

MANSION



The paneling in the dining area of an Aspen, Colo., home has a horizontal grain that must be meticulously matched in the workshop. The design gives the home a modern look.

THE GURU

Old World Artistry Made for New Projects

Merritt Woodwork in Mentor, Ohio, has a staff of artisans trained to create 'a natural aspect' in home interiors

By ALINA DIZIK

When it comes to implementing wood elements throughout the home, most architects know a guy who knows a guy. Often, that guy is G. Michael Merritt.

Mr. Merritt, 54, leads his namesake second-generation woodworking company in providing precise millwork for stately home libraries, expansive closets, custom kitchens, staircases and open living areas. They create rooms of hand-carved elements and moveable paneling and restore antique decorative features, often using hard-to-find woods.

\$5-15 MILLION
Cost of custom woodwork on typical client's home
"Wood brings a natural aspect by bringing the outside in," says Mr. Merritt, president of Merritt Woodwork, based in Mentor, Ohio. He says the right wood can add warmth to a room or create what he calls "a crisper interior" for a tailored, modern look.

Merritt is one of the largest companies working on high-end construction. Its custom work for a large single-family home can range from \$5 million to \$15 million—a fraction of the overall construction budget for a typical client, Mr. Merritt says.

For one recent project, a \$300,000 kitchen, his company's artisans had to integrate bleached elm kitchen cabinets with various ceiling elements, matching everything to the millimeter.

Construction projects can last two to three years, with the workers usually completing one project at a time. Mr. Merritt works with architects to come up with an engineering plan, then moves on to fabrication and installation. The company also can add replications of period furniture, he adds.

A current residential library project in an East Coast home that includes carving ornate Louis XV-style screens, will require about 5,000 working hours, he estimates. The panels will be carved in Ohio, finished in the company's San Francisco workshop and then installed on site.

"We are re-creating it the same way they would have done it back in 1705," Mr. Merritt says.

One out of five of the company's projects involves deploying Old World techniques. To meet demand, Merritt acquired a small woodcarving firm in 2018, adding 17 master carvers who can create moldings and intricate wood screens. A total staff of 250 works in the U.S., Germany and the U.K.

In the Ohio workshop, wood is hand-selected to find a precise grain and color match. It can take years to locate high-grade or exotic woods, such as oak from the Spessart region in Germany, says Mr. Merritt.

Wood-panel rooms and features are assembled inside the company's 110,000-square-foot main plant to minimize labor costs on

CEILING PANELS
\$450 per square foot



the road. They are then disassembled and loaded onto temperature-controlled trucks.

"We put the whole room together and stand it up to make sure it's perfect, then we take it to the field and install," Mr. Merritt says. Ceilings are built upside-down on raised platforms, and the company uses 3-D printing to get precise alignment.

One trend he sees is a demand for luxurious white oak and sturdy walnut to create cool, modern tones. "Nobody likes red," he says.

Mr. Merritt and his brother, Keith Merritt, head up the business. The brothers took over the 53-year-old family firm from their father in 2001. By then, the clientele had changed from middle-class homeowners to high-net-worth individuals with larger projects.

Last year, the business had about \$70 million in sales, compared with \$4 million in 2001, says Michael Merritt.

The majority of work is on the East and West coasts, along with some international homes and a separate yacht business. Mr. Merritt says he spends most of his time on the road, meeting with architects and focusing on sales.

The workshop is asked for a wide variety of styles. For an 18,000-square-foot Aspen, Colo., project, the workshop created contemporary custom kitchen cabinetry with an Art Deco-style inlay, plus built-ins for the bathrooms, two butler's pantries and acoustical ceiling panels. In the



Artisans at Merritt Woodwork finish pieces for clients before on-site installation.

1. Dan Reichert, cabinetmaker.

2. Finishing coordinator Brittany Moore.

3. An employee gives a surface texture and a distressed look.

4. Javier Munoz, finisher.

◀ The Long Island, N.Y., room has a ceiling with antique oak beams and fluted vertical wood trim for the mantel.



main areas, they installed wood-paneled ceilings to soften the lighting.

A beachfront project on New York's Long Island required a traditional wood paneling painted in light grays and a tongue-and-groove wood ceiling. "It brings some formality, but it's not like Park Avenue formal," Mr. Merritt says of the 15,000-square-foot home.

An unexpected popular request: creating an iridescent wood look on traditional mahogany doors, using a classic French polish technique of rubbing in shellac made from resinous insect secretions. "True French polish is not something you can learn quickly," he adds.

Employees experienced in such traditional crafts are tough to find. As a result, Mr. Merritt now employs two full-time teachers to train employees in "dying craft trades."

Last summer, four employees spent two weeks learning how to finish and hang 200-pound custom solid doors with specially manufactured hardware. Each door can cost \$15,000 to \$30,000.

CURVED WALL PANELS
\$450 per square foot



Hand-waxed Baltic pine panels in the library of a Fort Lauderdale, Fla., home are curved to complement the Mediterranean Revival style.

KITCHEN CABINETS
\$650 per square foot



Vertical-grain custom kitchen cabinets in the Aspen home are integrated with a ceiling lighting design that includes wood, onyx and metal.