



A Heart for History

Jim Probst's contemporary Mission-style furniture designs are in fine form.

BY NANCY A. RUHLING



top

Symmetry is the key design element of the Dora sideboard, whose bird's-eye maple doors and drawers are defined by cherry frames. A curved skirt lightens the look.

FOR JIM PROBST, THE DESIGN FOR A PIECE OF FURNITURE BEGINS WITH A FORM. IN HIS latest collection, Meander, it starts with a simple S curve, a decorative device that in his hands is so slight and subtle that unless you know it's there you might miss it.

"I come up with a form I find pleasing and try to turn it into something functional," he says, adding that sometimes his best ideas come from playing with and putting together scrap wood in his Hamlin workshop in West Virginia's Appalachian Mountains.

"The idea for Meander started with a mahogany and Blenko glass sculpture I made titled 'Blue Highway.'" It is fitting that he used the sculpture as a starting point, because he views his work as art. "I put so much thought into the elements of design," he says, "but everything I make is fully functional."

Sentimental Journey

When Probst took up furniture making more than two decades ago, he was working with wood, but in another form. A carpenter by trade, he needed furniture for his own house and wanted something to tide him over financially in the slow season.

His first collection, Otto, was inspired by the Mission style that was popular when his German-born grandfather, for whom the line is named, came to America. The collection, which Probst calls "contemporary Mission style," combines the best of Gustav Stickley, Frank Lloyd Wright, Greene & Greene, the Shakers and contemporary cabinetmaker James Krenov.

"I'm a fairly sentimental person, and Otto mirrors the attributes of my grandfather," Probst says. "He was strong and courageous, so I use tight-grained wood, such as cherry, walnut and maple, to create pieces that build upon the past to make furniture that will have its own place in history."

Dora, the companion collection, was named after Probst's grandmother, who came to America from Holland at age 11. This time, Probst was inspired by a line drawing of



above

The Dora console table, made of cherry and bird's-eye maple, shows that less really is more: The design hinges on the excellent use of negative space to make a statement.



right

The Dora bed, which is available in full, queen and king sizes, has an Asian flair, notably in its negative-space footboard.



a Japanese Torii gate. "It was fitting because my grandmother has passed on, and the gate is a symbol for leaving the physical world and entering the spiritual," he says. "I fell in love with its form and proportions, and applied them to a cabinet I was working on." Thus, Dora has an ancient Asian flair that is exhibited exuberantly.

"Dora is distinguished by its curved vertical members, its top-shape technique, where the centers are thicker than the ends and the way all the forms are put together," Probst says. The mirror of the Dora dressing table, for instance, is a catching concave shape that looks like a woman's silhouette, and one of the beds uses negative space at the headboard and footboard to convey a Japanese feel.

Table of Elements

With Meander, Probst has taken his design to the next level. The pieces are spare and primal, evoking contemporary images of ancient Asia.

"My quest, with all my furniture, is to break things down to their elements," he says. "I see a table, for instance, as a top and something to hold the top up. And it has to be interesting and attractive to catch people's eye."

Probst is experimenting with Meander and is thinking of adding glass elements to the pieces just as he did with "Blue Highway."

"If I use glass, I have to find a way to illuminate it," he says.

Probst's signed, handcrafted pieces feature traditional mortise and tenon, and dovetail construction. Prices start at \$250 for a plant stand and top out at about \$8,400 for a hutch. Many pieces are available for \$1,000 to \$1,500.

Whether he's making a Dora chair, an Otto lamp table or a Meander console table, Probst places a priority on wood selection. He says, "I'll dig through several hundred feet of wood just to find the right piece for the bottom rail of case pieces."

The attention he pays to each piece literally is reflected in the grain and the glow of the wood. Probst wants everyone who owns his furniture to discover something new and exciting about it every day.

"I draw something on a piece of paper and then see the piece in 3-D when it's done," he says. "Turning nothing into something beautiful—that's what I live for."

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JIM PROBST



top

The two-piece Dora hutch, in Probst's signature cherry and bird's-eye maple, illustrates the unique balance that defines the collection. The top piece, whose lightness is emphasized by its interior illumination and glass panels, takes some of the weight off the bottom piece that is defined by its symmetrical drawer arrangement.

ON A MISSION FOR MORE

Jim Probst's furniture is available through his woodshop in Hamlin, West Virginia, and online. His shop is open to the public by appointment. For more information, go to Probst Furniture Makers at probstfurniture.com.

Other retailers include:

- Fairhaven Furniture, New Haven, Connecticut. Visit fairhaven-furniture.com.
- Sawbridge Studios, Chicago, Illinois. Visit sawbridge.com.
- Tamarack Conference Center in Beckley, West Virginia. Visit tamarackwv.com.
- Grovewood Gallery, Asheville, North Carolina. Visit grovewood.com.