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A uniquely Southern tradition

Greg Arceneaux is exploring his heritage through woodworking. His Louisiana shop specializes in Creole reproduction furniture. Above, Arceneaux roughs out chair legs. **Page 8**

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Furniture maker's pieces explore his Creole heritage

Traditional woods, techniques blend utility with French influences

By Garry Boulard

When Greg Arceneaux sits down to chip, carve, sand, and stain the Louisiana cypress he likes to work with, he is driven, in part, by the force of his own ancestry.

"I am kind of exploring my own heritage," said Arceneaux in his busy Covington, La., workshop. "My last name is a Cajun name, and I have been very interested in Cajun furniture. But my specialty is both Acadian and Creole reproductions, which have given me a chance to research and explore my own family's heritage."

A heritage of style

Many Americans may associate Louisiana with the spiced-up gumboes and foot-tapping music of the more than 300,000 Cajuns, who are descended from French-speaking Acadian immigrants from Canada. But a less clear connection is made with the far more numerous Creoles, largely because debate over what is and what isn't a Creole still rages among historians.

For example, New Orleans writer Mary Gehman in her 1994 book, "The Free People of Color of New Orleans," claims Creoles were, and are, largely black people who were free: "Les gens de couleur libre," as the French named them, who after the Civil War were called Creoles of color, shortened later simply to Creoles."

Whatever the precise implications of the term Creole, scholars generally agree that most Creoles of Louisiana, beginning in the 17th century, were better educated, had a higher social status and were more financially secure than most of their contemporaries. And they brought highly developed skills to the New World from France.

"As a group, they brought with them master craftsmen who built intricate but solid pieces of furniture in the United States — influenced by the design styles popular in Europe at that time," said Arceneaux. "These were the styles of Louis XIV and XV. But when they made that furniture here, they basically did it without most of the flourishes."

The curved cabriole tables or Vasselier dressers made by Creole craftsmen are almost all less grand in design, although more utilitarian.

"It was pretty much a reflection of the different status enjoyed by the Creoles after they came to this country," said Arceneaux. "Here they wanted their furniture to be more functional and usable, things they would pretty much keep for themselves. Whereas in France, this kind of furniture was more court-like and in public view."

A brief flourishing

Although Arceneaux and various scholars of Creole America pinpoint the era of Creole furniture to the century between 1725 and 1825, a time when thousands of armoires, simple wooden benches and sturdy cabinets were constructed and distributed up and down the Mississippi River; few of the artifacts have survived to the present.

"By 1825 the era was pretty much over," said Arceneaux. "Once Louisiana became a part of the United States in 1812, the Americans poured into Louisiana, and everybody wanted to follow the new fashions, which included American-style furniture."

The few remnants of original Creole furniture in existence today are found in private collections and in museums. At the Louisiana State Museum's Cabildo exhibit in New Orleans' French Quarter, a sampling of Creole furniture pieces — including a replica table by Arceneaux made of heart cypress — are on prominent display.

"These are relics not only from a nearly forgotten past, but also from a forgotten culture," said Claire Brown, the museum's director of public relations. "By preserving and exhibiting the very few pieces left of the era's furniture, we can get an idea not only of the craftsmanship of this particular period, but also of the form and style. It gives us a glimpse into an important part of our history."

The vast majority of furniture from the Creole era was made of cypress, a plentiful stock material that grows from Virginia's Atlantic coast all the way to Mexico. But the Creoles also frequently worked in walnut and cherry. Because of the close proximity of New Orleans' port, abundant supplies of mahogany and Spanish cedar from the Caribbean and South America were also used.

Today most of Arceneaux's work continues the cypress tradition. Smaller items, such as his cabriole tables, slat-back benches and Acadian cocktail square tables, are all made of heart cypress and finished with hand-rubbed oils. Other pieces, his "LaLouisiana" straight-backed arm chairs, for example, are made of pecan and maple.

"Some of the earliest pieces were built out of the more traditional woods like Spanish cedar," he said. "And I replicate that. But some of the pieces I build are combinations. With a small table, for example, I might make the legs out of cherry, while the top is mahogany."

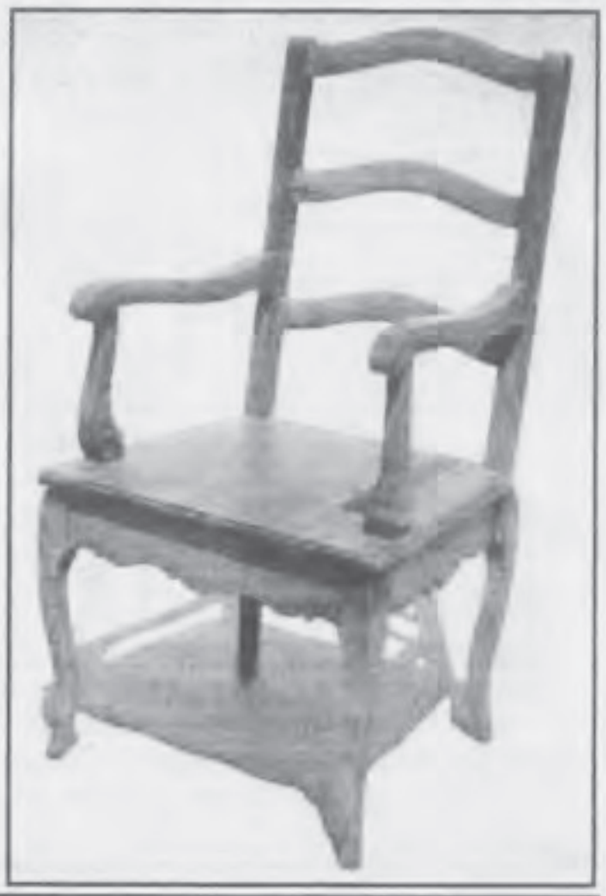
Other works, such as Arceneaux's "Table de Mandeville," with a 96" top, is made of either cypress or pecan.

Arceneaux's small shop is in a quiet industrial park located in an out-of-the-way spot behind several other businesses. He makes the Creole- and Acadian-style furniture with two assistants. One, Ronnie Allen, is highly skilled and helps Arceneaux in all phases of the work. The other assistant, Buddy Pollitt, is newer to the trade and concentrates on the sanding and finishing.

The three use mostly modern equip-

STEVE LASKY PHOTO

Covington, La., furniture maker Greg Arceneaux stains the headboard of a custom-built bed to give it an "antique look." Arceneaux says "it's a hell of a thing to do to a good piece of wood, but it's what the customer wants."



Arceneaux's "LaLouisiana XV Table," above, in cypress comes in lengths up to 102". He makes these "LaLouisiana Arm Chairs," right, in maple and pecan.

ment. Although Arceneaux said he's familiar with the historic tools used by Creole cabinetmakers, he sticks with the contemporary equivalents. His equipment includes standard small-shop fare such as a band saw, jointer, router and shaper. He does use two table saws and two drill presses.

The work, however, continues the traditional joinery and construction methods used by the Creole cabinetmakers.

Ronnie Allen, Arceneaux's operations manager, trims the band-sawn edges of a table piece with a wood chisel. This is a critical step, since all of Arceneaux's furniture pieces are assembled using historically accurate traditional joinery.

Finding his style

Arceneaux has only gradually become a Creole furniture maker. The trail started in the 1970s, when he studied wood sculpture at Louisiana State University.

In the early '80s Arceneaux started working as a house carpenter in the affluent St. Tammany parish, north of New Orleans. But in the mid-1980s, he began devoting more of his time to researching the specific designs and dimensions of historic Creole furniture — designs he then used as models for his reproductions.

The plans he now uses for the more than 60 pieces of Creole or Acadian furniture he regularly makes are based on that research. His "Acadian Cocktail Square Table," for example, is 17" high by 34" wide, with a 29" diameter. Composed entirely of heart cypress, each piece of the table is cut, sanded and finished individually, then assembled with mortise-and-tenon joinery.

Arceneaux imparts a look of age to his furniture by delicately sanding edges to give them a worn appearance, or sometimes by carving delicate termite trails into the surface. For a finish, he uses carnauba wax or tung oil.

Prices for Arceneaux's Creole furniture range from the $160 he charges for an 18" x 18" Acadian stool to the intricate but elaborate Creole armoires that start at about $1,500.

Arceneaux's prices are generally determined by the amount of time he puts into any one piece of furniture. His "Convent Slat Back Bench," a handsome but simple piece made of heart cypress with tapered legs, may take a few days to build and join, and lists for $790 to $995, depending on the dimensions.

The armoires can take up to two weeks to build, explaining the higher prices they fetch.

"The armoire is probably the most commonly found Creole-style piece, and that's because at the time when Creole furniture was popular, you were taxed by the number of rooms your house had, and closets were counted as rooms," said Arceneaux. "So thousands of armoires were built instead of closets, although there aren't many left."

The armoires that have survived, however, are valued as collector's items. One such piece in California recently sold for as much as $60,000.

Unlike the original Creole furniture, however, Arceneaux's work will probably not disappear any time soon, not only because it is made of sturdy stuff, but because he is so productive. He is even hoping to expand his output in the near future by developing a business plan for outside investment.

"I want to be able to develop a catalog and approach the investors and market through the upscale magazines," he said. "I am in the process of taking my business to the next level, which hopefully will mean I can devote as much time as possible to furniture making."

STEVE LASKY PHOTOS

Allen uses a drill press to cut a mortise on a table leg.

Finding wide appeal

Arceneaux's furniture is now on display at only a few locations — he has shown his work in New Orleans and is planning to do so again. Word-of-mouth, meanwhile, has brought him customers from as far away as California and Florida.

"I like very much the fact that as a business, this is something that is working out for me," Arceneaux said. "But I also like the fact that with each piece of furniture a person buys and uses they are taking with them a piece of a historic culture that lives again through its furniture."

Louisiana association working to promote native furniture to growing national market

So promising is the national market for Louisiana reproduction furniture that more than 150 furniture makers in the state have banded together to form an organization highlighting their work through a central gallery and 30-page catalog.

"The demand is there. We're getting calls from all over the country," said Brad Mallers, spokesman for the Louisiana Furnishings Industry Association's gallery in Ponchatoula, some 45 miles north of New Orleans.

The association opened a new showroom in the fall, which it bought with funds from a federal grant. The new home also provides shop space for woodworking classes and training. The association offers workshops and seminars on wood technology, business management, marketing, international trade and tools, as well as the ongoing cabinetmaking training program.

With craftsmen skilled in Cajun, Creole and colonial Louisiana furniture making, the association's catalog features Acadian armoires, elegant Creole bed frames of mahogany, and durable standard Louisiana coffee tables carved out of tidewater cypress.

However, the furniture isn't restricted to reproduction work. Indeed, the association also features the modernistic chessboard and cocktail tables of the Winterhill Design Group of New Orleans; the maple and pearwood chests in the European Biedermeier style, by Francois Deguerce of Shreveport; and the Italian night tables and Florentine chests of the Renaissance Shop, also in New Orleans.

"Basically, our emphasis is on the work that is being done within Louisiana's borders," Maller said. "The more we have gotten together and learned about one another, the more we're amazed by the true variety of styles that the furniture makers here work in. It almost seems to be endless."

Contact the Louisiana Furnishings Industry Association, 495 S.W. Railroad Ave., Ponchatoula, LA 70454. Tel: 504-386-0471. The catalog sells for $8.

— Garry Boulard

The Louisiana Furnishings Industry Association showroom in Ponchatoula, La., has a wide selection of furniture and crafts. Keith Phillips of Greenwell Springs, La., makes this hall tree cabinet from 100-year-old heart cypress, with carved and painted door panels. The birds are an egret, left, and a blue heron. He sells the limited-edition cabinet and mirror as a set.

Crossroads Rustic Furniture of Carriere, Miss., makes these traditional rustic chairs using a smorgasbord of woods. Hickory and pecan are used in the frame and oak in the arms. The seats and backs are made from a sandwich of padauk, walnut, bubinga, canary wood, mahogany, cherry, zebrawood and wenge.