

Want some graffiti with that armoire?

Howard's Artcraft Collection specializes in funky, handmade furniture

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You just moved into your dream house and, naturally, want to furnish it.

Do you buy:

A) A colorful armoire with funny fake book titles — such as “Underwater Diets” — painted on the front?

B) The clock curved like the Leaning Tower of Pisa?

C) “Character” pillows with images of Charlie Chaplin, Oprah Winfrey and Groucho Marx?

D) A metal sculpture called “surfer dog,” that is, indeed, a dog with a paw clutched around his surfboard?

Clearly, this is not Ikea or Pottery Barn.

And co-owner Jay Winer knows that is one of the key factors that has made the family-run Artcraft Collection successful. If you can buy it at a furniture chain, or big-box stores like Wal-Mart, then why shop at an independent retailer that sells American-made, handcrafted items?

The 4,500-square-foot store debuted in Historic Savage Mill in 1992 when husband and wife team Jay and Sharyn Winer decided to turn their love of contemporary American craft into a business.

Six years ago, their son Adam joined the fray and helped them expand into Northern Virginia, with a second store in Old Town Alexandria. Two years ago, the Winers opened their third store, in Reston.

The owners travel to craft trade shows, galleries and artists' studios across the country in search of original artists. Asheville, N.C., Sante Fe, N.M., Portland, Maine and several New England towns have offered some of the best finds for the Winers, who currently represent nearly 600 artisans.

They discovered David Marsh, a Texas furniture maker, during a visit to Boston's tony Back Bay district.

But getting Marsh to sell his cabinets, dining tables and book shelves — which sell for \$1,000 and up — at Artcraft was not an easy task. The owners corresponded with Marsh for four years before the artist, who limits his production to just 30 U.S. galleries, agreed to sell at Artcraft.

The wait was worth it as Marsh is one of Artcraft's best-selling artists. One of Marsh's distinctive features: The furniture is signed by every laborer who worked on the piece. One cabinet featured at least two dozen names — and even some symbols — along the back, prompting one client to mistake the signage for graffiti.

So why would someone plunk down \$1,000 or more for “graffiti-laden” furniture when the retail chain stores offer made-in-China items for far less?



Artcraft Collection is run by husband-and-wife team Jay and Sharyn Winer.

Jay Winer admits the store is not for everyone. But there is a segment of shoppers who want the human connection.

“People connect with anything handmade,” Jay Winer said. That was the case

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ARTCRAFT
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for Baltimore resident Dorothy Fuchs, who began shopping at Artcraft six years ago. As someone who crochets, Fuchs appreciates the time and effort that goes into a product that is handmade and not mass-produced. She also likes the fact that the store represents artists from all over the country.

And apparently other people do as well: The three Artcraft stores garner \$3 million in annual sales. Jay and Sharyn Winer, who previously ran a successful toy store, started the business with just \$5,000 seed money, which they spent at two trade shows, and initially displayed smaller items on ladders in their store. The pair then continued to plow any profits they made back into the business.

Most of the furniture and accessories are colorful and quirky. Take, for instance, one designer's life-sized cabinets carved in the likeness of Mark Twain or Katherine Hepburn, which sell for between \$2,800 and \$3,500.

Realizing that not everyone wants to buy expensive home décor, the Winers sell a number of gift items, such as jewelry, ceramics, purses and glassware, which can be had for under \$100.

To promote Artcraft, the Winers rely heavily on direct mail, which they send to 18,000 customers on their mailing list when they hold events. In many cases, the events feature an artist who is in town or are connected to a shopping promotion at the Savage Mill mall, said Fuchs, who signed up Artcraft as a marketing client several months ago.

So what is next for Artcraft? The owners want to open a store in downtown Baltimore or Harbor East sometime in the next couple of years.

Although the Howard County location is centrally located between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., many of their Baltimore customers don't make as frequent a trek to the converted textile mill as the store's capital clients