

An Original Angle: A Modern Take On Japanese Kumiko
Artwork By Vince Cook
February 2022

Hi, I am Vince Cook. I am a custom furniture maker and artist here in Brainerd, Minnesota, and my exhibit here at Crossing Arts is called, *An Original Angle: A Modern Take on Japanese Kumiko*.

So I started woodworking when I was really young. My grandfather was a house builder so I started woodworking with him. And likewise my grandmother was very artistic, she painted a lot. So I spent summers with them painting and making wood. And when I graduated from college I ended up getting a job in the travel industry. I lived in Boston for many years and when I was there I still did wood working as a hobby. And I took a lot of classes at the North Bennet Trade School, which is one of the oldest trade schools in the country. So I got a good background in furniture making. And so when I decided to leave that corporate job, I decided the next step should be to start making custom furniture. So back in about 2014 was when I started making woodworking a profession instead of just a hobby.

In, I guess it was 2017, I was looking around at the other custom furniture makers in Minnesota and I wanted something to really differentiate my furniture and so I thought, Kumiko, which I had seen in Japan before, would be a really good fit. I like a mid modern style of furniture so I think it naturally goes along with those lines in that furniture. So I went out and learned how to make Kumiko specifically for my furniture and then as I played around with it more and more I started making some bigger pieces and found, ya know, that it could be a lot like painting, just by combining different patterns and different woods and things, and that's, I think, where the turn really happened. And so, for the last couple of years, I've spent about half my time making Kumiko work, and half my time making furniture.

Most of my Kumiko, I have been showing in arts shows around the country which I really enjoy because you get to meet such a board group of people,

but, I haven't shared it a lot in and around Brainerd and I wanted to do that so I am thinking about trying to collect enough pieces to have a gallery exhibit. So I started making a few more for that early in the fall. And this opportunity came up to show here and I just really jumped at the chance to put them together.

There are quite a few steps that go into making a piece of Kumiko. I really think about it as three big steps with pieces in between.

The first step is milling because I have to cut the strips for all of the pieces myself. You can't buy them so you start out by buying lumber and milling it down into the size strip that gets done by table saw and a planer and a hand plane afterwards to finish it. So that is really step one, the prep work for all the materials I am going to use. When I actually sit down to create a piece, then the first step for me is to draw. I always sit down, I am old school, I use a pen and paper or pencil and paper and I sit down, and sketch out what I am thinking about. I start to fill in the patterns. Oftentimes I'll do a lot of research, cause there are over 200 different traditional patterns in Kumiko so I'm researching the patterns to see what I think would compliment well and would get across what I am trying to do for that piece. And so that process of the creation of laying it all out happens in that step. And really the third step is to start building the piece. And in a small piece, it is generally very straight forward. I'll make the framework, which is called the Jigumi, that's the lattice work. So I make that first, and I cut the pieces that go into that pattern, depending on the color I want, or the textures of the wood that I want in it. And usually, in a small piece, it's pretty straight forward. I just built the piece as I drew it. But as I get into the bigger pieces I find that I am moving things around, or I am changing colors, really trying to get it to be what I want it to or sometimes it takes a completely different direction and I end up making something completely different than I had imagined.

I use a lot of different woods in my kumiko but actually in Japan they use Japanese spruce. And that's important because it is a very straight grain wood. And while it's soft it also machines very well. So I try to emulate that as closely as I can here in the states for the jigumi, the framework piece, of

the art because that is where it's most important, for that to be true. I will use aspen, sometimes spruce if I can get it, although it's not that easy to get, or pine, and that's what I use generally for the lattice work. And then all the other woods that I use, I either source locally, here in Brainerd, I work with a small forestry co-op here and I get wood from a number of people who do that which I love, because putting local woods into my art means so much more. There I pick up local woods like black walnut, oak and ash and different woods that way. To get some real vibrant colors in my pieces because everything's left natural. There is no stain or finish put on the pieces at all, so I have to get some really exotic woods to really get some colors and those I source, generally, down in the twin cities through a specialized wood dealer, and I'll use pieces of wood like purple heart, which comes from South America, Cocobolo which is a really hard but beautiful piece of wood that comes from Africa and I use all different kinds and colors of wood to get those textures and just to really help fill out the design I am trying to make.

What I really wanted to do with the exhibition was to introduce the community to Japanese Kumiko. I am just fascinated by it. It's a craft that has been around since the Edo period in Japan. So the 1600's and it's just not well known in the United States. And so to introduce people to the type of craft it is and to show the level of craftsmanship that they developed all those years ago, in my pieces, and let them see what that entails. Ya know, and to show them my artistic sense as too, the title of the exhibition is *An Original Angle*, I have a different view on it. And while I use traditional patterns and what I do, is to create my own designs and my own pieces to reflect me and my life experiences. I am just really hoping people will enjoy seeing a brand new art form, or what most likely a brand new art form, and taking away some good feelings about what they're seeing.

I think there are a lot of things that inspire me about Kumiko. There happens to be a lot of Kumiko work on the internet now. I look at a lot of it, and go back and research patterns, just the beauty in the patterns themselves give me a lot of inspiration. I'll find a pattern, reverse engineer the geometry to figure out how to make it and that gets me excited to sit

down and actually do it. So there's a lot of inspiration in that. I'm also inspired just by the technical work of it. I really love the woodworking and the preciseness of Kumiko. Building pieces just in that and of itself inspires me. And then a lot of the ideas for pieces themselves come from things I see, around my home or the community, or here. Music plays a very big part in the art that I create. And so a lot of these pieces have some musical attribution to them as well.

I really like the preciseness of it. To make a big piece of Kumiko requires you to be very accurate in what you're doing, down to a tenth of a millimeter. And I really enjoy that part of it. It's like perfectionism in my woodworking and that really gets me excited, that's my favorite part.

The Crossing Arts always has always got such great exhibits going on. My wife and I have been coming down to see the art from various people for several years now. For us it's always a place for inspiration, just knowing there are so many great artists around. And that's why for me as I thought about trying to show my work in this area Crossing Arts was just a perfect fit for that. I am very happy with all the pieces I put together, I think they really show off the different types of Kumiko and really the breadth of what I am trying to do with my artwork. And I think working with the team here at Crossing Arts has been great. All the prep work was done beforehand, the help I got, in terms of setting up the display and everything I think has really come together nicely.

I still make furniture so I have a lot of custom pieces in process right now. I am also getting ready for the art fair season. Most of the summer I spend traveling around the country, showing my art. So I am still making Kumiko pieces for that as well. And I just recently just got a grant from the Minnesota state art board to put together a specific pack geof Kumiko pieces that I will use to help show it in more rural minnesota. So for the next year I will be building those pieces and working on places that I can exhibit those.