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Big Picture . Local Focus



New tools make intricate woodworking more affordable

By Jean Murphy

When Frank Lloyd Wright wanted to add pizzazz to his Oak Park home's dining room and playroom, he designed intricately cut wood grilles he installed under skylights and recessed lighting on the ceilings. When Victorian homebuilders wanted to dress up their homes, they cut intricate ornamentation and added it to their homes' rooflines, gables, porches and doors.

When today's homeowners want to cover an ugly radiator or add extra interest to a room or staircase, they, too, often opt for intricately cut wood panels and ornamentation to jazz up a room or an exterior. In each case, they are relying on the vintage art called fretwork.

Before the days of electricity, these intricate, decorative pieces were painstakingly cut in flat sheets of wood using tiny scroll blades in a fretsaw, hence the name. Today this type of ornamentation is still called fretwork even though it is now more often executed with lasers, computer-controlled routers and even water jets.

Lightwave Laser in Santa Rosa, Calif. specializes in fretwork panels more similar to the style and tradition of Wright than Queen Victoria.

Fretwork screens are an easy way to add a lot of interest to a room, said Lightwave's owner, Ron Macken. So many people who have scaled back from full renovations of their homes are adding fretwork as a way to update and freshen up their rooms.

Lightwave Laser's biggest markets are restaurants and hotels. In fact, they have a huge fretwork screen installed in the Crowne Plaza Hotel's restaurant in Rosemont. "But during the last couple of months a large number of homeowners have found us on the Internet (lightwavelaser.com) and contracted with us for small jobs. One woman had us make a screen to keep her cats out of her kitchen," Macken said.

The difficult economy has not greatly affected these fretwork firms. And while he will consider custom work, Macken mostly sells his stock production pieces, he said, because most people don't want to absorb the setup costs involved in a custom piece.

Lightwave Laser's customizable square and rectangular wood panels come in 30 to 40 standard patterns, including many that are licensed by the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio Foundation. The panels are made of recycled wood fiber board with four different possible wood veneers: cherry, maple, basswood and ayous (which mimics mahogany and wenge a dark, tropical wood).

Macken started Lightwave Laser about six years ago and at the time, his main focus was decorative paper stencils. He only decided to try cutting wood when representatives from the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio in Oak Park approached him to see if he could make Wright reproductions for them to sell in their gift shop.

It took him a year to perfect the process, but now he makes a wide variety of products and panels using wood or non-warping fiberboard. People buy his flat fretwork panels for accent lighting, door transoms, wall partitions, window covers, room divider screens and radiator covers. In addition, he makes accent lamps, wall art, night lights and other specialty products using the same process, many of which are available at the gift shops of both the Art Institute of Chicago and the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio. The laser process is uniquely suited to produce fretwork since both involve cuts that go straight through a flat piece of wood and are not turned at different angles, Macken said.

Lightwave Laser products begin with a computer program that tells the laser machine how to cut the panel using lines, curves and arcs. One pattern might involve 20,000 different lines and arcs, but once the program is set up, Macken said, it is easy to make multiple copies of the original.

Even with the laser, each panel takes as long as 45 minutes to cut because there is so much detail. But since the work is done by computer, Lightwave Laser also readily takes custom orders. They have copied homeowners' fabric or wallpaper patterns by scanning samples of it into the computer.

Homeowners can also choose the type of wood and the thickness they want, depending upon their unique needs. And even if a client chooses one of Lightwave Laser's standard patterns, they can be scaled to fit whatever size they need. "It takes three to four weeks to get a panel in one of our standard patterns or about six weeks to get a custom panel, once the design has received client approval," he said.

"I can make anything, including Victorian patterns," Macken said. "But left to my own devices, my own personal aesthetic comes out and I always end up producing modern, clean, organic, nature-inspired designs that look like they came from Japan or from Frank Lloyd Wright."

Macken said he was thrilled to be approached by the Wright Foundation. "When I was in sixth grade I did a book report on a book about Frank Lloyd Wright and after that, I wanted to become an architect," he said. Although he chose another career path, Macken believes Wright would approve of his current vocation.

"I think he would love the stuff we are producing. He would love the design flexibility we give people and the fact that it is not ultra expensive," Macken said. "Most can afford at least something from our line."

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