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May 2002

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Custom Woodworking Business

A Niche at the Top



Inside Architectural Woodworking

A niche

AT THE TOP

Merritt Woodwork's attention to detail and excellent work keep its 'cream-of-the-crop' clients coming back for more.

By Ann Gurley Rogers

Merritt Woodwork, of Mentor OH, is booked for the next two-and-a-half years. During that time, its 48 employees will be working on only eight projects. But with individual jobs ranging from \$500,000 to \$5 million, that makes sense.

Since the 1980s, this architectural millwork company has evolved into a firm that specializes in not just building, but also overseeing high-end commercial and residential projects. Its clients' homes range in value from \$10 to \$80 million, with costs between \$1,000 and \$3,000 per square foot for total construction. Its corporate work includes the headquarters of firms like Holland & Knight LLP, Deloitte & Touche, Alfred Dunhill,

The breadth of styles produced by Merritt can be seen in these two residential projects. The wine cellar for a home in Greenwich, CT, is plain sliced cherry. (Photo by Peter Mauss of Esto Photographics Inc.)



This contemporary residence features quartered figured anigre. (Photo by Eric Hanson, Hanson Photographic.)



Providing unique woods and veneers is part of the service Merritt gives its customers. For the offices of Wall Street Capitol in Charlotte, NC, (left) Merritt used mottled and quilt-figured kewazingo in casework that contains a 300-gallon saltwater aquarium. The feature wall, pilasters, columns and soffits use fiddleback makore with 1/4-inch reveals. The boardroom table has a polyester resin finish with marquetry inlays and concealed custom power and data interfaces. (Photo by Rion Rizzo, Creative Sources Photography)



A variety of projects wend their way through Merritt's finishing room, which is equipped with a conveyorized cart system, three stages of ovens and a flash tunnel by Koch.

Huntington Bank and Paine Weber. The company also has completed projects for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The 21 Club in New York City, and The Lodge at Vail in Vail, CO.

While the company does not reveal its gross revenue figures, it acknowledges that it is paid handsomely for its services. Of course, those services are extraordinary.

A HISTORY OF EXTRA SERVICE

G. Michael Merritt, co-owner with his brother Keith E. Merritt, says that the company has always had a reputation for being more involved with projects than other sub-contractors.

It was founded in 1972 by their father, George A. Merritt, who headed the company until five years ago, when he initiated a transition plan to allow for the next generation to run the company. He continued to work at the office and was an important mentor to his sons. In September 2001, George passed away, leaving the company in the hands of Michael and Keith.

Michael Merritt says that the way his father developed the company in the 1970s put it in an excellent position to fill voids created in the construction industry during the 1980s.

"By the late '80s, the construction industry had a reputation for costing a lot of money and delivering sloppy details. In the early 1990s, our best clients started asking us to oversee additional construction details," Merritt says. "We started by coordinating ceiling plans for commercial jobs, which typically have a lot of penetrations for electrical fixtures, sprinkler systems, security and HVAC. At first it was a balancing act for us, because we were performing functions that were traditionally the responsibility of the architect. But because what we were doing improved the quality of expensive interiors and saved time for demanding customers, the new approach began to catch on.

"Now we develop and oversee the execution of construction drawings, indicating the location for all framing, penetrations, difficult drywall joinery and flooring layouts," Merritt adds. "By 1993, we were offering this service to discerning clients who were building expensive residences in places like Greenwich CT, the Hamptons, Palm Beach, Naples and Aspen, CO."

Along the way, the company amassed considerable expertise in a variety of areas. For example, Merritt's engineers developed a technique that makes it possible for a person hanging

Merritt Woodwork

Mentor, OH

www.merrittwoodwork.com

Year Founded: 1972 Employees: 48

Shop Size: 41,000 square feet

FYI:

- Fees for most Merritt projects range between \$500,000 and \$5 million.
- The company spent \$250,000 to develop a fabric-bound portfolio, brochures and collateral materials to showcase its work to potential clients.

drywall or installing a ceiling to successfully locate the sites for ceiling and wall penetrations within 1/8 of an inch. Merritt says that ordinarily, it is not uncommon for these penetrations to wind up within 2 to 6 inches off where they were intended to be, which can cause problems.

"If the variance means that things don't line up properly, that part of the job will need to be re-done, which adds cost and delay to typically very tight schedules," he says.

To accomplish its unique level of service, Merritt Woodwork typically becomes involved in commercial projects six to 18 months in advance of construction; for residential projects, it is 18 to 24 months in advance. The company remains involved throughout the project as the work flow proceeds.

Because the company delivers such a high level of detail for each project, the structure and organization of the office tends to be unusual when compared to other shops.

"First, we have a higher ratio of engineers and project managers on our staff as compared to other sub-contractors for the trade," Merritt says. "Also, we tend to create situations where a small group of our people works closely together on a project over a long period of time. This builds a sense of cohesiveness that you don't always see in the work place. In addition, we only have one shift working on a job. We can't risk the potential for error that could arise if we had a second crew coming in at three o'clock in the afternoon to take over where another team leaves off."



Quartered sapele wall panels in a herringbone pattern were used throughout the Cleveland, OH, offices of Shaker Investments Inc., including the staff dining area. (Photo by Rion Rizzo, Creative Sources Photography)

WELL-APPOINTED SHOP AND FINE VENEERS

Merritt Woodwork's shop size is 41,000 square feet, with a sizable amount of equipment, including two CNC machining centers, one from Brema and one from CMS North America; a computerized, laser-guided gang rip saw by Raimann; a conveyerized cart finishing system with three stages of ovens and a flash tunnel by Koch; Michael Weing six-head moulder; Schelling panel saw, Brandt edgebander and a Costa three-head 54-inch widebelt sander.

The company does its own veneer layup. Its veneer department includes Küper zig-zag stitchers, a Friz hot press, an Italpresse cold press and Hymen guillotines.

Merritt says that 85 percent of its business comes from repeat customers. In addition to architectural millwork, the company manufactures some custom furniture, both antique reproductions and contemporary pieces. This part of the business developed as a service for clients who requested specific pieces. For commercial customers, Merritt has built conference tables, reception desks, administrative and secretarial workstations, as well as custom case goods for executive offices. Residential customers have requested entertainment centers, game tables, writing desks, chests, consoles and side tables.

MARKETING TO THE UPPER CRUST

About the time that George A. Merritt drafted a transitional format for his company, turning over the daily operation of the business to his sons, Michael Merritt began working on a plan to develop the best collateral materials for the industry. The project that was started about four-and-a-half years ago has so far cost the company \$250,000. But it definitely makes a statement.

It began with a new logo and name for the company. It also meant developing collateral materials, such as brochures, designed to grab the attention of the top 15 architects in the country and open new doors. Merritt says that the goal was to create instant credibility and to create a "cachet" for the company as a firm that delivers high-quality products. When he was shopping for a firm to create a new image for the company, it occurred to him that a multi-discipline design firm would be the perfect solution — a company that, in addition to providing graphic design services, also does architectural interiors.

"That way, we would be having a potential client in charge of how we are communicating to others in the industry," says Merritt. After interviewing three top companies that do both graphic and architectural design, Merritt chose Thom Williams at Sky Design in Atlanta, GA.

Sky Design developed a presentation package that Merritt uses to communicate with potential new clients and to keep current customers up-to-date. This includes a fab-

ric-bound book with leaflets showcasing major projects. The emphasis is on professional photographs supported with minimal dialogue enumerating the details of the project. Text is limited to the client's company name and location, the architect and contractor on the project, and the species of woods and other materials used. The book is updated on an ongoing basis as new projects are completed.

The book also is supplemented with individual brochures that are pictorial case histories of projects. The company gets between four and six new case history brochures done per year. These brochures are enclosed in a protective sleeve, along with reprints of articles about the company from magazines such as AWI's *Design Solutions* and *Interiors*.

The photos used in this article were selected from these materials and demonstrate the quality and professionalism of the photography.

Together these collaterals are used as an introduction to potential new clients who have made a general inquiry about services or as back-up for a proposal. The initial order was for a thousand brochures and so far only five hundred have been used.

"This is a small market and not a mass mailing situation," says Merritt. "We have definitely seen results from these collaterals. We have gotten responses from higher levels in the companies that we are pitching to, and these materials have opened new doors for us." ■



Merritt conveys a high-quality image to its clients with classy materials such as a fabric-bound book and individual brochures which showcase its projects.

The level of work the company does also requires extra care in veneer selection, and Michael Merritt spends some of his time traveling to Europe to seek out unusual woods and unique cuts for various clients. He recently completed a seven-month quest for Kewazingo, an African wood, which he finally found at a veneer slicer in Germany.

"It was not the cut that was so unique, but the character that the architect and I were looking for," he says. "We purchased 80,000 square feet. We recently needed French walnut for a residence. What we purchased, regarding the grade, was the entire supply for the next 12 to 18 months in Europe."


To keep reaching the top customers, part of Merritt's past marketing efforts was the development of very high-end promotional materials (see sidebar on page 84). It also hired an outside consultant in 1998 to develop a Web site. However, Merritt says that the site, www.merrittwoodwork.com, is used primarily to communicate with new vendors or people who are seeking employment with the company, adding that it is about ready for an update.

Merritt says that the vision he and his brother have for the future of the company is to continue on a path of controlled growth, teaching and nurturing all associates while adding new associates.

"We have no aspirations to be bigger than anyone else. We are interested in profitability, thus providing security to all our



An employee runs a board through a Raimann computerized, laser-guided gang rip saw.

employees," he says. "We are striving to continue to build Merritt Woodwork as a nationally known and admired entity through continual relationship-building with our clients and vendors." 

Reprinted from *Custom Woodworking Business* — May 2002

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