

Alberta Wood polishes custom design skills

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Small Business

Alberta Wood Products Inc.

- First opened in 1947, bought by Simon Isenstein in 1988;
- Evolved from retail furniture showroom to design centre;
- Moved to new location in February;
- All of the collections are exclusive to Alberta Wood.

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Astute business owners understand the value of listening to their customers, even when the message isn't conveyed in so many words.

Alberta Wood Products Inc. has embraced its client wish list by evolving the longstanding retail furniture business into a high-end design centre.

The 61-year-old business now offers exclusive collections of distinctive area rugs, fine furnishings and original art alongside its custom woodworking, to sate a client appetite for unique and interesting pieces for the home.

"That's the niche that Calgary needed from us," said Simon Isenstein, owner of Alberta Wood Products.

The decision to refocus the well-established business came when Isenstein took stock of the fact the shop was -- at the request of its clients -- customizing all the standard-line retail furniture pieces it carried at its former location in Inglewood.

"Frankly, we've realized what our clients were asking was: 'Could we continue to have your wonderful custom pieces?' So that's what we do," he said.

In its new location since February, Alberta Wood Products has a definite design studio look and feel to it. Setting the high-end luxury tone is an arresting display of Italian embossed leather custom furniture.

The leather line, from Lilli, is exclusive to Alberta Wood, while the furniture is designed and manufactured in Alberta.

Lilli's embossed leathers have the look and feel of beautiful fabrics and can be used to cover everything from headboards to chairs to oversized ottomans.

With more than 350 patterns to choose from, and lots of colours and textures to contemplate, the Lilli line is a hit with interior designers.

"You get the look of the fabric and the luxury of leather," explained Deirdre Gilbert, Isenstein's wife and -- as proprietor of Rearrange -- one of his best customers.



CREDIT: Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald
Simon Isenstein, with his wife, Deidre Gilbert, has turned Alberta Wood Products from a regular retailer into a design centre.

Competing for attention in the showroom is a collection of luxurious handmade heirloom-quality area rugs.

All of these rugs are hand-knotted or hand-tufted and vary between 100 per cent wool and wool and silk blends.

The rugs come from all over the world and are made by mature workers following international labour laws.

Each piece is a handmade original, but the weavers can duplicate the patterns in standard colours and sizes. It's also possible to have some custom sizes crafted.

Alberta Wood also carries a contemporary leather area rug that consists of uniform squares of a variety of hair-on hides assembled in a stunning patchwork-like pattern, with versions available in ostrich and cowhide as well.

There's original artwork by Canadian painter Darian Day, which can be incorporated into a variety of decors, and a selection of high-quality handmade quartersawn Mission furniture from Slovenia -- the only standard line collection Alberta Wood Products still offers.

"It's made the same way we would make it, if we were making it from scratch," Isenstein said.

The custom woodworking side of the business is another area where clients can have their hearts desire, be it having a custom piece of furniture built to match an existing high-end retail set, or a bathroom vanity to match the wood and millwork in a home.

The most unusual request Isenstein has fulfilled to date was to design and build a home theatre cabinet and display case unit -- in a Star Wars theme.

The client wanted the piece to look as if it had been plucked from the set of the 1977 movie. The display cases had to be backlit just so, to house a collection of original Star Wars memorabilia.

"They were uniquely designed, sleek and futuristic with bizarre facets, and looked like something right out of the set of Star Wars. It was very cool," he said.

Alberta Wood Products got its start in 1947, but Isenstein purchased the business in 1988 from longtime family friends who were looking to retire.

A cabinet maker by trade, Isenstein was already in the business as owner of both a custom furniture and a renovation business.

But he had a certain fondness for Alberta Wood Products. Isenstein had worked there as a youth, sweeping floors and cleaning toilets and even sanding some pieces. He noted it was the influence of the original owners that later saw him become a cabinet-maker.

Isenstein took an option to buy the business, following a year working there as general manager. Long before the year was up, it became clear that Alberta Wood Products was a viable business.

But there was the romantic calling as well for the hands-on woodworker with a business background.

"For me it was a rare opportunity to integrate my loves and my strengths," Isenstein said.

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