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## The secret life of trees

By Brenda Rees

William Stranger can identify the species of huge slabs of wood the way some men instantly recognize automobile makes, models and years. Surveying the lumberyard at his Pasadena studio, the English-born woodsmith points to various timber piles and ticks off their names: silver maple, black acacia, claro walnut and elm. He's particularly proud of the carob tree hunks reclaimed from Roy Rogers' Hollywood estate. "This California black oak will make some wonderful coffee tables," he says, brushing dirt off the richly grained wood. "It's just exquisite."

A tour of his workshop reveals artfully created tables, dressers, nightstands and entertainment centers, all done with a contemporary flair – clean lines that showcase the wood's grain and natural contours. Inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement as a young woodworker, Stranger prefers the simplicity of modernism. "It seems that in the last five years, I've found my own style of design that allows the wood to be the star of the show," says Stranger, 46. "The organic shapes, colors and textures – even the defects – are very spectacular."

Most of his raw materials come from re-purposed backyard and street trees, which have been cut down because of disease or construction. "The Los Angeles climate makes for valuable wood," he says, adding that the wide variety of local trees ("lots of camphor trees in Pasadena") is a bonus for woodworkers like himself. Making connections with tree surgeons statewide to salvage these fallen timbers, he saves them from being burned or discarded while sidestepping the need to cut down more trees. Yesterday's shade becomes tomorrow's table.

Not surprisingly, Stranger sees his design business through an ecological prism. While he creates striking, award-winning pieces, he's determined to show that companies can indeed follow their profit mandate and he still be earth-friendly. He doesn't use toxic glues and polishes, which are commonly used in woodworking shops, and he strives toward producing zero waste. Stranger recycles sawdust, makes cutting boards from scrap pieces and donates other bits to local woodworking classes.

"It's not so much giving up things as it is changing the way we produce and look at materials," he says. "My work is expensive, but if you buy a table, it will last for years and then you get to pass it on. This is a long-lasting connection from past to future." His pieces range in price from \$1,000 for a trunk stool to \$30,000 or more for a full set of kitchen cabinets, depending on the amount of custom work involved.

The woodsmith was inspired to investigate the ramifications of his trade by a discussion he had with another parent at his daughter's school. The man asked Stranger how he could reconcile using materials that promoted forest destruction. "I used to be like any other woodworker, getting my supplies at Home Depot," he says. "But that [comment] got me thinking."

In 1990, Stranger was profoundly moved by a retrospective of work by prominent mid-century furniture maker George Nakashima at New York's American Crafts Museum. Nakashima's spiritual approach and use of organic forms hit a chord with Stranger. He decided to find supplies close to home and design pieces that would illuminate the wood's natural beauty.

Since then, Stranger – a father of one whose wife, Sinton, makes tea tables – has been an advocate for green design. In 2005, he helped the Woodworkers Guild of Southern California organize the “Good Wood: Furniture and Objects from Sustainable Materials” show, which opened at the Pasadena Museum of California Art and toured Southern California. His “monolith bench” captured the show's best design award, as judged by renowned woodworker Sam Maloof.

These days, Stranger enjoys working on small projects – like cabinets and entertainment centers for a private home in Malibu – as well as big ones, including benches and decorative wooden designs on the walls and ceilings of the new Arroyo Whole Foods store in Pasadena. Stranger Furniture has also been popping up at design and architectural shows around the country as well as at area galleries, such as Pasadena's Folk Tree Collection and the Del Amo Gallery. His current retailers include Santa Monica's Gallery of Functional Art, Homework in LA and Trios Gallery in Solano Beach.

Trios owner Sheri Fox says she has carried Stranger's pieces for three years. “His work is beautiful – so simple and rich,” she says. “I love the fact that he doesn't strip the wood down...I love the idea of creating antiques of the future, that we will have items that are passed down for generations.”

There's no telling what Stranger's future will hold or what treasures he will unearth from the past. He welcomes the different – and sometimes surprising — kinds of artistic challenges recycling can present, such as that posed by the recent acquisition of bowling alley lanes. “They're maple and yellow pine,” he says. “Not sure what I'll do with them, but they are intriguing.”

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