



The Finishing Touch

A family business on the coast of Maine crafts the decorative hardware that adorns doors, drawers, and cabinets in the finest homes.



BY MARIA LAPIANA

Hardware is the unsung hero of fine woodworking. It gets little notice as long as it's doing its job; in most people's minds, functionality tends to trump looks.

That's not how they see things at Lowe Hardware in Rockland, Maine, however. Decorative hardware—from levers and knobs to latches, locks, and escutcheons (those flat pieces of metal around keyholes, door handles, or light switches)—is the mainstay of the Lowe family business, and the Lowes believe that beauty and utility are not mutually exclusive.

The company got its start in the coastal

town of Owls Head. Bill Lowe, the son of a boatbuilder and yacht skipper, was a machinist with extensive boatbuilding experience when he opened his marine hardware shop in 1977. His son, Elliot, now thirty-six, worked for his father through high school. As he watched the demand for luxury yacht hardware grow, Elliot says, "I took a liking to the interior items more, specifically the parts for cabinet and passage doors."

While at college, where he earned a degree in mechanical engineering, he began to see an opportunity for his family's company to grow beyond yachts and

The Lowe family is proud of its Yankee roots, the work ethic of its employees, and the variety of hardware styles (in twenty-two finishes, at last count) it manufactures for the luxury home market. Inspiration comes mostly from yacht design, period architecture, and "the tradition of American builders," says co-owner Elliott Lowe.

into the fine-home market. The Lowes had found their niche.

Now that Bill has retired, Elliot and his sister, Emily, co-own the company. Elliot is president and chief designer in charge of manufacturing. Emily is vice president in charge of administration, customer relations, project management,



IN OUR BACKYARD

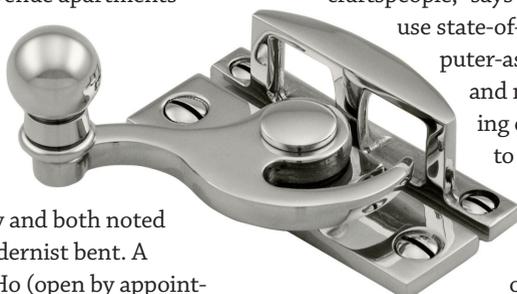


quality control, and scheduling.

Today the Lowes count among their clients Peter Pennoyer Architects, with which they've developed a product line used in many of the New York City firm's projects, from Park Avenue apartments to private residences in the Hamptons. They also work with Toshiko Mori Architects and Tod Williams Billie Tsien, both of New York City and both noted for having a more modernist bent. A new showroom in SoHo (open by appoint-

ment only) anchors the company's marketing efforts in the city.

The seventh-generation Mainers take great pride in their work "and in the work ethic of all of Maine's tradesmen and craftspeople," says Elliot. They use state-of-the-art computer-assisted design and manufacturing equipment to make their hardware, and they finish most of it (in some



twenty-two finishes) by hand in their 11,500-square-foot facility. They have fifteen employees.

Form is important, but it still follows function in an industry where everything has to fit like a glove and operate flawlessly. Engineering and attention to detail are both highly refined at Lowe. The machinery is operated by what Elliot calls "true tradesmen, who understand what our products need to look and feel like after they have gone through the finishing process. They understand how the different electroplated finishes affect the product, how the various patinas will age



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“My father simply wanted his own shop where he could practice his trades,” says Elliot. “He wanted to do this on his own terms; he is a true Yankee.”

with time.” Because they’re in sync with the finishers, there’s a cohesive quality to the product you won’t find anywhere else, he says.

It’s easy for the Lowes to stay on trend, since brass and bronze are today’s go-to finishes and they’ve been using them for

years. What of the trend toward referencing the past and incorporating traditional and classical motifs into modern designs? That’s been a hallmark of the company since the beginning. “Our inspiration comes primarily from an American perspective,” explains Elliot. “We are squarely rooted in the tradition of American hardware builders, and we’re proud to carry on a tradition that spans more than 200 years.”

Bill Lowe didn’t start his company with grand ideas for the future. “My father simply wanted his own shop where he

From the very beginning, founder Bill Lowe believed it was important to provide every client with a custom experience. Today, the company works closely with many architects and builders who demand products—any combination of knobs, levers, latches, and pulls—specific to their projects. Computer-assisted design and manufacturing mean that the company can fill larger orders while still providing the custom designs clients expect.

could practice his trades. He wanted to do this on his own terms; he is a true Yankee,” says Elliot. “He was never trying to grow the business beyond catering to his customers’ needs, primarily one job at a time.”

It was up to the second generation to see—and seize—the opportunities for growth. “Integrating design and manufacturing is the core of the business and the key to its success,” Elliot says. “It enables us to satisfy our customers’ needs by executing custom-finished products in a courteous and timely manner.”

It’s that Yankee spirit and work ethic again, retooled for the twenty-first century. •

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