A pair of original Illinois woodworking craftsman—one rustic, one polished—celebrate the organic art of nature.

Out of the Woods

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Illinois woodworker Kyle Kinser loves to use locally harvested wood for his finely crafted furniture designs. Many of his pieces include unusual, one-of-a-kind natural "defects" that reveal the beauty of nature.

What's the secret to great woodworking? Perfect lumber would seem to be one essential: At lumberyards everywhere, those serious woodworkers can be seen appraising individual boards, sighting down edges for straightness, running palms across planed surfaces. Flawless wood, one might conclude, must be the starting canvas for the art of woodworking.

Or maybe not.

Not all woodworkers are convinced the best cuts of wood are always the best. When it comes to revealing the organic art of nature, sometimes, those factory-cut rectangles of perfect, unblemished wood can be, well…perfectly boring.

Kyle Kinser is among those different-thinking Illinois craftsmen who deliberately go against the grain when it comes to selecting good wood for projects. Given the choice between a clean slab of perfect, white oak and a beetle-chewed slice of black walnut,

Kinser probably would grab the "defective" walnut—and incorporate it into a perfectly finished piece of exquisite furniture. His reasoning: The details of living history engrained within wood, even if those "flaws" don't make the cut among purists, truly are as beautiful as any human art ever created.

Example: Something as humble as a natural crack snaking across a table—or the wandering, serpentine path of a beetle's tunnel—directly communicates the artful compositions found everywhere in nature.

From an economic standpoint, Kinser's use of lumberyard cast-offs is

Cutting into an old walnut log, Kinser discovered an irresistible labyrinth of beetle galleries he decided to incorporate into matching panels.

also a very smart way to build. "Defective" wood is widely overlooked by those carpentry conformists who pay a premium for flawless lumber. It's also a Green choice Kinser is making. The frugal conservation of our resources matters deeply to this rural craftsman.

"Wood doesn't grow on trees, you know," Kinser often jokes when asked about his deliberate use of the questionable lumber he incorporates into finely crafted furniture.

"I like to practice conservation," he explains with a shrug. "I hate disqualifying wood just because the industry doesn't consider it up to standard."

It turns out, Kinser isn't the first artist to enshrine the beauty of nature's effects in wood. His teacher and mentor, the late James Krenov of the famed College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking Program, loved to incorporate unexpected twists of natural wood into his elevated designs. Even wood that had been streaked by filaments of fungi enhanced the appeal, Krenov insisted.

"I like what nature has done," Krenov once explained during a television interview. He was defending a small, natural crack in a spalted maple panel. Kinser became lifetime friends with Krenov after enrolling in Krenov's California woodworking program in 1982. After returning to Illinois and setting up his own shop, Kinser initially found an audience by producing elevated, Krenov-influenced furniture designs. All artists borrow and trade inspiration on the road to originality, and Kinser soon developed his own style with a dramatically organic message from nature:

Cracked, decayed and outright peculiar slices of wood became both accents and centerpieces of Kinser's astonishingly crafted works. Not only does the sense of nature permeate his work, the work exists because of what nature created.

"I'm willing to let the wood totally influence me," Kinser agreed while pausing beside long, irregular sections of aged walnut he keeps in his Makanda workshop. Nearly all of the pieces of lumber he's accumulated over the years ("They've become old friends," he says fondly) were harvested locally, often from trees Kinser watched for decades until nature let them fall. Once brought to a local mill and sliced open, the trees reveal the story of their life within their grain, and spark project ideas whenever Kinser discovers something unexpected.

"A lot of my pieces evolve directly from a particular piece of wood," Kinser notes. "In fact, I'd much rather have a piece of wood tell me what I should do with it than try to force a design on a piece of wood."

Still, he does love a woodworking challenge. When Makanda's largest catalpa tree finally went down in 2008, Kinser bought the fallen giant from the landowner to cut it up and enshrine it in furniture. The challenge: Catalpa was declared "too stringy" to be of any woodworking value by the master James Krenov.

"Part of the challenge of using catalpa was to make something with a wood Jim would never use," Kinser grinned. After sawing and drying the boards, Kinser not only managed to incorporate the catalpa into olive-tinted furniture panels, he found one, particular characteristic of catalpa to be exceptionally redeemable.

"It doesn't move," Kinser declared. Movement of wood—the expansion and contraction of wood through humidity—is not an issue with catalpa. "Once it's cut, it stays."

Despite the crafty triumph, the technical properties of wood don't move Kinser as much as the art he finds within the wood. And he's not alone out there.

Fellow Illinois artisan and truly primitive wood crafter **Bob Arseneau** reduces the art of woodworking to its most ancient level: Arseneau creates what's known as bent-wood furniture using nothing more than sticks and branches bent into the shape of practical furniture, often keeping the rough bark intact.

If anyone out there could be called a primitive woodworking artist, it would be Arseneau. This shaggy-bearded native of southwest Illinois gathers flexible sticks and branches—willow is a favorite—as raw material for a craft that dates back millennia. It's a purely atavis-

Illinois primitive wood craftsman and nature lover Bob Arseneau bends flexible branches and sticks to create truly rustic furniture.

For bent-wood crafter Arseneau, tapping in a few nails holds his creations together. For Kinser (above), finishing his exquisite furniture requires many hours of sanding and carefully rubbed oils.

tic art, reversing civilization's evolution toward elegant furniture. According to Arseneau, the popularity of this back-to-nature craft soared after a national magazine took notice.

"Back around 1980, 'Better Homes and Gardens' had a cover showing bent-wood furniture," Arseneau explained. "Suddenly everybody wanted to have at least one piece of bent-wood furniture in their home. It was huge. Even rich people with fancy houses wanted to have that primitive touch. For people living in the city, I guess it reminded them of the place they'd rather be."

Even after the bent-wood craze subsided, Arseneau continued making rustic pieces to supply friends and locals. His creations, from coffee tables to rocking chairs and love seats, remain conversational fixtures on Midwestern front porches, gazebos and even in businesses.

Everybody has their brush-with-fame story, and Arseneau recalls one love seat he made that was being displayed in a St. Louis coffee shop near Washington University. It was in that seat that 1960s altered-consciousness guru Timothy Leary once decided to take a break.

"Leary was speaking at the university one day and stopped by the coffee shop afterwards," Arseneau explained. "Somebody snapped a picture of him sitting in my love seat, wearing his long robe, looking all stately…"

Arseneau pauses, shaking his head, recalling the fate of that seat.

"I sold that love seat," he grumbles through his thick beard. "I sold it to a guy who didn't even know who Timothy Leary was."

No matter. Everyone who admires the rugged architecture of Arseneau's creations knows the visible details of the furniture itself are what matters. The pure, natural message of his unembellished creations remains as enduring (and endearing) as nature itself. Like Kinser, Arseneau lets the flukes of wood guide his craftsmanship. Neither works from a blueprint, and neither sketches out in advance what he intends to build. For his part, Kinser says a pencil would be useless as he develops his ideas.

"To be honest, I'm not very good at drawing a two-dimensional square," Kinser laughs.

Despite their seemingly drastic differences in output, both woodworkers credit the pure art of nature as a primary influence, trusting organic compositions as well as any written measurement.

It's not surprising, therefore, so many people are instantly drawn to what these sylvan artisans create with a shared vision. We are all admirers of nature—including what comes out of the woods.

While maintaining the rustic art within wood, Arseneau also pairs perfectly cut, contrasting pieces for his bent-wood furniture.