



BEAUTY OF BURL

John Koletic's passion is designing and making custom furniture from burl and other exotic and local wood species. His heirloom quality furniture designs are made to stand the test of time.

By Dennis McCloskey

Photos by Miguel Hortiguela

A burl can range in size from a tennis ball to a small car and results from a tree undergoing some form of environmental stress.

Irish philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke wrote in 1756 that beauty in distress is the most affecting beauty.

He was writing about the origin of ideas of the sublime and beautiful, and the chances are pretty good that he was not thinking of burl wood when he penned the quote 253 years ago. But, if beauty is truth and truth beauty, truth be told that some of the most beautiful wood furniture being made today is created from a round tree growth in which the grain has grown in a deformed manner. A burl, which can range in size from a tennis ball to the size of a small car, results from a tree undergoing some form of environmental stress or damage. This is often caused by either a fungal attack or an attack by insects.

Burl wood is highly prized by artists because of its unique shapes and swirled patterns. Some of the best examples of elegant furniture being made from bark-covered burl can be found in the home, workshop and studio of John Koletic, an innovative craftsman in Campbellville, Ontario, a village located west of Toronto on the Niagara Escarpment.

A tour of his green board-and-batten, 4,000-square-foot workshop that sits adjacent to his home on 1.5 acres, is testament to the skills of this unique wood craftsman. Upstairs there's an eight-foot-long bubinga and walnut table, made from a single board of the tropical hardwood from Central and West Africa with a stunning red-brown finish. Nearby is a hope chest made from sapele wood, native to tropical Africa and similar

Beauty of Burl

to mahogany. The commissioned chest, which sells for \$6,500, has an engineered slow closing top and pull-down drawers for photos or documents. In the downstairs workshop, amid his many tools - including band and tables saws, hand planers, and chisels for fine joiners - is an \$18,000 armoire that is two days from completion after 250 hours of meticulous labour. Unique to this piece is how the bark edge, or wane edge, fits seamlessly when the doors close and meet.

Valuable pieces of burl and other types of wood are stored throughout, including walnut, yellow cedar and box elder - also known as Manitoba Maple Bud - which he describes as a 'nuisance' tree and which came from Koletic's back yard. He also utilizes the kind of burlled elm and walnut that is

used in the dashboards of some luxury vehicles. In the garage attached to the home where he lives with his wife, Nancy, and two young daughters, Koletic stores a number of long slabs of rare wood cut from the same burl for which he paid \$11,000. It sits next to his magnetic red 1999 C5 Corvette that he likes to drive along country roads looking for colours and trees that will capture his unique creative senses.

Inside the home, and the focal point of an open-concept living room, is a magnificent, eye-catching, burlled redwood root coffee table made from a 1,500-year-old redwood tree. Koletic calls these trees the "gems of the forest." The coffee table, which measures 6.5 feet in length, 42 inches in width, and is three inches thick, retails for \$9,000. He made the kitchen cabinets for his home from



Koletic's downstairs workshop includes band and table saws, hand planers and chisels and an armoire that is days from completion after 250 hours of meticulous labour.

Beauty of **Burl**



A cigar humidor crafted from burl and Fiddleback Maple framed by solid ebony.



A burl Madrone nut bowl nestled into an African Blackwood root base.

bird's eye maple which he describes as "a freak of nature." The highly sought-after wood has a distinctive pattern that resembles tiny, swirling eyes disrupting the smooth lines of grain.

John Koletic, 42, was born and raised in Southern Ontario, and he credits his appreciation



This coffee table features African Shedua slats notched into a solid pine block with smoked glass centre panels.

for precision and craftsmanship from his now-retired father, originally from Croatia, who worked as a precision sheet metal master mechanic. "My hand skills coordination and my appreciation for quality work came from my father," says Koletic. "He taught me important values of pride of workmanship, and simple but equally important lessons like cleaning up after a job."

As a teenager Koletic loved working with wood and developed a keen interest in architectural drawings. He was accepted to study architecture at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Ryerson University) in Toronto but an opportunity arose to take a four-year apprenticeship with an aerospace firm in the city. "It was a fork in the road for me," he says. "Pay or get paid." He took the paid route and worked as a precision instrument technician in the aerospace industry, at one time working on the Canadarm that was used on the Space Shuttle.

Beauty of Burl

As he gained experience in working with precision instruments, in the early 1990s he combined his love of woodwork with fashioning precision watches. “Watchmaking was a natural progression of my training, and I was developing an expertise in burl wood at the same time, so my first product line was a range of unique clocks using burl wood,” he says. From that timely endeavour, he began to design and create bowls, candleholders, cigar humidors, and unique award plaques for large corporations.

His current passion is designing custom furniture such as dining room tables and coffee tables which he sells on commission to clients in Toronto’s Forest Hill and Yorkville areas and Muskoka. He made a dozen dining room tables recently, including one 14-foot table that was delivered to a home on Stony Lake near Peterborough. It brings to mind the Chinese proverb that ‘beauty can be feasted on’.

Koletic was influenced and inspired by George Nakashima, the eminent Japanese-American woodworker, master craftsman, and furniture maker who was one of the leading innovators of 20th century furniture design. The late designer, who died in 1990, created the Arlyn Table that fetched \$822,400 at auction. Koletic’s reverence for wood that’s left in its natural state is reflected in a statement by Nakashima who said: “A tree is one of the most intimate contacts you can have with nature; wood has a soul, and it speaks to those who would give second life to that tree through creative and artistically designed furniture.”

John Koletic, who works with one assistant who’s a woodworker and cabinet-maker, has been giving second life to burl trees from as far away as South Africa, Australia, and Europe. Some of the wood he finds on his own property – a victim of Dutch elm disease. Most large burls grow beneath the ground, attached to the roots as a type of malignancy that is usually not discovered until the tree dies or falls over, sometimes lying on the ground for centuries after a tree has been harvested or fallen. Koletic likes to utilize, without waste, nature’s gifts. He uses a variety of salvaged burl such as buckeye from California, black poplar, walnut, maple, and other exotic wood like rosewood. Some of the burls he obtains are from redwoods (which are sometimes called ‘diamonds’ because they are extremely rot-resistant) from Port McNeill, B.C. where the world’s largest burls can be found. He buys the wood either in cut slabs or whole burls. He takes it to a local saw mill where it’s cleaned, sliced, seasoned, and dried. “It takes one year per inch of thickness to air dry,” he says. “Time is of the essence. You can’t hurry mother nature.” Koletic says air drying the wood



Koletic in his garage, where he stores a number of long slabs of rare wood cut from a burl for which he paid \$11,000.

results in more stable, beautiful and brilliant colours versus kiln-dried wood. When he’s ready to work with the wood, he’ll hand-finish with a natural oil finish like tung oil and lacquer to give the wood a sense of warmth.

Koletic’s heirloom quality furniture designs feature precise dovetail joinery and silky smooth finishes. The majority of his work is commissioned pieces. He works closely with his clients, providing samples of colour, texture, and doing a ‘sketch-up’ (a 3-D design done on a computer), so the customer sees the furniture piece in proportion and colour. “It eliminates surprises,” the artist says with a smile.

Koletic, who says he designs “warm, inviting, organic, and comfortable furniture that will stand the test of time”, asks, rhetorically, why his work would not last 600 years or longer. Since he utilizes such solid, time-tested wood and little or no metal fasteners and instead relies on locking joints and wooded pinned joints, there is little reason to doubt that his work will endure over time. He doesn’t refer to his creations as “rustic” but rather “refined natural” and he considers his forte and trademark as retaining the natural edge in all of his pieces.

When asked to define his future goals in his craft, Koletic says he would like to be as creative as possible without being limited by a budget yet retain the elegance, complexity, appeal, and aesthetics of his current work. “That’s when I’ll take my work to the next level – a level that will continue to challenge me even further,” he says.

Sounds like something George Nakashima might say. More information, see page 91 H&C