

Richard Watson incorporates modern design, antique sensibility

By Liza Weisstuch | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 25, 2012

The highboy that Brooke Richard and Laura Watson designed is 6 feet tall and made of walnut. Inspect its dovetail joinery, its brushed red bronze ornamental pulls, and other details up close, and you can smell the deep, rich scent of linseed oil.

The brawny piece, which is accompanied by a dainty milkmaid stool, looks as if it would fit right into a stately bedroom in a 19th-century New England home. Or a South End condo with a flat-screen television and Jonathan Adler sofa.

Just as classic cocktails have been rediscovered, and fashion designers reimagine vintage designs for modern buyers, so it goes with furniture. The return to craftsmanship is a response to the functional minimalism ubiquitous now thanks in no small part to Ikea.

“There’s been more attention to craft. It’s the cycle of design — things go in and out,” said Richard. “But it’s hard to imagine why craft ever went out. It’s in line with the economy today. People want to purchase something that’s good for the Earth, made in America, and well made.”



JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Laura Watson (left) and Brooke Richard with their first piece, a highboy with a stool.

Richard and Watson are interior designers who in 2008 founded Brookline-based Orange Street Design Studio after meeting in the interior design master's program at New England School of Art and Design at Suffolk University. Orange Street's residential and commercial projects embody an aesthetic that's crisp, minimalist, and matter-of-fact, but has an underlying fanciful elegance.

On more than one occasion, the pair wanted to incorporate a piece of furniture that they just couldn't find. So they decided to make their own. The highboy is part of the Richard Watson Collection, which was enthusiastically received when it debuted in May at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in Manhattan.

The highboy looks like an antique from the 1800s, but there are quirky modern touches that stand out. The opposite is also true: It looks fresh and contemporary, but the hand finish suggests it's antique. A high sideboard and small pieces, like a trunk and jewel box, are in the works for the fall.

"I got excited when I saw their stuff, because it's exactly what I love: craftsmanship and a provenance of design that references a historical past, but isn't a reproduction. It's not only modern, but whimsical," said Paul Niski, who owns Good on Charles Street. He's in the process of moving his 11-year-old boutique to a larger location across the street. He will feature the custom furniture when he opens in the fall.

The highboy's drawers pull out and can stand alone like an open miniature keepsake box. It's a particularly useful feature since the top drawers are so high you can't reach into them. But beyond the engaging appearance, there's an Old World sensibility that went into the design and production. Richard and Watson were committed to using locally sourced materials and local artists and craftsmen who shared their philosophy.

"There are subtle design choices that get lost with larger manufacturers that use drawer machines that are cutting 50 at a time," said Shaun Bullens, a Pawtucket, R.I.-based furniture maker who's building the collection. "Brooke and Laura pushed for a finish that's tried and true. We used a linseed oil-based varnish, a green material, versus the typical lacquer spray."

The ornamental pulls, which protrude like nails that are only partially hammered into the wood, were designed by Jennaca Davies, a Providence-based metalsmith and jewelry designer.

“We spent time figuring out details that are worn over the body and how they can be applied to furniture. The pull serves a function, but it’s fairly delicate, so it doesn’t take away from the furniture itself. The wood is beautiful, so we wanted to highlight that and just add details,” Davies said.

All these collaborative efforts add up and lend the piece a dynamism that sparks imagination.

“Antiques resonate with people. The whole idea of memory comes into play here, and you feel like it has a story, some kind of soul,” Richard said. “Furniture is so standardized. You get a set — table, chair, etc. That’s not the way furniture has always been. People love a story.”

Liza Weisstuch can be reached at liza.weisstuch@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter: [@livingtheproof](https://twitter.com/livingtheproof).