

# Back to basics

A GROUP OF CRAFTSMEN IN THE FINGER LAKES ARE REVITALIZING THE ART OF WOODWORKING. *By Mary Stone*

French sculptor Auguste Rodin famously said, “The work of art is already within the block of marble. I just chop off whatever isn’t needed.” A team of highly skilled woodworkers in Naples, N.Y., is taking that same approach, but to timber.

Their goal is also different insofar as their artwork is particular to the customer for whom it is intended. The unique furniture Grand Wood LLC creates is made in collaboration with customers based off the potential their craftsmen see in a particular tree. They then mill, kiln dry and carve it.

Grand Wood general manager Zac Holtz explains: “If someone will have to take down a tree on their property for whatever reason, we’re able to talk to them and let them know what opportunity may or not be there with the tree and the logs that come from it. We discuss any early concepts or dreams they might have of using the lumber and producing furniture out of it.”

Grand Wood’s designers create 3D models and drawings of the customized design for clients to refine and approve. But what makes Grand Wood’s process stand out, Holtz says, is how its team handles the process from start to finish: from moving the logs to their workshop on Route 21 to installing the finished pieces themselves.

Holtz describes Grand Wood’s designs as the ultimate expression of wood that become part of the customer’s family history.

“Being a part of that story and helping the client create that story can justify the material, the tree that it came from. It’s really a wonderful thing,” Holtz says. “It’s sort of old-fashioned. It goes back to farmers who used to do that themselves, and a lot of that was out of necessity. But there’s a beautiful authenticity to it. It’s wonderful to provide that here around the Finger Lakes.”

Grand Wood has been operating with its current team since 2014 under a partnership between billionaire Richard Sands, executive vice chair of Constellation Brands, and Ontario County serial entrepreneur Jeremy Fields.

“At the time [of our inception], we were taking on a pretty diverse set of work. Much of it catered to the ownership and [the owners’] personal projects at the time: timber framing, furniture, and within each of those fields, we were using a lot of reclaimed materials. So, for instance, disassembling barns and re-purposing the timber into timber frames or furniture,” Holtz explains.

As it built a customer base, Grand Wood moved to its current location. “From the beginning, we’ve been in Naples. There’s an advan-



The Grand Wood team, from left to right: Shane Sakal, John Chudyk, Zac Holtz, Robert Ward III and Joe Castrechino.



tage to being in the Finger Lakes for sure. Richard's focus was around Canandaigua Lake at that point. Jeremy had a lot of resources in Naples. The property was available; they acquired it, and we just grew from there."

For its headquarters, the team reclaimed a barn, disassembled and re-erected it. Its first few projects were completed in that building, but as orders picked up, a larger production shop was constructed on the same property, mainly for timber framing.

"Originally, however, projects got started before we even really had a well-established structure. Rob (Robert Ward III, craftsman and shop foreman), who has been with Grand Wood forever, jokes about taking on projects and producing them under tents with flood lights," Holtz says. "That was sparked by the ambition of Jeremy and Richard. They had projects they wanted to get rolling on."

Today, Fields is the sole owner while Sands remains a regular customer, Holtz says. About Fields, Holtz adds, "In contrast to a lot of his other companies, he's quite hands off. He's allowed us to continue from where we started and make that transition on our own. He's allowed the people here to develop the company and bring it to where it is now."

Originally, Grand Wood's work centered on large-scale timber framing, which necessitated its second workshop. Due to competition in the market at other corporations, which use computer-automated joinery versus Grand Wood's use of handcrafted materials, the company has shifted its attention.

"About a year and a half ago, we made a pretty strong transition, that's where we're at now. Our focus now is more geared by the material we process," Holtz says. "We're largely focused on furniture. We still take on timber framing, but furniture and the materials that sort of drive our design are the focus."

Beyond the large-scale capacity of its workshop, which allows craftsmen to sculpt and process large scale projects such as barn doors, spiral staircases and the occasional timber frame, what makes Grand Wood stand out is how the company sources and mills the wood themselves.

Other shops, Holtz says, rely on Atlantic Plywood (a major wholesale supplier of hardwood plywood) and other lumber suppliers to get their lumber to build cabinets or furniture. By sourcing the logs themselves, Holtz says, Grand Wood can ensure the uniqueness of the material from the start.

Most of the furniture featured on these pages was produced for the Brooklyn Home Company, which has worked with Grand Wood since 2014. Producing large pieces takes four to five months depending on design details and what is required of the final production—including rough milling the log(s), kiln drying (which requires two to three months), resizing with Grand Wood's sawmill and final production. Clockwise from top left, a willow slab tabletop and a timber console made of solid willow timber dried to the core and polished; a carved mantel fabricated for Fitzhugh Karol, an artist-in-residence with The Brooklyn Home Company; a willow timber console; a willow stump table.