

Artistic vs. Commissioned Creation

The design and production of furniture focuses on the goal of physically manifesting an actual structure representing the visions of original and unique conception or reproducing an existing exact form, in scale, or in hybrid form. Creating stems from a mental image within the mind of the artist; through their hands and their tools the piece takes form.

The creator of an original form, an artist working for and among only their own reality achieves a result portraying their vision. An artist who works only to please themselves, creating for the sake of creating is established in the true freedom of artwork.

Artists are often master craftsmen, imparting their knowledge, experience, and skills turning a vision into a physical form. A craftsman may work from a plan, may work from a sketch, may work from a photo, may work from the memory of something they once saw in a museum. Craftsmen may work from their own mind, never establishing their creation anywhere until its final form is finished. Sometimes the artist doesn't know until it's done what it will be.

When the creation miraculously appears, seemingly without the invasion of even your own doing, leaving you as the artist wondering exactly who did this or how do the result emerge, this is essence of creativity. That's the most fun, the most fulfilling aspect of the process.

Counter to the fulfilling qualities is the frustration that comes when the result is a failure, or the expected return somehow doesn't reflect in what is deemed complete or cast aside as trash. Judgment of success or failure of true creativity falls solely to the creator of the form. In our case as carvers and furniture makers, the result is often what we deem "very expensive firewood."

The next level of judgment comes when an artist tries to sell their creative works, spawned in speculation in hopes that someone will come by at the right moment, with the right need and the financial resources to purchase the original creation; with no preconception they make a purchase of what already exists.



When the need to create with complete autonomy supercedes any realistic basis for filling a specific market need an artist often remains in a purgatory often defined as "the starving artist;" often hoping or seeking acknowledgement by the art community who may subjectively deem an artist the next "in" thing. For this reason, creativity is often restricted to hobbies or part time businesses while the artist participates in the daily grind to generate income.

removed from reality, putting the craftsmen once removed. This concept establishes the most critical phase in commissioning a custom work. Stepping into the realm of furniture commissions, the artist perceives a mental vision of a client's request. It is this distinct separation that causes misconception and room for dispute within the commission process. Plato even pondered these concepts in his critique of representational art. Pose that there are "three beds."

First the "real" bed, which exists only as the essence of all beds. Second, the bed that is produced by the carpenter; based upon his understanding of the essence of what a bed is he creates a physical form. Third the representational artist creates the illusion of a bed; perhaps as a painting.



So we have three perceptions of a bed; now add the client. A client has an interpretation of the essence of a bed, and a vision of their requirements. They, however, are not the craftsmen who will create the bed. A commission calls upon an artist to manifest a form outside their own scope of reality, often to create based upon set requirements of size, materials, color, and specific limitations to adhere to or established boundaries to exceed. The commissioned artist is the middle ground, reporting to a customer and offering a deliverable as defined by documentation.



Artists with a business sense, and an understanding that sometimes their skills can be applied to creating pieces that may challenge them, or may not, but its still more fulfilling to create than to spend 9-5 of every day in the monolithic world of corporate bureaucracy, stand in line and stamp out widgets, flip burgers, or whatever pays the bills ... the commission artist is defined.

There is one more level to define; the contractor. The contractor is truly bound by a contract. Framing a house, paving a driveway, running plumbing or electric, painting, or welding are all common contractor functions. A plan is laid out; the contractor must follow the plans, adhering to building codes and the architects specifications. There is skill and field decisions, but often no creativity or freedom to deviate from the plans.

Art is separated from trade by the amount freedom allotted, often equally skilled, individuals performing the tasks required to reach the end result. When you approach a contractor, there are limitations to their services, sometimes choices you can or can't make the decisions. The decision to use 2x6 walls or 2x4 walls is yours, you have the right to demand quality and that the specs are reached, but you will receive little intervention in just how they stand up the walls. Most people don't know or care how to build a wall and want no part, they sign the contract and the wall is magically built.



The commissioned artist can act like a contractor, or can accept abstract commissions. The abstract commission could take the form of build me a table for my dining room. The artist studies the room, the size, the décor, and the tastes of the client and is granted the full range of freedom to generate a result. A lucky few artists receive this trust from clients on a regular basis.

Eric & Stanley form the heart of Artisans of the Valley, and although we spend as much free time as possible in our own happy little worlds, we are commissioned artists. We operate within a contract to produce a functional and artistic form that hopefully exceeds the client's expectations. Our creative outlet comes from working with a client to design a unique piece where often the client conceives the need, the basis of the design, a preference and taste for materials and finish.



Client involvement varies from piece to piece, the more involved a client is the less freedom the artist has and the more defined the project becomes. However, a line must be drawn where a request has to fall within the limits of skills, tooling, practical function, safety, structure, budgets, materials availability, and other factors.

When you commission a piece with Artisans, you engage an artist. You have to trust the artists experience and knowledge of their media. You have to grant permission to make decisions that are not fully defined, and know the artist will act within their best interpretation of the intent of the specifications that are defined. You have to accept when the artist objects, expressing technical or artistic concerns. Sometimes we say yes, sometimes we say no – often we have alternatives. We've done this a few times before, and we're happy to walk you through the experience.

We will not compromise on a matter of safety or structural integrity. We can not make wood into what nature never intended it to be, it's a natural substance and has characteristics that must be acknowledged and accepted or the material is not for you. Ultimately, we will not create a piece that we will in the end refuse to sign, our reputation as a whole is worth more than any one commission.



What we will do, is work either independently or side-by-side, offering our experience to educate you and guide you to feasible expectations, then fulfill your commission with a functional truly unique, hand made, original design, heirloom quality piece.

By Eric M. Saperstein of

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