff climbing in the Niobrara River valley where spring fed water falls freeze into sheer formations. Ice fishing at Merritt Reservoir or one of the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge lakes is challenging and rewarding. Romantics can mail their Valentine from the Heart City. Call us and we’ll tell you how to get your Valentine’s Day card stamped with the custom cache from Valentine.

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