

Three Bosses One Shop

Having three top dogs at one company might sound like a nightmare scenario, but Ken Smith, Steve Petrie and Mark Grothman say it has truly enhanced their business



Cullen Grace Joinery is a custom cabinet and furniture shop in Becket, Mass., which specializes in producing antique finishes in-house.

BY BRIAN CALDWELL / STAFF WRITER

Cullen Grace Joinery, a five-man shop nestled in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, produces high-end furniture that is often finished with the look of years gone by. The shop's Web site states that the style, material, and finish all work toward the goal of making the piece feel like an antique without creating a reproduction. The business is based on serving designers, decorators and architects, and the majority of business

comes from four or five sources.

Ken Smith founded Cullen Grace Joinery — Cullen and Grace are the middle names of Smith's children — in Becket, Mass., in 1995. Smith's solid woodworking ability, combined with his finishing expertise and business skills has brought the shop increased recognition during the past 10 years. Along the way he has added talented employees, which has enabled Smith to accept larger and more sophisticated projects. The shop has several unusual aspects, including its

financial structure, having three employees who at one time or another owned their own shop, and a relationship with a cooperative of carvers in Nepal.

Who's the boss?

Steve Petrie joined Smith several years ago and brought along the experience he gained while running his own one-man shop. An avid cyclist, Petrie left Cullen Grace about a year ago to fulfill a dream and bike around Europe. He followed his European venture with another — riding

a motorcycle around the United States. Down a person in the shop, Smith hired Mark Grothman, a retired ballet dancer from New York City, to replace Petrie. Grothman had operated his own one-man shop for six years and had 12 years experience as a cabinetmaker.

During his motorcycle trip, Petrie came close to accepting a job at a shop in San Francisco, but instead, returned to the Berkshires and resumed working at Cullen Grace.

At this point, Cullen Grace had some

unanswered questions. How would the business be set up and who would be responsible for running it? Was shop expansion necessary? Did the shop have sufficient tools and machinery?

The decision was made to double the shop's size to 4,000 sq. ft. Since the expansion, Grothman and Petrie have joined Smith in running the shop, Luke Bates was hired and the two entry-level employees departed. Bill Connell — with experience as a restoration contractor, banker and engineer — has been added to the staff.

Smith attempted to form a legal partnership, a cooperative comprising himself, Petrie and Grothman to own and run the business. It proved to be too difficult to arrange and the shop is now a corporation with Smith the sole stockholder.

"In practice, what it comes out to and the way we've agreed to structure things is that it is a cooperative team effort and the rewards and benefits we receive are shared," Smith said. "We did look into doing partnerships and trying to spread out the financial liabilities and turn it into a legal partnership, but that was overly burdensome and problematic."

Cullen Grace has a strong benefits package — health insurance, 401K and vacation. Plus, although Smith wouldn't exactly call it profit sharing, when the company makes money it goes to the employees in one form or another.

"I can present a compensation package that I know is much more substantial than if I had to make sure there was enough fluff left over in case we had a bad project," Smith explained. "I give them what is available as part of the compensation package but they know if we have a really bad quarter, there's not extra money there to make up for it. We have to make sure that we make our bottom line at the end of every quarter."

"I think it is a reasonable goal to be able to expect that you can get health insurance and a comfortable place to live and send your kids to college," Smith added.

Smith also takes care of the books. By using a combination of Quicken and Microsoft's Excel software, he is able to quickly produce accurate spreadsheets that track the business down to the last penny. He can't emphasize enough how simple the process is.

"Each project is tracked so we know who is spending what hours doing what. That allows me to verify that we did make money on the project. It also gives me a really powerful tool for estimating what it's going to take to do something else in the future that has some similar qualities. I incorporate into that spreadsheet an allotment for what my cost of business is. As I take my annual cost of business and divide that by the amount of hours that people in the shop can work, I figure we are at about 85 percent efficiency. I know that shop maintenance and doing estimates for projects that we don't get, that accounts for about 15 percent of our year. And that's fine because I know we can make good money doing the other 85 percent."

Three's company

Having three past and former shop owners under one shop roof has its advantages.

"The thing that Mark and I have pulled off our own businesses is we bring an understanding of efficiencies and a need for efficiencies," said Petrie. "If a project is going over-budget we have a sixth sense that this isn't a good idea, we need to rethink. We have a very specific interest in how well this business does. We're not just coming with our hands in our pockets expecting to collect a paycheck."

"We're finding that it makes sense to have one lead person on a given project, and any one of the three of us is capable of being that leader," said Smith. "Once that person has sat down and come up with a progression of how that project should flow, he can pull any one of the others or the other two guys in the shop out. We will have two, perhaps three, large projects going on simultaneously. It's important that one person be the primary leader on that. It's also important that any one of three-fifths of the team here is capable of being the leader and that gives us a strong dynamic."

Even though a project will have one lead person, there is a series of checks and balances that helps all involved — and therefore, the end product.

"We're constantly checking each



(Clockwise from top) Smith and a decorator designed this 26"-wide dining table, made from solid Cuban mahogany; Cullen Grace Joinery built this white oak desk with the assistance of Nepalese carvers; cherry veneer was used for this 60" round dining table that extends to 11" in length with the addition of six leaves.

other; there's little-to-no ego here whatsoever so we are constantly watching over each other's shoulders because there is an element that goes on with everyone working on something [different] that you will overlook something," related Grothman. "Our skills are very different and in some ways we approach projects somewhat differently and all three of us can have a discussion and we'll come up with a version that works."

Shop equipment includes a Sicar flat mortiser, Kollé sliding table saw, Powermatic table saw, Rockwell 20" band saw, Sandingmaster 37" wide belt sander, American 16" jointer, Inca 12" jointer, Rockwell 18" planer, Powermatic 15" planer, line boring machine, Delta X series drill press and DeWalt miter saw.

In-house finishing

Smith's knowledge of finishing is impressive. He has developed dozens of finishing combinations thanks to years of speaking with finishing experts, and constantly experimenting until he successfully obtains the desired look (*see sidebar*). Every piece that Cullen Grace

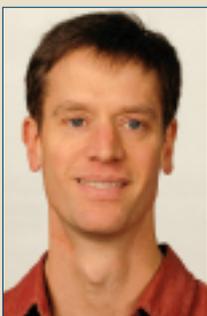
produces is finished on the premises.

"We can do a fully filled high-gloss finish with a polyurethane spray-on material," Smith said. "We don't spray pre-catalyzed lacquer over a stain. We have a broad repertoire and it certainly goes well beyond the particular stains we use. It's combinations of conversion varnish and lacquers and shellac and opaque lacquers, and then we use dyes, we use glazes, we use waxes, we use a lot of different things."

"I think that is an important control point for us. First of all the logistics of moving it to another shop to have it finished would be problematic. The finish in so many respects is integral to the whole project that there is no way we could do what we do without doing finishing."

"Based on my experiences plus the [Berkshire Woodworkers] Guild people I have worked with, Ken's knowledge of finishing far exceeds what I think most shops are capable of," said Petrie. "He's very technically oriented and he will exhaust a finishing supplier's knowledge about their product. He still wants to know more."

CULLEN GRACE JOINERY



Ken Smith

Location: Becket, Mass.

Principals: Ken Smith, Steve Petrie and Mark Grothman

Shop size: 4,000 sq. ft.

Number of employees: 5

Principle projects: Commissioned custom furniture and cabinetry, veneer work, antique finishes

Smith on dollars and sense: "Keeping track of the numbers is important and not nearly as difficult as a lot of people think it might be. You don't need to be a brilliant mathematician or a computer whiz to do very basic bookkeeping."

Petrie's shop outlook: "Everybody here has worked toward getting a place where everyone wants to come to work; everybody is excited about showing up here. It's exciting being involved in all aspects of the business ... the vision of where this business ends up is an open discussion for everybody."

Out-sourced carvings

Smith took a hiking and trekking trip to Nepal five years ago and checked out the local woodworking. The area was known for producing intricate carvings, a talent dating back for many generations. He hooked up with Lee Birch who grew up in the United States but had lived in Nepal for 25 years at that point, 30 years now.

“She ran a carving guild,” he related. “She had gotten together a bunch of traditional people from a single area, village or tribe and wanted to establish an ongoing viable business where they could use skills that had been passed on for centuries.

“She does a great job. It’s very satisfying to send her initial sketches and get back very detailed, two-dimensional drawings in what the piece will look like in three dimensions. I’ll edit that in Photoshop, send it back. We do a lot of back and forth on e-mail. She’ll then generate a carved sample, photograph it, again a lot of

back and forth. Once or twice she has actually shipped the sample here for approval. It takes about a week and it’s pretty costly.”

The Nepalese carvers work with a rosewood-type wood that is a *dalbergia* species native to Asia. The availability of wood in Nepal is a huge problem and Smith noted it prevents Cullen Grace from increasing the workload for the carvers. Birch is currently working on an affordable method to obtain a sufficient supply of wood for the Nepalese carvers.

“They are incredibly fast and the quality of it is as good as the best carvers I’ve seen here, far better than what is typical carving in this country,” Smith added.

Unlimited potential

Cullen Grace caters to national and international clientele, as well as customers spread out in the 30 towns that make up Berkshire County.

“Most of our clients here in Berkshire County are second-home owners,” said

Smith. “The house value of the residential projects that we work on is anywhere from \$1 million to \$2 million.”

When asked what they attributed the success of Cullen Grace to, Petrie quickly answered, “luck.”

“You make your own luck,” noted Smith. “We have stumbled upon opportunity but we’ve been willing to take advantage of that opportunity.”

“And we value that opportunity,” Petrie added. “The relationships that we have, there’s nobody who gets taken for granted. From Ken’s personality being open to the input and wanting the input, not wanting to be the only person responsible for every decision that’s been made and allowing it to be a dynamic relationship where we all have equal say — that’s all important. That’s why I came back. You need someone to take a personal interest; it’s too small of an operation for the people who work here to not take a personal interest.”

Projects that were too large to con-

sider a year or two ago, now are possible and even profitable. With all the changes at Cullen Grace during the past year, one can’t help but wonder what lies down the road.

“We are down the road,” Smith said. “This has great potential here. I think another important part of it is that we all come from dissimilar backgrounds, and the important thing is not woodworking. We’ve got a perspective of the world beyond just manual labor. That’s a big part of what we do but we can incorporate many other parts of our own lives and that helps us in dialogues with clients and managing the business. We understand what is important to people and that is what allows us to provide them with the product and service that they’re after.” ■

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Creating a ‘natural wear’ finish

Cullen Grace Joinery had a client who recently ordered a home library built out of Lyptus, Weyerhaeuser’s eucalyptus hybrid. The customer wanted the library to look as though it had accumulated years of patina and natural wear, giving the feeling that the woodwork was decades old.

Ken Smith worked with Matt Squires, a finishing expert and sales representative with Raybern Co., to develop a finishing process to meet the client’s desired look.

Pictured is the storyboard Smith kept of the process; the final result is on the right. The steps, as explained by Squires, are as follows:

- applied aniline dye
- went over it with a CNA stain from ICA (Italy). CNA is their water stain, a finely ground pigment

immersed in water and used for more clarity than a pigmented wiping stain.

- sealed it with a Valspar pre-catalyzed finish, the NUF 3604.
- applied a color coat of glaze with the same CNA stain mixed six-parts water to one-part stain. Smith called it his color glaze. He then worked it around with some 3M Scotchbrite, steel wool and rags to give it a splotchy look.
- sealed it again with the Valspar pre-catalyzed finish
- used the same CNA colorant for an accent glaze in all the crevices and all the cracks, but at a stronger mixture — two-parts water to one part CNA.
- top-coated it with same Valspar self-sealing pre-catalyzed lacquer.

— Brian Caldwell



PHOTO: MICHAEL GORDON