

Upholstered 'Adelaide' chair from Juicy & Co.



Burled English oak buffet by S. L. Natof

AGAINST THE GRAIN

FIVE CUSTOM FURNITURE DESIGNERS PROVIDE THE PERFECT SOLUTION FOR PICKY AFICIONADOS BY AMALIE DRURY

When in the market for furniture, it's possible to never come across that long-envisioned perfect piece. If, after countless weekends scouring showrooms the city over, your treasured china still sits in boxes, yearning for a cabinet to do it justice, only one solution exists: a custom-made piece. Thankfully, Chicago does not lack for options when it comes to commissioning custom pieces. There are many design pros offering the service to various degrees, whether it involves starting from scratch or simply altering an existing piece to suit a customer's needs. Here are five of the best.

JUICY & CO.

Thanks to her background as an interior designer, Jessie Davidson was able to detect a gap in the furniture market for the kind of beautiful, comfortable, upholstered pieces that many of her clients desired for their homes. With that in mind, she opened her Lake Forest showroom, Juicy & Co., two years ago. Most of Davidson's design styles are grounded in tradition, with much use of dark wood, gracefully curving legs and scalloped edges on tapestry-like floral fabrics. Her current line of upholstered pieces includes chairs, a chaise lounge, an ottoman and sofas, most of which seem ideally suited for use in the bedroom or other small-scale spaces. Each order is custom-built to the client's specifications.

"Many people don't realize that a piece of upholstered furniture is supposed to fit them," says Davidson. "You should be able to sit *into* a chair or sofa, not on it." Accordingly, seat heights and depths are adjusted to suit clients. Many orders are upholstered in Busatti textiles, a line of luxurious cottons and linens woven on shuttle looms in the Tuscan village of Anghiari (Juicy & Co. has the exclusive rights to use these textiles in Chicago). Others are covered in the customer's own fabrics and trim, but no matter what you choose, all of Davidson's furniture frame and upholstery work is done locally. Juicy & Co., 190 E. Westminster, Lake Forest, 847.482.1466. www.juicyandco.com

MAXINE SNIDER INC.

Early in her career, Maxine Snider was employed as an interior designer for the architecture firm Minoru Yamasaki and Associates, architects of the World Trade Center. "Yama taught me that it's OK to obsess over a detail until you feel it's right," she remembers. "Since then, I've allowed myself that luxury without apology." It's a devotion to perfection that pervades her work to this day, even

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though interior design is no longer her focus. Snider started her own firm in 1979, but over the years, she says, her interests have shifted from the environment to the sculptural object. Her first furniture collection, 'The Paris Series,' was inspired by the Scottish architect Robert Adam and 20th century French designers Jean Prouve and Andre Grouet, as well as what she calls "the exquisite modesty and simplicity of the Shakers."

"A great part of my thinking comes in the form of restraint and selection," Snider says. "I ask myself, 'What can I leave out and still have a powerful design?'" Her philosophy has worked thus far, in 1999, her 'Paris Side Table' received the Distinguished Furniture Award from the Chicago Athenaeum's Museum of Architecture and Design, and her 'Paris Writing Table' was honored by *House Beautiful* magazine.

"I love hearing from clients about their needs," says Snider. "Sometimes, if a custom piece proves especially successful, it goes into the line." Her top three selling pieces, the Collector's Table, the Paris Writing Table and the Grande Salon Table, have inspired a variety of custom adaptations. For instance, one customer requested that the Grande Salon Table be redesigned as a buffet.

Snider insists that the quality behind her pieces is extraordinary, citing custom hardware and a hand-rubbed surface that is all but gone in the industry. "In my mind, the quality of a piece is part of the essence of the design and inseparable from it," she explains. *Maxine Snider Inc., 116 W. Illinois St., 312.527.4170.*

S. L. NATOF

Yes, his great-grandfather was Frank Lloyd Wright, and no, that's not the reason his work sells. For 14 years, S. Lloyd Natof has been producing custom wood pieces out of his small West Loop woodshop, and he never lacks for business. Focusing mainly on cases and tables, Natof has his reasons for preferring to use veneer (very thinly sliced wood), despite how difficult it can be to work with.

"A lot of the vulnerabilities people associate with veneer can be avoided with good construction techniques," he says. "The finest furniture has always been veneered... but I always warn clients that it's not good for a lot of abuse." For one thing, he explains, veneer provides a certain uniformity of grain and color not seen with regular lumber or board. Natof likes burl wood—utilized best with veneer—which comes from that part of a tree with bulbous growths that extend deep into the trunk, yielding a beautiful grain and figure, unlike any other part of the tree. Veneer also provides an unparalleled degree of design freedom, as it can be more easily manipulated, and seams (which often play a significant role in design) can be placed virtually anywhere.

Recently, Natof has worked with such unique woods as ebony, English brown oak burl, and curly white ash. His projects range from very large pieces to everyday items; he recently built a 35-foot ebony library, then moved on to a dining table with leaves that make it wider rather than longer.

"Customers always hear about me through word of mouth," says Natof, who relishes the personal value in a custom-made piece. "Often, it's just a matter of them not being able to find a piece the size or function of which they're looking for." For that kind of work, he says, his prices are very reasonable, since "all of

the middleman markups associated with a showroom are unnecessary." *S.L. Natof Furniture, 1217 W. Monroe St., 312.733.4205. www.slntof.com*

MCKINLEY DESIGN

McKinley Wells earned his design reputation in Chicago with distinctive stainless steel creations that popped up in restaurants and places of business across the city. But while stainless is still a key player in many of his pieces, Wells says, "I found that after a while, all of that metal started to seem a bit cold and industrial." He set out to broaden his horizons, and his year-old Wicker Park showroom, serving both residential and commercial clients, reflects as much.

Wells and his staff have compiled an extensive design resource library at the showroom, where customers can view samples of a vast selection of materials, including every type of steel and stainless steel, plus textiles, plate glass, laminates, woods and resins. About 90 percent of the work he does is custom design, Wells says, and many customers already have an idea of what they want. But the library is a great way for them to see many options at once, providing a wide range of choices. "Anyone who thinks at all about their surroundings really wants to tailor their furniture to their own lifestyle and feelings," says Wells. "You can't always achieve that by picking something up off of a showroom floor."

McKinley Design makes pieces from custom staircases and railings to sofas and complete living room sets, from fireplace surrounds to kitchens and bathrooms. "Stainless steel and glass shower panels are really hot right now," says Wells.

All pieces are made by Wells and his staff in Chicago, and Wells is adamant that he keeps an extremely tight rein on quality. As for his design style, he says, "People come here for something that is very clean and contemporary, with a slight quirk to it. For instance, we might do a classic chair set, but add shearing upholstery for an element of surprise." *McKinley Design, 1742 W. Division St., 773.252.7210.*

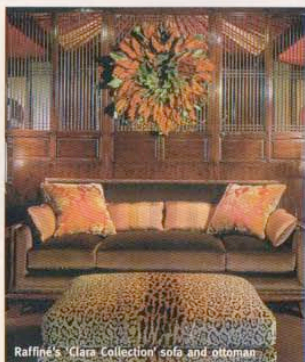
RAFFINE

The French word 'raffiné' is translated to English as 'refined.' When interior designer Suzanne Lovell set out to create a furniture collection almost two years ago, the name seemed perfect for the pieces she planned to create.

Already, Lovell's collection of upholstered chairs, sofas and ottomans, with names like 'Audrey,' 'Clara' and 'Greta,' have garnered praise for their gracefully fluid lines and couture-inspired detailing. Lovell's motivation for the collection actually came from the custom design she was already doing for her customers' homes through her service business, Suzanne Lovell, Inc. "I became enthused to create the line, which we now sell quietly on the Internet, but our major focus is still on unique pieces for our clientele."

As part of Raffiné's constant quest to create perfect furniture for each of their clients, Lovell says they are constantly studying how different species of wood can be cut, stained and applied to different surfaces in ways that will complement each interior's final balance of textures.

In the fall of 2003, Raffiné is debuting a fine textile line, which will be machine-woven from premium quality yarns from around the world. *Raffiné, 225 W. Ohio St., 312.670.5760. ■*



Raffiné's Clara Collection sofa and ottoman



Maxine Snider's 'Paris Lounge Chair'



Stainless steel at McKinley Design