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FEATURED ARTIST: THOME GEORGE

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SWEET TREES: THOME GEORGE

Photos by Sol Gutierrez, feature article by Marcy Stamper

It's probably safe to say that most people, when they need furniture but have little money to spend, buy a ready-made piece, go to a used-furniture store for something vaguely antique, or assemble pre-cut pieces of veneered particle board into a bookcase or table.

Not Thome George. About 20 years ago, when he was living outside Tonasket and needed something to sit on, he looked around at the woods surrounding his house and settled on a grove of birch, where he cut some branches and hauled them back home. "I just started experimenting with shapes," he said. "I had a friend who did bentwood willow furniture, I had studied some classical architecture, and I had an awareness of form."

George built two chairs with the organic lines of the branches describing tapered Vs on the backs. While he

recalls struggling to come up with a rudimentary form the chairs held up so well that he still uses them today as outdoor furniture.

Since then, George's output has become considerably more elaborate and sophisticated, with high-backed chairs featuring elegant curves and tables marked by a refined sense of balance and decoration. He has won awards for woodworking craftsmanship for a corner table and been featured in two books on rustic furniture and design. This year his pedestal table took the Exhibitors' Choice award at the Cody High Style show in Wyoming.

George went from building his own furniture to making pieces for his family and selling at Christmas bazaars before deciding to try his luck at a craft show in Montana that unfortunately fell through at the last minute. In Montana with a truckload of furniture,

George began making the rounds, ultimately finding a receptive curator at a gallery in Kalispell. "They bought six pieces—it was the first time someone who was not related to me had bought any of my work," he said.

The gallery owner's instincts were right on and she had sold all George's work by the time he got back home to Washington. She steered him to the juried Cody exhibition, a well-respected showcase of Western arts and crafts, where he sold everything he brought and went home with orders to fill. George's experimental furniture project had blossomed into Sweet Tree Designs.

Participating in the show was key in the development of his art, but in terms of technique and creativity, said George. "Getting ready for the Cody show each year made me elevate what I was doing, because I was stunned by the quality of the work there," he said.

As a furniture maker, George has an educational background that is helpful but peripheral. "Geometry was the only math I did well in," he said. "I can see things; I can see dimensions easily." He studied architecture, but his main focus at college was on community planning and poetry—in some way, the perfect foundation for designing and building handmade furniture from trees he gathers himself.

George works almost exclusively in water birch, which he loves for its deep ochre color. "I use birch because it's expressive, graceful,

unusual," he said. "I recognize classic lines in trees—things like arches and claw feet." He may incorporate other woods, such as chokecherry or vine maple, to provide some color contrast.

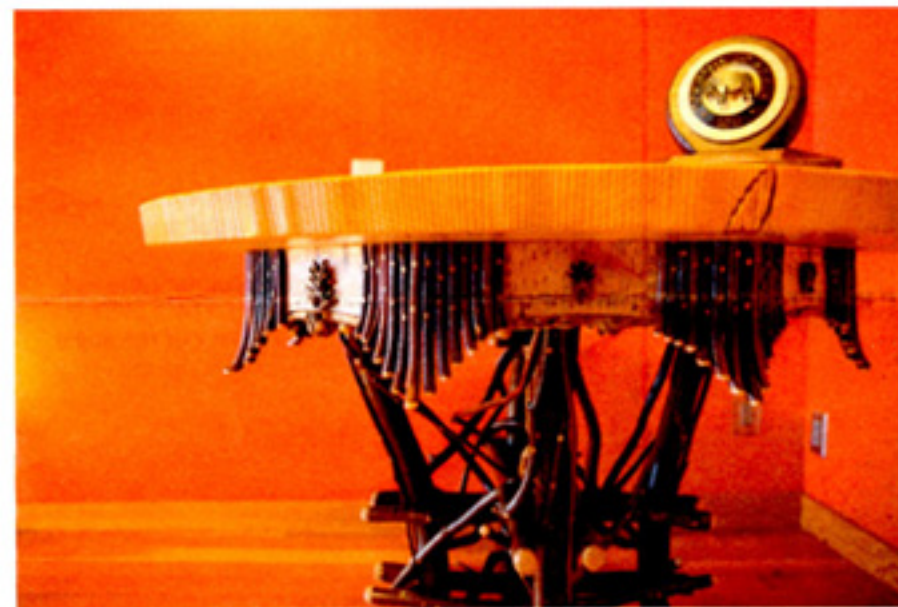
Water birch also grows plentifully here, particularly in draws and wet areas in the Okanogan Highlands, where George is able to harvest virtually all his materials on private land. He cuts the trees when they are green and must allow them to dry for several months before he can use them in a piece of furniture.

George said the process is ecologically friendly, because water birch will regrow from its large root mass. Cutting back wood to stimulate new growth is called coppicing. "It's like a hydra," he said. "You cut it and it doubles."

George cuts the tree at the base, clipping off small twigs but keeping the branches intact. "I try to leave as much of nature in place as possible," he said. "That's what attracts people—it's wild. Well, it's obviously been tamed, but I leave as much on as I possibly can, from harvesting till building."

As opposed to the more familiar bent-willow furniture, which relies on the flexibility of soft willow branches, George's furniture requires hardwood. There are only a few hardwoods native to this area, primarily water birch, rock maple, and saskatoon (serviceberry).

George uses other woods for some pieces, such as the intricately branching tops of apple trees that become his "walking tables." The wispy tree tops form the main part of the table base and George adds extra support as needed for stability. He even built some of these deceptively delicate tables as pedestals for a bronze sculpture collection.



Center of Attention, above, won Cody High Style's 2011 Exhibitor's Choice award.

Almost all of George's work, from harvesting to building, is done with basic hand tools. Scouring the woods with a handsaw and pruning shears, George bundles

whole trees and branches to bring back to his shop. He maintains a mental shopping list of what he needs—the claw-like feet he finds below ground, the sucker whips that become seat slats, and trunks with delicate branches and unusual shapes that are the inspiration for new pieces.

Branches both angular and lacy; sticks and twigs in all sizes; and burls, the intriguing bulbous forms that protrude from a tree, await their next incarnation in a huge shed that once provided cold storage for potatoes. "I get ahead of myself in collecting—I collect a lot of things just because I like them," said George. "I have more than I need—it's not greed, but possibility."

Harvesting the wood is the most enjoyable part of the work, said George. "It's the discovery—finding something unusual, or finding graceful branches that match or have symmetry."

Often George finds most of what he needs in a single trip, but it can take years to locate all the necessary components for a design. One pedestal table has three curved legs that he found in the same cutting, but the fourth eluded him for two years.

One of George's most popular items is something he calls the "comfort chair," a high-backed chair with ample armrests. "People are surprised by how comfortable it is," he said. "Most twig furniture is not that comfortable—either there is a twig poking you in the back or the angle is too straight," he said. In George's chair, both the back and seat have sticks placed less than one inch apart, too close for the body to perceive the individual elements. Although the chair follows an established design, George estimates that it still takes 60 hours to harvest the materials and build each one.

George finishes the sticks with beveled or sanded ends so they become part of the design. The bronze heads of the flexible wooden-boat nails he uses accent the



The Shepard's Chair is based on a bishop's chair and was started as a tribute to George's father.

contours of a table or chair. He also applies a varnish that seals and protects the bark, preventing it from oxidizing and turning grey.

George also uses twigs and branches to ornament cabinetry and interiors. Shapely sticks embellish the surfaces of doors and a peeled branch may form a twisting banister and newel post. "It's free-form but very functional," he said.

He applies various architectural principles in his work. A recent project—probably George's most ambitious and most personal—is based on a bishop's chair, a throne for a bishop flanked by seats for two canons, who assist the prelate. George started the chair as a tribute to his father, an Episcopalian priest who later became a canon, shortly before his father died.

George designed the chair around an unusual stick he found in Tonasket ("the closest thing to a cross I can imagine in nature") and added curved armrests, imposing vertical supports, and 200 small branches for seat slats, using materials he had been saving for as long as 10 years.

Although he likes to find art in branches and twigs, George appreciates the fact that furniture remains the most functional of all crafts. Textiles, pottery, and glass can exist in a purely decorative realm, he said. "A chair must be comfortable and sittable. A table must be flat and be able to hold something."

Still, George has recently begun to experiment with decorative pieces himself. "I've grown bored with

conventional four-legged things, so I tried to push out from that," he said. "Lately, I'm into defying conventions."

He finds that water birch lends itself to sculpture. His favorite wood inspired a series of twig assemblages with what he describes as "graceful, bizarre shapes." He thinks of them as air sculptures, with twigs dangling from fishing lures so that they spin gently.

One sculpture, which he calls "The Mother of All Sticks," was created from a single stick he found 15 years ago, but most are assemblages of multiple twigs and branches. "I'll find sticks that just belong together," he said. "I come home with wood that refuses to be part of furniture."

George teaches furniture building and woodworking to adults and children. "It's a way to pass on the love of natural materials. The kids realize that what's on the ground or in the forest is valuable as art," he said. "They come back excited by what they find, even just along their driveway."

"It's all really fun—that's why I continue," he said. "It's a really incredible experience to build this stuff. If in the end it's my legacy, nobody's going to remember how much money I made. The question is, did I move the style forward?"

George's sculptural assemblages and pieces of furniture are an exhibit at The Studio in Twisp and are placed throughout the valley. George's piece "Center of Attention" is featured in the current issue of *Western Art & Architecture*.



George's workshop showcases his first two chairs hung from the ceiling.