

# By WESTERN HANDS

By Bryant Hall

## Introduction to Western Studio Furniture

The West has long captured the imagination. From the historic departure of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1804 to the tens of thousands who braved the Oregon Trail in the 1840s and 50s, Americans have been enthralled with the adventure and allure of the American West. As stories of these early pioneers made their way back to the metropolitan East, a sense of what the West was, a “western style,” began to develop. Then, in 1883, in Omaha, Nebraska, William F. Buffalo Bill Cody presented the first Wild West show and set into motion an infatuation with the “wild west” that would last for more than 25 years.<sup>1</sup>

Though western style was quite popular at the turn of the century, interior western style would have been almost indefinable. In the early twentieth century, western homes were furnished in mission oak or by mail order.<sup>2</sup> It is also evident when traveling through small western towns, the prevailing home style was reflective of eastern design styles – Victorian and craftsmen. Although the West, as an American ideal, has long been a place calling to mind thoughts of freedom and independence, and being surrounded by the beauty and wonder of nature, true western style emerged with Thomas Molesworth and the Shoshone Furniture Company, defining it for the world.

Forty years later, J. Mike Patrick and a small group of craftsmen from Cody, Wyoming, created the Western Design Conference. That show would grow from a small group of artisans to a world-class conference – showcasing the absolute best western decorative artists and once again, making western design relevant to the world.

Western Design Conference co-founder and visionary, J. Mike Patrick described western design as, “casual, warm, friendly, utilitarian, and makes wonderful use of materials and native traditions of the west. Above all, Western design is quintessentially American.”<sup>3</sup> Elements found west of the Mississippi, such as lodgepole pine and fir, leathers, antlers, horns, and other natural materials, are commonly thought of as key components of western style. These materials were traditionally used in western furniture and clothing, and are still in use today. In addition to those traditional elements, today’s craftsmen and designers also incorporate steel, iron, copper, and stone into the list of materials used.

Beyond the use of specific materials, designers often incorporate images and accents to elicit thoughts of the West and its natural settings. These can be as subtle as the inlay of a star at the center point of a coffee table, or as overt, as a stain glass display of a cowboy bar scene on the head of a piano.<sup>4</sup>

Whether through the materials used, images incorporated, or other unique elements included in their pieces of functional art, designers of western style aim to evoke the West. From Thomas Molesworth to today’s craftsmen, western design leaves those watching and participating in this style with a lasting sense of independence, freedom, and being surrounded by the beauty and wonder of nature.

The aim of this perspective is to examine and celebrate the rich history and talent of these artisans and to outline their story – from the beginning of the western studio furniture movement, its quieter years in the 1960s and 70s, through the wave and excitement of the Western Design Conference and Cody High Style, to today’s uncertain future, and to the possibilities of what may lay ahead.

By

# WESTERN HANDS

## Thomas Molesworth and the Origins of Modern Western Style

Though Thomas Molesworth is, for many people, the craftsman most identified with western studio furniture, one of the first names to become associated with western decorative arts was Edward Bohlin. Swedish born, Bohlin came to America in 1900 and moved to Cody in 1917 after working in Montana and on several ranches in the area. Established in Cody, he opened his first saddle shop, and after honing his craft there for several years, moved to Hollywood where his skills in leather and silver led him to become the “saddle maker to the stars.”<sup>5</sup> Over the years, Bohlin’s pieces have inspired countless artisans. His pieces are still collected, and being used and worn today.

Counter to the popularity of Edward Bohlin’s saddles and tack, western furniture did not gain immediate and early recognition. Towns with train service ordered furniture from back East or through catalogs. Those towns and ranches, whose isolation made ordering furniture impractical, had it built by local log builders and ranch hands. Early “pole” furniture came from the use of lodgepole pines and was first and foremost functional, with little to no emphasis on artistic integrity. As western furniture started to gain popularity and skilled artisans garnered recognition, they added aesthetic elements to their designs. Many early makers of western furniture – Eagle Rathe Furniture of Dean, Montana, John Stark in Seeley Lake, Montana, Kranenbergs of Jackson, Wyoming, Uptown Furniture in Sheridan, Wyoming, and Thomas Molesworth’s Shoshone Furniture Company in Cody, Wyoming – all had distinct construction techniques and decorative elements, but they were also influenced by and imitated one another.<sup>6</sup> It was this confluence of style and timing that would ultimately lead to the success and recognition of Thomas Molesworth and the Shoshone Furniture Company.

The son of a wealthy Methodist minister, Thomas Molesworth, was born in Kansas in 1890. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to South Dakota, and then again to Forsyth, Montana. In his youth, he became an avid horseman and developed a strong connection to the West, so much so that he wanted to become a painter and enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago in 1908.<sup>7</sup> This was the time of the Arts and Craft movement. Arts and Crafts stood for traditional craftsmanship, using simple forms made in a factory setting, using a hands-on approach. Molesworth’s arrival in 1908 Chicago was deeply rooted in the Craftsmen style – most notably expressed in the Prairie School architectural designs of Frank Lloyd Wright and his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

Molesworth would return to Montana after only one year at the Art Institute after his family finances took a downturn. However, that single year in Chicago would leave a lasting impact. Molesworth would later integrate into his own furnishings a style reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts movement, using simple forms, and a clean, solid style that would come to define his furniture.<sup>9</sup>

After returning to Montana and working on his family’s ranch, Molesworth served in the Marine Corps in World War I. His tour completed, Molesworth returned to Montana where he worked, as a banker for five years then as the manager of the Rowe Furniture Company in Billings for seven years. In 1931, Molesworth, who now had a wife and two children, moved to Cody to open the Shoshone Furniture Company. Originally Shoshone Furniture Company was a retail furniture store; it sold products of various manufacturers and Molesworth’s previous jobs provided him with an excellent background to run the budding business. However, it is clear that Shoshone Furniture Company did not start as a furniture manufacturer. According to noted Molesworth historian, Terry Winchell, the first documentation of Molesworth, as a furniture maker, was in a 1933 Cody Stampede Rodeo program. The ad presented Shoshone Furniture Company, as a “maker of distinctive furniture for western homes.”<sup>10</sup>

Like the western furniture makers before him, some of Molesworth’s earliest customers were area ranchers. Anthony Huber, who owned the Indian Head Ranch on the South Fork of the

By

# WESTERN HANDS

Shoshone River, commissioned Molesworth to build a bedroom suite. E. V. Robertson, owner of the Hoodoo Ranch, also commissioned the Shoshone Furniture Company. Though these commissions were good for the growing business, the turning point for the Shoshone River Company was the commission to furnish Ranch A in Crook County, Wyoming.<sup>11</sup>

Ranch A was owned by Moses Annenberg, a Russian immigrant who worked under William Randolph Hearst, had great success, and later purchased the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Annenberg amassed tremendous wealth, and his retreat in Crook County was one of the finest log structures in America.<sup>12</sup> The commission was an enormous opportunity for the Shoshone Furniture Company. Upon its completion, Molesworth had gained recognition in the elite circles that would become his future client list, the capital to grow his business, and the confidence to continue to develop and refine his style.

By 1936 Molesworth, who had a relationship with the Abercrombies, put Shoshone Furniture Company on a national market with representation by Abercrombie & Fitch of New York. This led to commissions with eastern clients looking to build second and third homes in the West. The Shoshone Furniture Company likely received its commission to furnish The Old Lodge, George Summers' ranch near Glenwood Springs, Colorado, from this exposure.<sup>13</sup> From that point going forward, the Shoshone Furniture Company would go on to be the premier furniture maker of western studio furniture.

As the Shoshone Furniture Company grew, it faced challenges from changes in clients' tastes, shifts in the economic climate, and competition in the emerging western-inspired furniture market. One of Molesworth's competitors came from another Cody-based furniture company.

Paul Hindman had worked for the Shoshone Furniture Company since its inception, along with his brother Don, who was one of Molesworth's finest woodworkers. Paul then left Molesworth in 1939 and started the Wyoming Furniture Company, based off a commission to furnish the lobby of the Noble Hotel in Lander, Wyoming. In addition to the sting of his departure, Hindman's Wyoming Furniture copied Molesworth's unique style, a trespass that Molesworth would never forgive.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the bad blood between the two local companies, Wyoming Furniture Company operated for many years. It was sold on several occasions, once to Pete Fritjofson, who had worked under Molesworth in the early 1950's. Fritjofson, who mentored future craftsmen Ken Siggins for a short time, worked in Cody until his death in 1964. Hindman would eventually come to own Wyoming Furniture once more, but by the 1980s Hindman's health was in decline and Wyoming Furniture Company closed its doors.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the Wyoming Furniture Company, Molesworth was also competing against craftsmen who had developed their local followings, but now had new opportunities to advertise in magazines, such as the *Dude Rancher*.<sup>16</sup> However, despite increasing competition, Molesworth was able to remain not only one of the most influential western designers, but one of the most sought after. Molesworth adapted his designs to reflect the more modern tastes of a post-World War II America, and Shoshone Furniture Company remained popular until Molesworth retired, and the company closed its doors in 1958.<sup>17</sup>

Molesworth's legacy and unique design were recognized in 1989 in the exhibition, *Interior West: The Craft and Style of Thomas Molesworth*, at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody and in 1990 at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup> These shows, along with several articles in the *New York Times*, helped spark a revival of interest in western studio furniture that had not been seen since the 1930s. This wave of enthusiasm would last for nearly two decades, and Cody would be at its epicenter.

## 1960–Late 1980's: Ken Siggins Carries the Torch

By

# WESTERN HANDS

Of the craftsmen who have been part of Cody's furniture making history since Thomas Molesworth, Ken Siggins best bridges the time from the 1960s to today's modern style. A Cody native, Ken grew up on a guest ranch established by his grandfather in 1917.<sup>19</sup> After high school, Siggins moved to Los Angeles where he graduated from college and spent several years there, working various jobs and pursuing an acting career.<sup>20</sup> Ken had started a young family and decided to return to Cody where he bought a small ranch on the South Fork of the Shoshone River. At his father's suggestion, he started Triangle Z Ranch Furniture and began building ranch western style furniture in 1964.<sup>21</sup> Ken notes the distinction between his style and what he calls Molesworth's "cowboy" western style in the 2007 Cody High Style catalog, "Triangle Z Ranch Furniture is a reserved, refined western style lacking a Hollywood flair."

At that time, Thomas Molesworth had moved from Cody. Paul Hindman, who once had Siggins peel burls for him at a rate of \$0.11 a piece, had moved on to operating heavy equipment, and Pete Fritjofson was taking only limited orders, and would pass away later that fall.<sup>22</sup>

Around the same time period Ken met some guests, staying at his family's ranch from the Harden Furniture Company in New York.<sup>23</sup> The connection made, Siggins spent several weeks in New York, working on cherry Victorian style furniture.<sup>24</sup> Although it was not western furniture, the experience would prove invaluable as Siggins learned about drying wood, finishing, and upholstery. As Siggins pointed out in the first Western Design Conference catalog in 1993, "This served me well, as I am one of the few artisans who cut my own poles, skin my own calf hides, design and construct the pieces, finish and upholster them."

Dude ranches and guests of those ranches were Ken's primary clientele through the early years, and Ken describes the business as being "feast or famine." Occasionally supplementing his income through other ventures, then having up to six employees, slowing down once again, and then going to the dude ranch convention, Siggins characterized this time as, "go like crazy, then slow down until the next big order."<sup>25</sup> Triangle Z's first big contract was for the Flathead Lake Lodge in Bigfork, Montana in 1994. One of the project's biggest challenges was a lack of quality material, so Siggins, resilient and industrious, scavenged the forest for dry poles to complete the project.<sup>26</sup>

Over the years, Siggins would have several employees who would later become established craftsmen in their own right, and most notably, Jimmy Covert. Covert grew up in Louisville, Kentucky. After graduating college, he and his wife, Lynda, moved to southern Indiana. In Indiana, the Coverts worked on their farm and ran their own sawmill. In 1984, Covert accepted an apprenticeship from Siggins, and together with their two small children, Jimmy and Lynda moved to Cody. The Coverts lived on the South Fork, and Jimmy worked for Ken until 1990 when the family moved into town and Jimmy setup his own shop. During his time at Triangle Z, Covert not only learned the craft of woodworking, but he began to develop his own style. In the years following, Covert's organic designs helped to push the Molesworth style in new directions, and along with several other talented artisans, helped create a new "Cody style" of western furniture.

Siggins' place in the annals of western studio furniture history should be celebrated. In addition to his mentorship, his furniture under the Triangle Z Ranch label helped to keep western style and design relevant in years when there was not a national craze for all things western. However, in the true fashion of ranch ethics, Siggins will be the last person to brag or boast, instead working quietly at his shop thirty miles up the South Fork of the Shoshone River. When asked recently about slowing down or retirement, Siggins commented, "I love it, you know, and I just can't wait to get up in the morning and go to work making furniture."<sup>27</sup>

## **The Molesworth Exhibition, J. Mike Patrick, and the Beginning of the Western Design Conference**

While Siggins and Covert were busy building their style of western furniture, another builder from

By

# WESTERN HANDS

Cody and the assistant director of the renowned Buffalo Bill Historical Center were both taking steps that would eventually lead to the Western Design Conference and forever change the face of western style.

Wally Reber spent thirty years working at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, most of those years as the associate director with several occasions as the interim director. Through those years, Reber was responsible for many aspects of the museum, but undoubtedly his two biggest contributions to the arena of decorative arts was as curator of the Thomas Molesworth exhibition in 1989, and his idea for the Switchback Ranch Purchase Award to be held in a permanent collection at the museum.<sup>28</sup>

In 1987, Reber came up with the idea for doing a Molesworth Exhibition based on his early impression of the furniture he saw when he arrived in Cody, "When we got to Cody in '81, I saw a lot of funky furniture beyond poles being shoved together, it has some style to it."<sup>29</sup> In initial discussions, the exhibition was to be held in the mezzanine of the museum's large center hall. However, Peter Hassrick, who was then the museum director and curator for the Whitney Gallery, said that Reber would have the entire main floor to put on the exhibition. This dramatically changed the scope of the show. As the curator of the exhibition, Reber was wearing many hats – doing the photography, designing the exhibition, and writing for the catalog – "Wow, this has changed a lot."<sup>30</sup> The exhibition had shifted from a small show to a large scale exposition that would draw in over 400 people at its opening.

In 1989, the museum opened the exhibition, titled *Interior West: The Craft and Style of Thomas Molesworth*. It was an absolute success. Along with Paul Fees, who was the assistant curator for the exhibition, the pair put together an excellent show – one that would garner national attention. The show sparked interest in western style studio furniture, not only in Cody and the region, but also in metropolitan markets like New York and San Francisco. Those craftsmen who were building "cowboy furniture" in Cody and throughout the West were poised to take advantage of this growing opportunity. One of those craftsmen was J. Mike Patrick.

A fourth generation resident of Cody, Mike grew up western. He spent his early childhood on his grandfather's 50,000-acre Diamond Bar cattle ranch and later roaming the 30,000-acre Belknap Ranch after his parents purchased the historic homestead when he was in the third grade.<sup>31</sup> Ranching was in the Patrick's blood and that was the obvious path for Mike as well.

After a family trip to Kenya, Mike was offered a job to manage a 50,000-acre cattle ranch. He accepted the job and stayed there for a year and a half. Mike returned home after his time in Africa and married Virginia Livingston.<sup>32</sup> The two tried their hand at ranching in Wyoming for the next ten years. Ranching, however, can be a tough business and Mike would have to supplement their winter income working construction for his brother, Nic, building small pieces of furniture, and working on other jobs in the area. After giving the family business more than a decade's worth of effort, Mike decided to shift to furniture.

In the mid-1980s, Mike was working as a cabinetmaker in Seattle, but he had a young family back in Cody and the distance began to be a strain on Mike and his family.<sup>33</sup> Several years earlier, Mike had built a desk out of eighty-year-old windbreak that he had torn down from his family's ranch. Though he had grown up building, putting things together out of necessity, this was the first time that he built something around the quality of the material itself. The desk had been a revelation and so, after moving back to Cody, Mike, and his wife, Virginia, started their furniture company, New West, in 1988.<sup>34</sup>

After two years of building under their new label, and on the heels of the Molesworth exhibition at the museum, a piece in New West's catalog caught the eye of a design editor of the *New York Times*.<sup>35</sup> Mike had created a bed frame called the *Teton Bed*, which was featured in the June 1, 1989 lifestyle section of the *Times*. That article gave the Patricks instant credibility, as New West was most certainly collaboration between Mike and Virginia.

By

# WESTERN HANDS

In 1990, the growing community of western craftsmen in Cody received another boost with an article in the April 5 Home & Garden section of the *New York Times*. The article, titled *How the West Was Done* by Patricia Leigh Brown, summarized the history of Molesworth and his legacy in Cody. It also highlighted the craftsmen in Cody at the time – Ken Siggins, Mike Patrick, Jimmy Covert, and Paul Hindman. Coupled with the exhibition, the article put Cody and these craftsmen on the map. Clients from coast to coast began calling, and the butterfly wings that create the hurricane, had begun to flutter. Though Hindman’s health was beginning to decline, Siggins, Patrick, and Covert would all take part in the first Master Artisans Guild show, a year later.

As the zeal for western studio furniture grew, Mike and Virginia added employees to meet the increasing demand for quality pieces. One standout New West employee was John Gallis from Long Island, New York. Gallis would only stay with New West for a short time before starting his own Norseman Design, an award-winning company that is still thriving today. This is what Cody represented at the time, a small western town that was cultivating a unique colony of talented craftsmen. Patrick could see Cody’s and the industry’s potential, and knew something big was afoot.

At the 1990 *Best of the Southwest Show* in Dallas, Mike met fellow craftsmen and frame maker, Monte Scholten. That meeting was the spark for what would later become the Western Design Conference. In January 1991, the two got together again and laid out the blueprint for the Master Artisans Guild. That September, the Master Artisans Guild held the first furniture show in Cody.<sup>36</sup>

Though it was the seed for a conference that would grow to over a hundred exhibitors, the first Master Artisans Guild show was a small affair. It was held in the Governor’s Room at the Irma Hotel in downtown Cody with five exhibitors: Mike Patrick, Ken Siggins, Jimmy Covert, Wolf and Lily Schlein, textile artisans from Santa Fe, and Monte Scholten. The show was held the same week as the Patron’s Ball and the first Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale with the craftsmen, trying to capitalize on the wealthy patrons that were in town that week. The show had no catalog and received little press coverage – the only coverage of the show in the *Cody Enterprise* in the entire month of September that year was a two by two inch photo of Monty Scholten examining a piece of furniture with a fellow craftsmen. However, despite its lack of coverage, the show had enough success that the guild agreed to hold another show the following year.

The show in 1992 was again in the Governor’s Room at the Irma. It was only slightly larger than the ’91 show, but did include Cody craftsmen, Lester Santos, who had been previously been working at Sweetwater Ranch Furniture. Once more, the show was held the week of the Patron’s Ball and Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, setting a pattern that would continue through all of the Western Design Conferences and Cody High Style shows.

Though both shows had mild success, the Master Artisans Guild, led by Mike, wanted the show to grow to something much bigger. As Mike wrote in the first Western Design Conference Catalog – it was decreed at the 1992 furniture show at High Point, North Carolina, western design was to be the fashionable style for the rest of the 1990’s. Mike knew that the wave was building and had the vision that Cody’s furniture show would have its place on a national stage.

## Western Design Conference Grows to a World-Class Design Conference

On September 20, 1993, the Master Artisans Guild hosted the first Western Design Conference. The conference was three days long, included twenty-three presenters, twenty-nine exhibitors, and a fashion show at the Old Trail Town. Like the earlier shows, the first Western Design Conference was run by the craftsmen and a core group of volunteers, all led by Mike Patrick. “He was the juice behind the movement.” Wally Reber described for Mike and his passion for the Cody shows. That passion drove not only Mike and New West to new heights, but also elevated the conference and those craftsmen who participated. Virginia said of the early shows, “you’re going to bring in fifty

By

# WESTERN HANDS

competitors? You're nuts!"<sup>37</sup> Though the conference did not yet have fifty exhibitors, it continued to thrive.

In '94, the conference had thirty-nine exhibitors and fifteen presenters. In addition to growing the scale of the show from the previous year, the 1994 conference included the prestigious Switchback Ranch Purchase Award. The brainchild of Mike Patrick, who had the initial idea and a contact to underwrite the award, and Wally Reber, who had the idea for the Buffalo Bill Historical Center to purchase the award, the Switchback Award was added to preserve the best piece of the year. With the generosity of David and Paula Leuschen, the Switchback became the most coveted of all of the awards - not only would the craftsmen have sold their piece, but it would be part of the permanent collection at the premier western museum in the world.

Although still primarily a volunteer run show, the 1994 conference also marked a shift from the early guild shows and first conference in that there was a paid executive director. Dennis Zenhle, the president of a marketing and advertising firm based in Laramie that consulted for New West, was hired as the first executive director of the Western Design Conference. Although he was connected to Mike Patrick through New West, Zenhle was the director for only the 1994 show. In 1995, the show hired Cody local, K.T. Roes and her firm, Wordsworth, to run the conference.

By 1995, western interior design and fashion was fully en vogue. The scale of this growing trend was clearly evidenced by the Christie's auction on June 7, 1995 - *Furnishings from Thomas Molesworth's "Old Lodge" for George Summers, circa 1935*. Like the Molesworth exhibition in 1989, the Christie's auction was further proof that western style was a legitimate school of design. The Christie's auction helped to galvanize the movement for those putting on and participating in the Western Design Conference, and the '95 conference reached the mark of fifty exhibitors that Mike had envisioned only a few years prior.

The 1996 and '97 conferences continued to grow. By then, it included nearly sixty extremely talented craftsmen, designers, leatherworkers, and metalworkers, with the majority traveling to Cody from outside the state. The conference had a board of directors, made primarily of craftsmen, was an established non-profit corporation, and, with the boards' personal backing, had secured a note from a local bank to ensure the show would continue to grow.

In its origin, the Western Design Conference was a way to bring together the best western style furniture makers to showcase their talents, help push each other to be better, and educate their clients and each other as to what quality western designed studio arts represented. In its goal, according to the craftsmen that were part of those early shows, it was successful. It was the place where interior designers, gallery owners, and prospective clients could come to see what the top western craftsmen and artisans were building and making.

## **Western Design Conference Establishes Western Design Institute and Reaches its Zenith**

K.T. Roes was the executive director again in 1996 and the show was successful, but the board decided to make a change, and in 1997 hired Thea Marx, as the new executive director. A native of Kinneer, Wyoming, Marx was living in Cody, but working in Campbell County, exporting log homes from Canada to Japan. Marx had a background in marketing, and a passion for design and immediately put that fusion of skill and enthusiasm to work growing the conference by more than twenty exhibitors between 1997 and '98. The style of the show also began to change. In the 1997 catalog, the basic beliefs of the Western Design Conference appeared, as listed -

1. Western Design is a bona fide school of design.
2. The role of education is to promote an appreciation of the school of western design.
3. Quality craftsmanship is worthy of encouragement.
4. Sharing of ideas, experiences and knowledge creates a synergy that is beneficial to Western

By

# WESTERN HANDS

Design.

5. The client is an important partner in Western Design.
6. An annual conference is important in fostering a sense of community among practitioners and enthusiasts of Western Design.
7. The opportunity for sales is an essential element of the Western Design Conference.
8. The Western Design Conference should be fun.
9. The Western Design Conference recognizes the historic traditions of the Western design.
10. Change is an important ingredient of the annual exhibition.<sup>38</sup>

This small element helps demonstrate the conference's move toward a more distinguished and professional show. The overall quality of the show became more refined from the exhibitors' displays to the quality of the catalog – the show looked and was more polished by the late 90s, and the number of clients, designers, and guests had dramatically grown. By 1999, the conference had grown beyond a gathering place for craftsmen to a higher, more professional level. Awards were given through a blind jury process, seminars grew into an accredited education program, the volunteer-based staff was replaced with paid professionals, and in every way the show was growing in scale and legitimacy.

In addition to growing the conference in the number of participants and clients, Marx also helped push it to new heights by establishing the Western Design Institute. The Western Design Institute was created “to carry out the mission established by the conference at its inception. The Institute will provide architects, interior designers, collectors, and crafts people with gratifying educational opportunities.”<sup>39</sup> Accredited through the American Institute of Architects and the American Society of Interior Designers, the Western Design Institute was a significant development for the conference.<sup>40</sup> Now, not only could designers come to see what the best western builders and designers were displaying, those who attended the world-class seminars could use those credits to further their education and their own accreditation.

Whether simply through antidotal information, the amount of transactions that took place, or the number of participants and guests coming to the conference, the late 1990s to early 2000s would be described as the show's high-water mark.<sup>41</sup> Multiple tragic and significant events in the following years, coupled with circumstances within and outside the show's control, helped to cement these years as the best of the Western Design Conference.

### **Turbulent Times: Western Design Conference is Sold and Moved**

Despite the growing success of the show, it was not, nor was it originally intended to be, an overly profitable venture. In most years, the show covered its costs and would yield a marginal return.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately the financial structure of the show was setup where the board members had to personally back the annual note the conference held with its bank. This put a lot of pressure not only on the staff, but also on those board members, as they would be personally responsible for any shortfalls. As the show continued to grow, so did its bottom line, which over the years only further increased their personal risk. The board members also had to find a replacement for Marx who tendered her resignation, after the 2001 show.

Though the departure was on good terms, it was a significant loss. Marx had been a huge driver of the show. She had pushed the show to a higher level of professionalism and reached a much broader market than the early shows. Further, the 2001 show, which was on pace to be one of the best conferences to-date, took place only a week after 9/11, and consequently had lackluster performance. All of these factors came to a head in 2002 when, for the first time, the show took a financial loss, leaving the board members responsible for the shortfall. Having to make the decision

By

# WESTERN HANDS

whether to write personal checks to creditors or look for another viable option, the board sold the show in 2003 to Western Interiors and Design.

As Western Interiors and Design was preparing for the show in May of '03, the conference and the colony of Cody area craftsmen suffered a tragic loss when its founder, J. Mike Patrick, lost his life in a car accident.

Mike's passing signaled the closing of a significant chapter in western design and Cody's history. Different than many of the craftsmen in this industry, Patrick had the vision and commitment to bring together a group who until then worked mostly in isolation. In the January 2004 article in Log Home Design, Marx stated, "Mike was very much the guiding light of the conference. He had a vision and was very intense about following it."<sup>43</sup>

On the heels of the sale of the show and Marx's departure in 2001, the loss of its Patrick would prove to be too much for the conference to bear. The show would operate for several more years under the ownership of Western Interiors and Design, but despite a growth in participation (2005 had 110 exhibitors) the show did not thrive in its new incarnation.

Carol Decker, the founder and CEO of Western Interiors and Design, stated, "The goal is to encourage the continuation of creativity and beautifully crafted work. We want to nourish and support these artists and craftspeople."<sup>44</sup> Western Interiors aim was to make the show profitable and thus sustainable. In 2003, for the first time in its 11-year history, the Western Design Conference became a for-profit venture.

While Western Interiors intention may have been to follow the framework set forth by Patrick and the early boards – the belief that bringing artisans together to share ideas and philosophies benefits all – the for-profit motivation was at odds with those earlier sentiments, and the show began to take on much more of a "trade-show" feel. This eventually tarnished what had been a gathering place for the craftsmen and artisans, and the show attendance and profitability began to fall off. In 2006, Western Interiors looked for suitors for the show. Initially, Decker sought out the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, as a possible buyer for the show, but, after negotiations over the pricing fell through, the museum was not interested in the purchase of the show.<sup>45</sup>

In 2007, Western Interiors did find a buyer when Powder Mountain Press and Jackson Hole News and Guide partnered to purchase the show. Once the ink was dry, the new owners moved it to its current location in Jackson, Wyoming. The sale and move of the conference left Cody area craftsmen and all of those who had travelled to participate with a void. Cody had become synonymous with western design, and the Western Design Conference had become not just a place to meet prospective clients or show ones latest and best pieces. It had become a gathering place for friends who shared a common bond. Many exhibitors had been coming to Cody for nearly a decade or more. While many craftsmen would follow the show and participate in Jackson, a core group would come together for what would become a renaissance of the old ideas in a new setting.

## **Cody High Style – A New Beginning at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center**

Seeking to find a fresh start, but using the philosophies of the original Western Design Conference, the Cody craftsmen came together to form the Cody Western Artisans Guild in 2007. The original guild had twenty-six members, representing Cody's finest craftsmen: Jim Anderson, Scott Armstrong, Maurice Brown, John Cash, Brice & Yazmihl Corman, Jimmy Covert, Lynda Covert, Steve Estes, Bill Feeley, John Gallis, Tim Goodwin, Mike Hemry, Bert & Judy Hopple, Tim & Tiffany Lozier, Ernie Lytle, Tom McCoy, Doug Nordberg, Joe Paisley, Wally Reber, Lester Santos, Fly Brod, Keith & Lisa Seidel, Ron & Jean Shanor, Matt Sheridan, Ken Siggins, and Marc Taggart.

These craftsmen and women, led by co-chairs, Jimmy Covert and Wally Reber, created the idea for Cody High Style. With ethics similar to the early Western Design Conferences, Cody High Style's

By

# WESTERN HANDS

mission was to educate, to present economic opportunities, and to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas which perpetuate the best traditions of Western decorative Arts.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike the early conferences which took place at the Cody Auditorium – whose decorum and lighting was not the highest caliber – Cody High Style was sponsored by and held at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. To many of the craftsmen who had participated in the Western Design Conferences, the move was a perfect match. The museum held the Molesworth exhibition in '89 and the largest collection of Molesworth furniture, housed the permanent collection of Switchback Award winners, and was a world-class western museum.<sup>47</sup> What better forum to hold a show with the premier western designers and craftsmen?

In 2007, the Cody Western Artisans Guild and Buffalo Bill Historical Center held the first Cody High Style. The show was much smaller than the recent conferences. There were fifty-nine exhibitors in the first High Style show. In the 2005 and 2006 conferences, there were one hundred ten and ninety-two exhibitors, respectively. The number of awards dramatically reduced from as high as twenty-five in 2004 to nine in the first High Style show. The show was also designated to be a retrospective for six artisans who had been long time participants of the Cody shows. All of these elements - the gallery-style lighting, higher quality venue, smaller scale, and the artisans - gave the new Cody High Style not only a more intimate feel, but a level above. Anne Beard, a fabric artisan, who participated in the first Western Design Conference and won numerous awards, said of the first Cody High Style, "It was exciting again. The first few Cody High Style shows were as exciting as the first Western Design Conferences."<sup>48</sup>

As is the saying with the success of a restaurant, "location, location, location" - the success of Cody High Style was driven in large part by being at the museum, and the director at the time, Bob Shimp, guaranteed the craftsmen three years of support. So the artisans, both from Cody and those who had travelled for many years to come to the shows, had a new home. With the combined effort and desire of the Cody Western Artisans Guild, the numerous volunteers who dedicated their time, including former director, K.T. Roes, and the staff at the museum, notably, Jill Osiecki Gleich, - who many craftsmen have said did a great job as coordinator - Cody High Style was a rousing success.

## **A Recession, Change of Venue, and the End of Cody High Style**

On the heels of the '07 show, Cody High Style was set to be the premier destination for western design and fashion. However, couture fashion and finely crafted studio furniture would take a back seat to national economic circumstances. The recession that began on a similar timeline as Cody High Style would plague the attendance numbers of both exhibitors and prospective clients. This overall decline in numbers and a perceived shortage of gallery space was enough for the museum to let its sponsorship lapse in 2011.

Recognizing the importance of the show, the Cody Country Chamber of Commerce made the decision to underwrite the show on a three-year commitment. The show was held at the museum in 2012, and then moved back to the Cody Auditorium in 2013.

Unfortunately, to many participants the move back to the auditorium was a serious letdown, particularly for those who had only been active in the Cody High Style shows at the museum. According to Anne Beard, "We got spoiled by being at the museum."<sup>49</sup> The lighting at the museum was so much better than at the auditorium, but even more so was the gravitas of the museum itself. To be able to say that your piece was on display at one of the finest western museums in the world was very significant to many craftsmen.

Several artisans did not follow the show back to the auditorium in '13 and fewer still in '14. Though Osiecki made a valiant effort, the show had lost much of its luster after the move. The writing may have been on the wall, but this further hurt the show and may have been the straw that

# By WESTERN HANDS

broke the camel's back.

One point that should not be understated for the Western Design Conference and for Cody High Style is that in planning events during the same week as the art show and Patron's Ball, they, along with the events at the museum, made it very difficult to quantify the financial benefits to the community for each event separately. With the "three-legged stool" of the Rendezvous Royale all working together everyone benefits, but if one falters, as was the case with Cody High Style, the decision to save it became hard to justify for the Chamber. As a consequence, after the 2014 show, the Chamber announced it would not financially support the show in 2015.

## **Cody, Wyoming and the Future of Western Furniture and Design**

Like many design movements, western style has and will have its peaks and valleys. However, after over 100 years, this movement is more than a trend. Western design represents the authenticity of functional art. It speaks to a sense of place by using elements reminiscent of location and evocative of natural and rustic beauty. Those artisans who create these unique pieces represent the West in the truest sense of its ethics, its purity, and its ability to capture our imagination.

Cody has been at the core of this movement since the beginning. As venerable craftsmen, John Gallis, said, "I thought and still believe, Cody was the furniture capital of the West."<sup>50</sup> There is history worth preserving, talent worth defending, and a future worth building.

With this in mind, preserving the legacy of western design for future generations to enjoy is the goal of the *By Western Hands* Design Center, located in Cody, Wyoming. To accomplish this goal, The Design Center plan includes a stand-alone structure with a gallery, museum and education space to be used for training. The Design Center will be dedicated to promoting Western functional art and design, creating a new generation of craftsmen and artists in the Western tradition.

It will be up to the craftsmen, and those who believe and support them to decide how they will forge ahead.

The time is now.

## Endnotes & Acknowledgments

i Reber, Wally. *Western Design Conference Sourcebook*. Western Interiors and Design. 2004, p135-36

ii Ibid.

By

# WESTERN HANDS

- iii Patrick, J. Mike. *Western Design Conference*. Cody, WY: Master Artisans Guild. 1993, p4
- iv Spotted Horse Studio & Stageline Furniture. *Western Design Conference Sourcebook*. Billings, MT: Western Design Institute. 2003, p64-65
- v Reber, Wally. *Western Design Conference Sourcebook*. 2004, p136
- vi Winchell, Terry. *Molesworth, The Pioneer of Western Design*. Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith. 2005, p4-5
- vii Winchell. p9
- viii Clayton, Marie. *Frank Lloyd Wright Field Guide*. Running Press. 2002, p97-102
- ix Winchell. p5-10
- x Ibid., p10
- xi Ibid., p5-10
- xii Ibid., p17
- xiii Ibid., p43-50
- xiv Ibid., P93-103
- xv Ibid.
- xvi Ibid.
- xvii Reber, Wally & Frees, Paul. *Furnishings from Thomas Molesworth's "Old Lodge" for Greorge Sumers, circa 1935*. New York, NY: Christie's. 1995, p16-17
- xviii Brown, Patricia Leigh. *How the West Was Done*. New York Times - Home & Garden. 5 April 1990
- xix Siggins, Ken. *Western Design Conference*. Cody, WY: Master Artisans Guild. 1993, p48
- xx Siggins, Ken. Phone interview with author. 9 Apr 2015
- xxi Siggins, Ken. Interview with author. 17 Nov 2014
- xxii Siggins, Ken. *Western Design Conference*. 1993, p48
- xxiii Siggins, Ken. *Cody High Style Catalog*. Cody, WY: Buffalo Bill Historical Center. 2007, p18
- xxiv Siggins, Ken. *Western Design Conference*. 1993, p48
- xxv Siggins, Ken. Interview with author. 12 Dec 2014
- xxvi Siggins, Ken. *Cody High Style Catalog*. 2007, p18
- xxvii Siggins, Ken. Interview with author. 12 Dec 2014

By

# WESTERN HANDS

- xxviii Reber, Wally. Interview with author. 19 Mar 2015
- xxix Reber, Wally. Interview with author. 6 Apr 2015
- xxx Reber, Wally. Interview with author. 19 Mar 2015
- xxxi Raynolds, Chase. *Old Masters of the West*. Castine, ME: Country Roads Press. 1992, p103-109
- xxxii Ibid.
- xxxiii Livingston, Virginia. Interview with author. 8 Dec 2014
- xxxiv Raynolds, Chase. *Old Masters of the West*. p103-109
- xxxv Livingston, Virginia. Interview with author. 6 Apr 2015
- xxxvi Scholten, Monte. *Western Design Conference*. Cody, WY: Master Artisans Guild. 1993, p3
- xxxvii Marx, Thea. *Western Design Conference Sourcebook*. Billings, MT: Western Design Institute. 2003, p24
- xxxviii Marx, Thea. *Western Design Conference*. Gillette, WY: 1997, p3
- xxxix Marx, Thea. *Western Design Conference*. 1998, p2
- xl Uhlenbrauck, Jay. *Best of the West, Wild West meets high style at the Western Design Conference*. Log Home Designs. Jan 2004, p160
- xli Marx, Thea. Interview with author. 7 Apr 2015
- xlii Ibid.
- xliii Uhlenbrauck, Jay. *Best of the West, Wild West meets high style at the Western Design Conference*. p160
- xliv Ibid.
- xlv Prevost, Ruffin. *BBHC has eyes on design conference*. Billings Gazette. 18 Feb 2006
- xlvi Gleich, Jill Osiecki. *Cody High Style Catalog*. Cody, WY: Buffalo Bill Historical Center. 2007, p77 <sup>xlvii</sup>
- Reber, Wally. Interview with author. 6 Apr 2015
- xlviii Beard, Anne. Phone interview with author. 17 Mar 2015
- xlix Ibid.
- i Gallis, John. Interview with author. 11 Dec 2014

By

**WESTERN  
HANDS**