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Open & Shut

By Romy Schaler



Robert Martin

My company:
Robert Martin Designs

My Web site:
www.robertmartindesigns.com

My background:

I have a master's degree in painting, but I've made furniture from the time I was in high school. My grandfather was an accountant who wanted to be a cabinetmaker. When I was a kid, I hung out with him in his little shop. I taught furniture-making and art in high school for 10 years. I went to graduate school at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and moved to New York in 1985. In 1986, I started making furniture full-time. I've never taken any professional wood-working classes or even design classes.

My materials:

The central element in all my designs is wood. Then I use stainless steel, aluminum, various composite materials and plastics as they seem appropriate for the design. My general approach to design is akin to minimalism.

My processes:

One process is commission-based. The other is starting with a shape that I've always wanted to see. The first may be an extended collaboration with a client—trying to tame my aesthetics to their needs. The second is where I'm starting from a purely abstract place where I have a sense of making a piece using particular materials.

My inspirations:

The materials themselves often suggest their forms, particularly woods such as mesquite, where every board is going to have a unique array of flaws or characteristics. Oftentimes, those kinds of designs will flow from taking a piece and trying to use it in a way that makes sense. I love to take very simple approaches to things. I love minimalist art.

My challenges:

The central challenge to my business is developing products that have an audience and then finding a way to make those things affordable in that market. Another challenge is having integrity in terms of the way you follow your own aesthetics and convictions—to not use endangered or rain forest woods, for example.

What's next:

I just finished a commission for a large expandable dining table that now is the basis for a more scaled-down product. The particular piece seats 14. I scaled down the aesthetics, yet still used the same vocabulary. It seats four to six people when contracted and eight to 10 people when expanded.

Three words that describe my designs:

Modernist, functional, open.

Three words that describe me:

Optimistic, honest, energetic.



"I don't make art furniture—things that are hard to use or not useful," said Robert Martin of Robert Martin Designs. Angry demonstrates his point as from top to bottom: writing desk and chair, coffee table with high-standed table. **DSR03 001**

