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COURTESY, CRAFTSMEN IN WOOD

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While a home's landscaping and architectural design certainly get noticed, it's the front door – perhaps more than anything else – that makes the first impression.

No one knocks casually on a door made by **Wayne Hausknecht**. In his Tucson studio – a restored old adobe – this master craftsman creates sculpture on hinges; artwork that opens and shuts. At the very least, you might call it vertical fine furniture. “I consider all of my doors furniture-grade,” says Hausknecht, who assembles his stunning custom doors the old-fashioned way, with painstaking hand joinery and premium kiln-dried woods. If his doors are carved, he's done the carving himself. Hausknecht's sensational entries are more than just really nice doors, though, they make you rethink what a door can be. And they certainly make you think twice before slouching against them.

Of all those elements of home design that tend to get overlooked, front doors may be the most inherently obvious. After all, most people agree that it's the front door, even more than the facade, that really cements a home's first impression – if only because you'll spend a minute or two staring at it before seeing anything else. It's the front door that strikes the appropriate note of

anticipation or dread for an anxious first date; the front door that encourages solicitors, or tells them to move on. Yet, like anything that we use day in and day out (or not at all, if we use a kitchen or garage door instead), front doors can fall into our mental blind spots. Your pizza deliveryman may know if your paint is peeling, your wood is warping, or your ironwork rusting, but the odds are better than even that you do not.

That's not to say that front-door blindness is a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, a great front door can exact attention as consistently as a toll keeper takes change. Among his many large projects, Hausknecht has crafted huge church doors, and these heavy, elaborate portals are predictably awesome and inspiring. Yet even his smaller doors evoke a similar sense of ritual. At its best, design acknowledges the small ceremonies of existence and gives them greater meaning. The act of entering our home is as significant as anything we do on a regular basis.

Hausknecht has been making front doors since 1981, when he

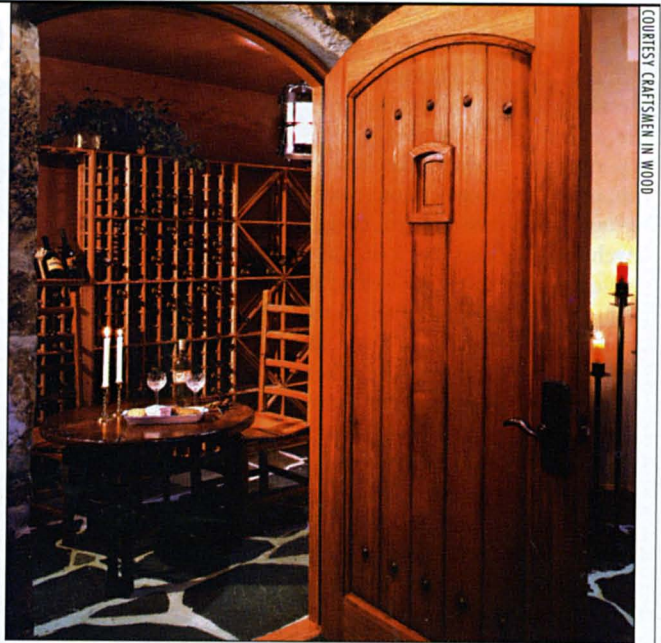
left a career building custom homes to specialize in their entryways. "I make the doors like they've been made forever," he says, meaning he uses fine solid wood, not composites, to craft their components, then assembles them with mortise-and-tenon joints. It's a method that's rarely used for doors these days, simply because it requires such time and exceptional skill. Patience, too, on the part of the homeowner: Hausknecht generally works with a six-to 12-month backlog, but the wood he uses needs about that long to season, anyway. Wood imported to our desert climate cracks and warps as it dries. By giving his materials time to dry out, Hausknecht can select those boards that prove to be straight and stable.

Naturally, all of his doors are made custom to order. Most high-end doors are, and whether you're working with a lone artisan like Hausknecht, or a custom door factory like **Craftsmen in Wood** or **Portella**, both in the Valley, the commissioning process is a collaborative one. Clients may have a specific vision for their door, a vague one, or really no idea at all. The door-maker provides suggestions and guidance as appropriate.

"We use our catalog as kind of a starting point," says **Marti Medina**, owner of the Portella line of wood doors and of **Cantera Doors**, a wrought-iron business. Medina's clients can pick and choose elements from different existing designs, or create a design that is wholly their own. "There is no basic model," echoes **Alexandra Borquez** of Craftsmen in Wood. Hausknecht directs uncertain clients to the photo gallery on his website. "Sometimes, I suggest they bring in pictures from doors they've seen in their travels," he says.

It's more or less impossible to price a custom door without a detailed design: the size and thickness of the door, the type of wood involved (mesquite is more expensive, alder less), and presence or absence of decorative elements like carvings all bump the price up or down. So the design phase is also when the door-maker and his or her client start talking cost.

Custom doors aren't cheap. Hausknecht's simplest plank doors start at around \$2,500, once the cost of hardware (purchased separately but installed by Hausknecht) is factored in. "If someone only has a budget of \$1,500, I'm probably not the right person for them," he says. His largest and most elaborate doors – including an incredible mesquite door that



COURTESY CRAFTSMEN IN WOOD

demanded four straight weeks of carving – can cost \$10,000 or more. For many people, doors like these may simply be out of reach. But if you can stretch your budget, it's not a bad investment, whether you're building a new home or making over an existing one. "You can change the door and change the look of a house and give it street appeal," Medina says. A front door is certainly cheaper than an external remodel.

A big chunk of the price tag on even a factory-made custom door reflects the cost of labor. Front doors do heavy duty. They're constantly opened and closed, pounded by clumsy fists, clawed by anxious dogs, and exposed to every insult that the sun, wind and rain can muster. If they aren't well constructed, they just won't hold up. The performance of Hausknecht's wooden doors derives from time-honored construction techniques, but the good factory-made custom doors achieve their durability through technology.

Both Craftsmen in Wood and Portella use some type of engineered wood core in their doors' stiles, or frames. Unlike solid pieces of wood or boards that are ripped in half, then glued together inside-out (an inexpensive hedge against warping), these engineered cores afford a stable base for a door that won't twist or bow. The finished look of the door is achieved with a veneer, and all of these components are assembled by hand. "It's the most expensive way to build a door," Medina says, but it also guarantees that your door will last for years.

Even a quality wooden door demands regular upkeep: sealing and occasional refinishing. By comparison, metal doors, including wrought-iron ones, are nearly maintenance-free. They also offer a radically different look that many homeowners prefer. Metal doors are often associated with security, but few of those people who seek out Cantera's beautiful custom wrought-iron doors do so for reasons of homeland defense.

"I think it's aesthetics and durability, more than anything," says Medina, whose clients are limited in their designs only by their imaginations (OK, and maybe their pocketbooks). Cantera Doors are manufactured at a facility in Mexico. Other ironsmiths, like **Freitag's Custom Wrought Iron**, make doors to spec right here in the Valley. It should be noted that these two genres, of wooden and wrought-iron door construction, aren't mutually exclusive. Many Craftsmen in Wood clients accent their wooden doors with custom

wrought-iron detailing, done locally. Hausknecht collaborates with “kind of an Old-World blacksmith” in Tucson, a master so stubbornly traditional that he has resisted even an answering machine for his business, let alone a website.

Artisanal products like these are inherently expensive. Yet it's not impossible to go custom on a relatively smaller budget. When a northern New Mexico client of Santa Fe-based **Archaeo Architects** decided that a certain custom-door manufacturer was too expensive, ingenuity yielded an entry door every bit as striking. Archaeo commissioned custom stiles from the general contractor on site, then had them fitted with a pane of Quickship architectural glass from **Bendheim Glass**. This fantastic new product, which encapsulates translucent rice paper in a variety of designs, created an entry door that was private yet not opaque. And the rice paper proved a natural fit with the home's Japanese-influenced architecture.

Another intriguing approach to front doors is the recycling of antique doors. Depending on the door, this isn't necessarily a cost-saver, since doing it right can cost a bundle – easily as much as a fine custom door. Yet certain old doors are simply too beautiful to consign to the scrap heap; too beautiful, even, to delegate as interior privacy doors. If you've found one and fallen in love with it, you do what you need to do. Depending on your perspective, then, it can be either fruitful or dangerous to wander into **Relics Architectural Home & Garden**, an architectural antiques store on Camelback in Phoenix. Among the parade of originals that owners **Todd Zillweger** and **Tim Harris** chaperone through their store, you'll find some very beautiful doors indeed.

Hausknecht, who is infrequently asked to rebuild or stabilize antique doors, notes that few such doors are serviceable as is: “They may have been built really well at the time, but they didn't have the modern glues that we use today,” he says. “They might not be as tight as they should be.” If you can see daylight through them, he points out, scorpions can probably pass through, too. One solution for an old door is to build a frame to support it. The result will have the original's character, yet be structurally sound and tight against the elements (and scorpions).

There's a nice symmetry to Hausknecht working on these old doors, for he says of his own doors, “I expect them to last for hundreds of years.” Front doors always make a home's first impression. Sometimes, they make its last impression, too.

Resources:

- *Archaeo Architects*, 1519 Upper Canyon Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 505-820-7200, archaeoarchitects.com.
- *Bendheim Glass West*, 3675 Alameda Avenue, Oakland, California, 888-900-3064, bendheim.com.
- *Cantera Doors and Portella Doors*, 8295 E. Raintree Drive, Suite F, Scottsdale, 480-367-0944.
- *Craftsmen in Wood*, 5441 W. Hadley Street, Phoenix, 602-296-1050, craftsmeninwood.com.
- *Freitag's Custom Wrought Iron*, 2238 W. Sands Drive, Phoenix, 602-765-9803, freitagcustomiron.com.
- *Wayne Hausknecht*, WGH Woodworking, 419 N. Herbert Avenue, Tucson, 520-798-1133, wghwoodworking.com.
- *Relics Architectural Home & Garden*, 835 E. Camelback Road, Suite 102, Phoenix, 602-265-7354, relicsaz.com.

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