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HENNEFORD FINE FURNITURE

Balancing form and function | Written by Christine Phillips • Photography by Kyle Stansbury

A SCULPTED, THREE-LEGGED BARSTOOL. A chaise lounge perched on a swooping set of rockers. A classic carved seat built with Old World techniques. Is it everyday furniture? Or usable art? If it's a product of Henneford Fine Furniture, it's both.

A woodworker and artist based in Kalispell, Montana, Steve Henneford designs and builds beautiful things. Both functional and expressive, his catalog of contemporary, custom-made, hardwood furniture strikes the ideal balance between form and function. Self-taught, Henneford made his first chair 12 years ago after watching a YouTube video. He initially chose chairs because he heard they were difficult to do well. "They're not," he says with a smile.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Cowboy Rocker; Sculpted Three-Legged Barstool; and Sculpted Barstool, with its classic carved seat, are all popular pieces in Henneford's catalog of custom hardwood furniture.

Prior to woodworking, Henneford ran a gymnastics studio with his wife. When he dove into furniture making, he didn't have a clear vision or business plan; his decision to focus on a full-time career making furniture was about maintaining professional autonomy while doing something he loves. "Making chairs is something I enjoy and find fun to create," he says. "It always surprises me that you can grab lumber off the rack and, a little while later, have a sculpture that's also functional."

Henneford began making chairs using plans he purchased. His first unique design was the Sculpted Three-Legged Barstool — a popular model that he continues to sell today. "By and large, barstools are more useful than attractive," he explains. "I wanted to build a better-looking barstool." He sold his first set to Dr. Max Gouverne. Gouverne, whose permanent residence is in Texas, met Henneford



Each piece of the Cowboy line built in Henneford's shop is constructed without screws or nails. Above, a mortise-and-tenon connection locks the lumber in place and, at left, bullets fasten the leather to the frame.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Much of Henneford's inspiration comes from "wanting to make something better." • Henneford adjusts the fit for the leg of a coffee table. • Henneford shapes the tenon of a Cowboy Chair. **OPPOSITE:** A chair template hangs in Henneford's shop.

while remodeling a vacation home he had purchased in Montana. "A local architect recommended I hire him to make some custom doors," says Gouverne. "He built these beautiful doors. When he mentioned he was making furniture, I was intrigued."

Gouverne purchased three barstools and has since amassed quite a collection of Henneford originals, including a dining room table, rockers, and chairs. "His craftsmanship is outstanding," says Gouverne. "And he has a very particular style — kind of spindly and curvy — it's not rustic cowboy style at all. I'd call it more Montana modern art."

Henneford's catalog of furniture can be classified into four distinct categories: barstools, chairs, rockers, and tables. Within each category he produces a number of variations. The Cowboy line, one of his most popular collections, includes a rocker, barstool, and chair — each piece built without screws or nails. A mortise-and-tenon connection locks the lumber in place, and bullets fasten the leather to the frame. His choice to adopt this approach is about both aesthetics and durability. "My hope is that with every piece I create, it becomes more than a barstool or rocker — it becomes a treasured family heirloom that gets passed on, generation to generation. If you hold the pieces together with drywall screws, it's just not going to last as long."

Rockers are another signature item. The first time Henneford participated in one of the C.M. Russell Museum's annual art auctions in Great Falls, Montana, he submitted the Cowboy Rocker. It became one of the first pieces of "functional art" to be sold in Charlie's March Roundup. The following year, he created a spinoff of the Cowboy, a high-back version. He named it the Russell Rocker, a tribute to artist Charlie Russell and the wild west of Montana.

Henneford's Classic Rocker is based on the timeless design of Sam Maloof, a legendary American woodworker who began designing and handcrafting custom furniture in the 1950s. "I've always been drawn to Maloof's sculptural, elegant style," says Henneford. "It flows and swoops ... there's not a lot of 90 degrees. It's a beautiful, functional design." Henneford is also an enthusiast of the Maloof joint, a solid, practical woodworking technique that permits the sculpting or blending of two pieces. He uses this technique often, achieving seamless curves in a lot of his furniture.

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"My hope is that with every piece I create, it becomes more than a barstool or rocker — it becomes a treasured family heirloom that gets passed on, generation to generation." — STEVE HENNEFORD



design and wanting to "make it better" by giving it his own unique spin. The idea for his first rocker design came from one his mother and father bought more than 40 years ago. "None of us are necessarily inventing," he explains. "Tables, chairs, rockers — they have already been invented. We're just continually evolving, improving, and enhancing designs to make them more interesting, attractive, or comfortable."

Henneford says that he used to try to design a new chair every year, but over time that turnover got to be a little cumbersome. Today, he focuses on building and refining the catalog of designs he's already developed. He also enjoys collaborating with his clients on custom, one-of-a-kind pieces.

Henneford estimates that one chair takes roughly two weeks to build. He uses a combination of power and hand

tools, depending on the stage. "It's hard putting a number to it," he says. "It's fun to take rough lumber and turn it into something functional and useful — typically, that doesn't take long. Smoothing and shaping into something more sculptural takes a bit of time. And then oiling and finishing the piece is when the wood really comes to life. With each phase comes unique challenges, but I really enjoy the entire process."

Every piece is designed and built to the buyer's specifications. "It all depends on not only a person's height and size, but also how they want to sit. My wife likes to sit tall, whereas I like to lean back. Some people want to sit with their feet on the ground, others like a little bit of float," explains Henneford.

Most of the wood Henneford works with is locally sourced walnut, maple, and cherry from Glacier Hardwoods,

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while the leather he uses for seats and backs comes from Jeff Morrow of Shooting Star Saddlery in the small town of Niarada, Montana. He prefers not to stain the wood; rather, he works to keep its distinct natural grains intact.



COURTESY OF STEVE HENNEFORD

The Lazy Chaise Rocker, made with quilted maple and bison leather, accommodates both form and function.

Just as elegantly as he balances the connection between form and function, Henneford also enjoys walking the line between craftsmanship and art. Henneford Fine Furniture regularly participates in a select number of conferences and art and design shows each year. In 2023, he will participate in both of the C.M. Russell Museum’s auction events in Great Falls, the Whitefish Arts Festival in Whitefish, Montana, the Kimble Show in Park City, Utah, and the Western Design Conference Exhibit + Sale in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. While most of his clientele purchase items to furnish their own private homes and residences, a few of Henneford’s

pieces are featured in public gathering spaces in The Cloudveil, a luxury hotel outside of Jackson Hole. 📍

Christine Phillips is a freelance writer based in Whitefish, Montana. She enjoys writing about art, architecture, design, health, and outdoor recreation. When not playing with words and working with her clients, she loves hiking, biking, snowboarding, taking care of her two little dogs, and teaching Pilates.

Kyle Stansbury is an editorial and commercial photographer tucked away in northwest Montana. He’s known for unfolding the layers of Western culture through his passion for authentic storytelling and his connection with his subject. His client list ranges from USA Today to the Discovery Channel and quite a bit in between.

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