

# Greatest Commission

Irion Company  
fills a house with  
90 of the finest  
pieces of American  
period furniture

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

In 1999 Irion Company Furniture Makers, a highly regarded period shop in the rural town of Christiana, Pa., received a commission to furnish an enormous house with reproductions of the greatest American period furniture ever built.

The customer explained that he wanted to re-create the feeling he got when he saw the best furniture collections in museums. And he wanted no compromises along the way. No fudging of the dimensions, materials, construction, or detailing. Every piece should be built so it could stand beside its original like an identical twin.

In the nine years since, Irion has built



**Masterpieces in the making.** The craftsmen at Irion are a close-knit group, but they work independently, so each piece is built entirely by one person. The bombé chest-on-chest at left, a copy of one made in Boston by John Cogswell circa 1780, was built by Gerald Martin with carving by Steve Swann and Rob McCullough.

Photos, except where noted: Jonathan Binzen

# Ever?

and delivered 90 pieces for the job, which is now nearly finished. The roster so far includes four breakfronts, three secretaries, three high chests, 15 tables, four tall clocks, and over 30 chairs, and carries a total price tag of “probably over \$2 million.” One of the most impressive pieces, the nearly 11-ft.-tall, serpentine-front Holmes-Edwards bookcase, is featured on the back cover and in “How They Did It,” p. 110.

## The client

“He didn’t look like much,” remembers Kendl Monn. “He came in wearing sweatpants and there were handprints in flour on the back. He’d been baking cookies that morning.” But Kendl, who has 23 years’ experience at Irion, 15 of them at the helm of the shop, and is deeply knowledgeable—and highly excitable—on the topic of American period furniture, soon realized that he was talking to a man whose passion for furniture might rival his own.

In that first conversation, the man in sweatpants—a financier named John who covets his anonymity—showed Kendl a picture of a chair in Albert Sack’s *The New Fine Points of Furniture* and asked if Irion could make it. Kendl knew the chair well. A Thomas Affleck Chippendale-style dining chair with ball-and-claw feet, it had carving on its Gothic splat that merged right into carving on the crest rail, making it an extreme challenge to build.

Kendl recalls that when he gave an estimate of \$5,000 for the chair, John asked him, “Why should I pay this much for a chair?” And Kendl told him, “I can’t answer that question. I could show you other chairs nearly as good that would cost a lot less to make. But if you want that chair, all I can tell you is it’s a fair price. And it’s a great chair—any cabinetmaker would give his right arm to build one in his career.” After thinking it over, John ordered 18.

Then he invited Kendl to see the newly completed house where the chairs would go. Sited on rolling land and built with foot-thick walls of local fieldstone and a cedar-shake roof, it had the flavor of a traditional Pennsylvania farmhouse—but at



**The commission began with this chair, a reproduction of a Gothic Chippendale chair made by Thomas Affleck of Philadelphia. With carving on its pierced splat flowing onto the crest rail, it’s a challenging chair to build. A craftsman could wait his whole career to make one, but Irion got an order for 18 to go with the New York Federal-style dining table shown below. Eric Jacobsen built the chairs and Jim Swift built the table.**





**Like walking into a museum.** When the commission began, the client's house was practically empty. Nine years and some 90 reproductions later, the house is bursting with American masterpieces. The secretary above, a copy of one made in Salem, Mass., was built by Chris Arato. The Philadelphia lowboy and balloon-seat chairs at right were built by Kendl Monn.



35,000 square feet it was dozens of times larger. Inside, the woodwork approached the quality of fine furniture. In room after room there was floor-to-ceiling French walnut paneling, all mortise-and-tenoned and hand-scraped. There were coffered ceilings, secret doors, and hidden stairs. It had taken 12 years to build. John was camped out in a few rooms, but the great majority of the house, Kendl remembers, "was totally empty. Not a stick of furniture."

The story of the Irion commission is one of passion and patience. When they first discussed the job, John asked Kendl to shut Irion down for several years and dedicate the entire shop to his commission. When Kendl said he wouldn't do that to his many regular customers, John had another proposal: He would buy the business. Determined to keep craftsmen in control of the company, Kendl declined the offer without asking for a price. In the end, he agreed to

devote a third of his workforce to John's commission for as long as it took. Kendl says, "He was amazingly patient. I think he appreciated the passion we have to really get the furniture right."

### **The Irion shop**

Founded in 1947, Irion is spread out over the three floors of a century-old former hardware store, and it employs a dozen craftsmen. But it operates like a much smaller shop. Even the largest and most complex pieces were handled start to finish by an individual maker. A craftsman might get a hand along the way, and a few carvings were farmed out, but the responsibility for building the piece was his from drawings through delivery.

Most of Irion's craftsmen arrive on the job green and many stay for a decade or more. They learn the craft through years of building reproductions from start to finish, repairing fine antiques, and talking shop with antiques dealers, collectors, and museum curators. They deepen their knowledge by reading—the shop's collection of furniture



**Wood great enough to rival the originals.** Irion craftsmen made sure the wood they used was up to the quality of the masterpieces they reproduced. They sawed their own mahogany crotch veneers for the drawers of the Salem chest-on-chest from around 1807, seen with Kendl Monn at left. Brad Ramsay made the reproduction. The Chipendale breakfront below, from an original made in Massachusetts, was built by Jim Swift.

books and auction catalogs is extensive—and also by traveling to museums, private collections, and auction previews to examine important pieces. Perhaps most important, they learn from each other.

### The selection process

After laying out his plan to fill the house with furniture on a par with what he was

*Even the largest and most complex pieces for the commission were handled start to finish by an individual maker.*

seeing in museums, John asked Kendl to “get together for me all the information you can on the great masterpieces of American furniture.” Kendl’s first move was to collect the dozen or so books he consults frequently and flag the most impressive pieces in each. Then he spent several days at Winterthur collecting images of outstanding but unpublished pieces.

Winterthur, the museum and country estate with its unparalleled period rooms, is located in Delaware but not far from Irion,





**Seeing the original piece in person was essential.** Jeff Williams, who built this copy of an 89-in.-long Charleston sideboard, visited the original at Yale University to be sure he got the details right. Seeing the fragile condition of the original gallery, which had been sawn from solid wood, he decided to strengthen the reproduction fretwork by making it from a crossgrain sandwich.

and Kendl has spent countless hours there over the years. Kendl refers to the Winterthur library as “the furniture mecca of the world,” and says, “I could spend the rest of my life there.” In addition to books, catalogs, and account ledgers, the library has an enormous archive of black-and-white photographs documenting American decorative arts. The photos can be accessed by region and furniture type, so you can easily compare, say, a dozen Boston bombé chests or 20 Philadelphia tea tables. Focusing on furniture of the 18th and early 19th centuries, Kendl went through thousands of prints and compiled a thick packet of photocopies—several hundred pieces that he considered the best of the best.

To further immerse John in the world of American furniture, Kendl accompanied him on visits to the period rooms at Winterthur and to other furniture collections including New York’s Metropolitan Museum and Philadelphia’s Museum of Art.

When they began selecting pieces, some choices, Kendl says, “were no-brainers.” Pieces like the Madame Pompadour high chest and the Affleck chest-on-chest were agreed upon immediately. Others took a bit of back-and-forth. John did a lot of research on his own, and if he came across a piece he particularly liked—a Newport kneehole desk, say—Kendl would either agree with the choice or present another kneehole that he thought was a bit better.

John was intent on having pieces representing a range of times and places—from William and Mary through Sheraton and from Massachusetts to South Carolina. But in order to get Kendl to consider furniture made far south of Philadelphia, John reports, “I had to drag him kicking and screaming.” In the case of the Holmes-Edwards bookcase (back cover), Kendl was only convinced after John cajoled him into traveling to Charleston to see it in person.

Kendl stands firmly behind the selections he and John made, but doesn’t claim that they are definitive. “There are a lot of master-

pieces,” he says, “and the choices often came down to what do you really like?”

### Period tools for period pieces

John’s insistence from the outset that there be no changes or shortcuts, that the pieces be exact replicas, not reinterpretations of the originals, matched Irion’s long-established approach. Although the shop has an impressive machine room where stock is prepared and some parts are cut on shapers, the majority of the work on complex pieces like these is done at the bench with hand tools. Irion furniture is typically made with

matched sets of boards, and all joinery and materials are appropriate to the period. Surfaces are finished with planes or scrapers. On the Holmes-Edwards bookcase, the veneers for the serpentine doors were sawn in the



**Geography played a part in the selection.** Irion and its client sought the best pieces in a range of regional styles. This kneehole desk, built by Gerald Martin from an original attributed to John Townsend, is one of several pieces representing the Newport style.

shop and adhered with hot hide glue. In many cases, complex moldings were created by hand with scratch stocks made for the purpose. And all the decorative banding and stringing was created and inlaid in the shop. In almost all cases the finish was shellac, sometimes tinted with aniline dyes and occasionally applied as French polish. Tops of tables and bureaus received lacquer or varnish topcoats.

### High fidelity, with a few exceptions

Irion followed original construction precisely, except in a handful of cases when to do so would be to court catastrophe. When Kendl and Jeff Williams examined the Charleston sideboard at Yale University, for example, they discovered that the sideboard's delicate fretwork gallery—which ran the length of the piece—was not metal, which they had thought possible, but solid wood. And the grain ran vertically, giving it no chance to expand and contract. Not surprisingly, the gallery was rife with cracks and extremely vulnerable to breakage. To avoid a similar fate on their version, they decided to glue up a three-ply blank that sandwiched a thin piece of veneer with its grain running the length of the gallery between two thicker pieces of wood with the grain running vertically.

To maintain fidelity to the originals, Kendl says, it was frequently necessary to make a tool. That might mean custom-grinding a scraper to re-create an unusual contour or filing the end of a nail to produce a stippling tool. The details on many reproductions these days are compromised, Kendl says, "because if the machine can't do it, they just forget it—or they change it."

### Matching the original materials

The quality of the wood in period masterpieces—extremely wide boards with great color and figure—is one of the hardest things for the contemporary craftsman to match. Irion excels at it. The shop has access to extraordinary wood because it gets its supply directly from Lou Irion. The son of the Irion shop's founder, Lou ran the shop himself for many years before branching off into the lumber business in the early 1990s.

Almost every piece in the collection was built with boards hand selected by Lou and shipped down to his old company. For many of the pieces in the collection, Lou supplied mahogany from Peru. One nota-



**Some pieces were "no-brainers."** The selection process was long and painstaking, but a few pieces rose to the top of the list immediately. Thomas Affleck's Philadelphia chest-on-chest from around 1770 was one of them. Gerald Martin built the reproduction, using wood dredged from the Delaware River and said to have belonged to Thomas Affleck himself. Kendl Monn carved the phoenix cartouche.

ble exception is the Affleck chest-on-chest, which is one of John's favorite pieces. Irion's reproduction was built with veneers they sliced from 4-in.-thick boards of Cuban mahogany that are purported to have belonged to Thomas Affleck himself. Dredged from the Delaware River early in the 20th century, they were squirreled away in a barn for decades. Their owner, who considered them too special to use, died in 1998, having left instructions with his daughter to offer them to Irion. They found just the piece to use them in. □

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### WANT MORE?

• Go to [FineWoodworking.com/extras](http://FineWoodworking.com/extras) to see the entire collection, and visit [Knots](http://Knots), our online forum, to share your thoughts about the pieces chosen.

• Turn to the back cover for a close-up view of the Holmes-Edwards library bookcase reproduction, and go to p. 110 to learn how Jeff Williams created a full-size construction drawing of the piece.