

- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Entertainment](#)
- [Living](#)
- [Anniversaries](#)
- [Comics](#)
- [Crossword](#)
- [Health & Fitness](#)
- [Home & Garden](#)
- [Horoscopes](#)
- [Let It Out](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Weddings](#)
- [Columnists](#)
- [• Lori Borgman](#)
- [• Dick Crum](#)
- [• Susan Guyett](#)
- [• Ellen Miller](#)
- [• David Mannweiler](#)
- [AP Health](#)
- [AP Offbeat](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Weather | Traffic](#)
- [Customer Services](#)
- [Subscriber Services](#)

- [Links](#)
- [Community](#)
- [Fact Files](#)
- [Message Boards](#)
- [Multimedia/Photos](#)
- [Newsletters](#)

- [Star Links](#)
- Links mentioned in The Star
- [Star Source](#)
- Send us your news tips, ideas

- [Cyber survey](#)
- Which Indianapolis museum is your favorite?**
- Children's Museum
- Eiteljorg Museum
- Indiana History Center
- Indiana State Museum
- Indianapolis Art Center
- Indianapolis Museum of Art
- NCAA Hall of Champions
- Other
-

30-DAY STORY SEARCH

HOME & GARDEN

Wood wizard
Woodworker creates, restores and appraises fine furniture

By S.L. Berry
s.l.berry@indystar.com
November 29, 2003

In an era in which many people consider yesterday too late, Robert Kasnak considers next week too soon. Quality, he'll tell you, takes time. Excellence takes longer.

Kasnak insists on excellence. It's what his reputation is built upon.

With wife Leslie, he operates Kasnak Restorations in the countryside east of Brownsburg. With a staff of four other woodworkers, Kasnak designs and builds custom furniture, as well as appraises and restores fine furniture.

It was his 25-plus years in custom furniture making that convinced Wendy Sommers to commission Kasnak to make a dining room table to match the 1920s-era breakfast room table she inherited from her grandparents.

"I didn't know anything about how to create a piece of furniture," says Sommers. "I didn't even know anything about the materials. But I have some friends that Bob built a table for, so I took a leap of faith and called him."

Over the course of several months, Kasnak worked on drawings and computer renderings until Sommers, director of creative services for Pacers Sports & Entertainment, was satisfied. Then he went to work crafting the table.

The result is an elegant piece of furniture made from maple, mahogany and walnut burl, with Wedgewood tile inlays and cast bronze toecaps. Nearly four years later, Sommers still talks enthusiastically about the project.

"The materials Bob chose are really beautiful," she says. "He even knew how to replicate the carving that was on my grandparents' table."

Although Kasnak won't reveal how much Sommers' table cost, insisting that every custom project is different, he says, "If we were to make that same table today, it would cost about \$18,000."

Kasnak markets his custom work by word of mouth, through brochures and on his Web site (www.kasnakrestorations.com). He also used to show select pieces in high-end art and craft shows, such as the local Penrod Art Fair.

That's where Ann Varneau first encountered him.

After seeing Kasnak's bird's-eye maple rocking chairs, which have won awards at art and furniture shows around the country, Varneau ordered one for her husband, Mark. "He was planning to retire, and I wanted to give him something special," she says.

She wasn't disappointed. "It's an absolutely gorgeous piece," says Varneau, who also owns two other Kasnak pieces -- a birds-eye maple clock and a table. "Everyone who sees his work loves it."

While it's his custom work that attracts attention, Kasnak acknowledges, it's the appraisal and restoration work that pays the bills.

"The market nationwide for custom furniture is razor-thin," he says, rubbing his hand across a pair of recently completed dining room chairs that he designed and built for buyers in Seattle, former Indianapolis residents. "It's fun to do, but it's hard to make enough money from custom furniture alone to sustain a business."

That's why he's emphasizing the restoration and appraisal segments of his operation these days. "I'd say restoration work is probably 85 percent of our business, while appraisals is probably 10 percent. The other 5 percent is custom furniture."

That's a significant shift in emphasis from his early days as a woodworker.

Kasnak, 55, an Indianapolis native, had dropped out of Ball State University and was working as a carpenter when he picked up some scrap lumber from a job site one day in 1976 and built a bookcase. He still has it sitting in his workshop today.

Reminder of roots

It's nothing like the high-end, refined woodworking he does today, but it is a solid reminder that a well-made piece of furniture can withstand the rigors of constant use. It's also a reminder that even the most skillful craftsman had to start somewhere.

For Kasnak, the starting point was his admiration of older, well-built furniture, which he started restoring in the mid-1970s. That led him to building his own.

"Sometimes I couldn't find what I wanted to restore," he says, "so I started building things."

Among those things were desks and birds-eye maple clocks like the one Varneau owns. As his design and woodworking skills developed, he started showing some of his work in fine furniture shows around the country. The custom end of his business took off, and Kasnak was elated.

"For years, I felt that making custom furniture was the way to go," he says, "but gradually I changed my mind."

In part that change came about as a result of his growing concern about using exotic rain forest woods from Africa and South America in his work. That sent him back to restoration.

"It's nice to take pieces that are damaged and restore them," says Kasnak. "It's a way of preserving natural resources and reusing great old furniture."

Thanks to Kasnak's restoration skills, Elizabeth Brand Monroe, director of the graduate program in public history at IUPUI, was able to save 40 pieces of her antique and heirloom furniture that were damaged when her house burned earlier this year.

"Because I'm a historian, it was useful to me to work with a professional who knows what he's doing," says Monroe. "I'm pretty set in terms of the quality of work that I expect, and he understands that. He did a very nice job."

Restoring a piece of furniture is easier than building one from scratch, says Kasnak. "With custom work, you start with some drawings and a bunch of wood, and you have to figure out how to make something that doesn't exist except as an idea. With restoration work, a piece of furniture already exists."

His appreciation of old furniture is what has led him to add appraisal to the list of services he offers. "When Leslie and I do appraisals, it's not like 'Antiques Roadshow,' " says Kasnak. "We crawl under pieces and look for signs of damage or repair. When we're done, we create a detailed document that provides information about the piece."

In all of the things he does, says Kasnak, the goal is the same: to take an enlightened approach to woodworking. And to constantly strive for excellence.

"When it comes to quality," says Kasnak, "we hold ourselves to an 11 on a scale of 10."

For Varneau, that's what makes waiting for Kasnak to build a piece of furniture worthwhile. "He makes heirloom pieces. He's a superb craftsman, and a real credit to Indiana."

Call Star reporter S.L. Berry at 1-317-444-6437.



Robert Kasnak of rural Brownsburg, an award-winning furniture restorer and designer, displays a chair he custom-made for a client recently. -- Frank Espich / The Star

Related content

- [Kasnak's shop crew is bright and diverse](#)

Kasnak Restorations

- **Services:** Furniture restoration, custom furniture, appraisals.
- **Where:** 5505 N. Hendricks County Road 1000 East, Brownsburg.
- **Information:** 1-317-852-9770 or <http://www.kasnakrestorations.com/>.

Links to external sites will open a new browser. IndyStar.com does not endorse external sites.

- Top Stories
- [No. 1 Huskies rout Ball State](#) - 4:39 PM
 - [Thomas leads Irish to victory](#) - 3:21 PM
 - [Anderson teen faces murder charge](#) - 2:49 PM
 - [Muncie lodge forced to sell hall](#) - 1:47 PM
 - [Deer carcasses found along road](#) - 12:26 PM

- [Email this](#)
- [Print this](#)
- [Post message](#)
- [Send letter to editor](#)
- [Reprint info](#)

Article tools sponsored by