

# Builder/Architect



*Masterpiece*  
STAIRCASE & MILLWORK

# Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork

## Every Home Should Have Its Own Masterpiece

By Ken Munkens

Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork builds custom staircases for the finest homes throughout the Southeast. However, that is only a small part of a story that reveals how good business practices, practical skills and artistic vision can work in synergy to offer builders and homeowners something truly exceptional and of enduring value.

A visit to Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork very quickly reveals that this is not your run-of-the-mill manufacturing facility. There is energy here. Harmony. Rock, jazz and new wave music plays in the background while men of different ages and backgrounds focus on their work. If you watch them closely it becomes evident that they care greatly about what they are doing. They simply will not accept less than the best from themselves or the work. As one observer quipped, “You cannot pay a person enough to motivate them to have that degree of interest — it has to come from within.” There is something else — which is missing. The common grumbles and complaints of

workers who don’t feel appreciated. Laughter, good-natured ribbing and teamwork abound. Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork is a haven for artists and craftsmen with a creative drive to build something of which they may be proud.

Afterhours at Masterpiece can also be a unique experience. Kevin Schoolcraft, the owner, and other members of the staff might pick up guitars and jam for a while. Fatigue doesn’t exist when the fires of creativity take over. It is an energy that is limitless. Regardless of why they came, in this place at this time, they have found an outlet for their creative talents and are comfortable in an environment that gives them what they need.

### FROM CRISIS TO VITALITY

Masterpiece today is a far cry from the company it was a short 18 months ago. Kevin Schoolcraft bought the company in June 2005, at a time when it was providing excellent quality work but unable to make a profit. Workers were concerned about their next paycheck. And, even though staircases of the highest quality were being built and installed, the company was foundering.

Schoolcraft saw potential in the products and the people of Masterpiece and knew this was a challenge he wanted to take on. Of course, being a triathlete, skydiver and mountain climber, he was accustomed to turning challenges into conquests. Yet, he did face one daunting hurdle. It was essential to win the trust and respect of the staff if anything good was going to happen.

From the beginning, Kevin had the greatest respect for the skill and talent of the Masterpiece staff. He never dreamed of telling these talented and seasoned veterans how to do their jobs. Instead, he set out to do all that he could to make the business more profitable while allowing them to do their best work. He succeeded and the results are impressive. As one staff member stated, “He never once pushed me to finish a job faster. He let me do the job right.”

It was Kevin Schoolcraft’s business acumen that turned things around. He knew he had something very special in the staff and simply had to inject better business practices into the operation.

Kevin Schoolcraft won’t admit it, but facts don’t lie. His tireless efforts, strength, com-







PHOTO BY ANTHONY ROE

mitment, business strategies and people skills breathed new life into an ailing company. It became profitable and vibrant. The decisions he made reflected a subtle genius that stopped the decline and brought Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork to new heights, culminating with the honor of being chosen “2006 Small Business of the Year” by *Business North Carolina*.

### **NOTHING MATCHES A MASTERPIECE**

Time-tested and superior staircases have common structural attributes that provide a uniform look, unique style and stronger finished product. Seasoned craftsmen with decades of staircase experience, who were trained by tough, old master craftsmen, make sure that every design and structure adheres to the Masterpiece European Traditional System (M.E.T.S.) of design and construction.

Centering up riser to riser (the vertical wood part at the back of each tread) and stringer to stringer (side boards into which treads are mounted) makes sure that all parallel and perpendicular members are true.

Balusters (the upright elements that rail is attached to) are centered over stringers because this creates a stronger system. When a Masterpiece staircase is let in, the post base is notched to provide strength and longevity, as well as to eliminate the potential for it to loosen up over time.

Things that are not readily seen include a combination of routed stringers, gluing and wedging that creates a strong squeak resistant structure. Masterpiece stringers are never made of plywood and risers aren't made of MDF (medium density fiberboard). These cheaper materials cannot stand the test of time.

Artists, many of whom possess degrees in fine arts, possess a sense of space and style. It is their critical eye and design ideas that ensure that there are not any visual inconsistencies, construction flaws or awkward designs.

### **VISUALLY APPEALING FUNCTIONALITY**

Art is where you build it. The craftsmen at Masterpiece understand

that a staircase has an important job to do, but who says it can't look good while doing it? Time and again they demonstrate that they know how to make the best use of space and create elegant art, while also creating a superior quality staircase.

While every Masterpiece staircase meets or exceeds building codes, that is just not good enough. Designers and craftsmen make sure every staircase, step-up and railing are safe, both in design and structure, as well as aesthetically pleasing. In addition, they make sure the staircase walks comfortably and that there are not any awkward or dangerous transitions. When possible, smaller risers and longer treads than code requirements are used to accommodate any young children or older adults in the home.

To ensure the best visual effect, every piece of wood in a Masterpiece staircase is custom made in their shop and carefully inspected for color consistency, grain and overall appearance. No mass-produced piece of wood is given this level of attention. With treads, they never use more than three pieces of wood to avoid a mismatched piece that would detract from the overall appearance of the staircase. All rails are manufactured to perfectly fit the profile of the job. Balustrades are carefully hand built on the job site and fit and finish done precisely. The Masterpiece approach may be time consuming, but it assures that the staircase will stand the test of time with dignity and grace.

### **HIGH-TECH ADVANTAGE**

High-tech came to Masterpiece Staircase & Millwork in the form of a Biesse Rover B 4.40 ATS state-of-the-art machining center, custom built in Italy. This incredible machine was purchased through J&G Machinery, Inc., based out of Sanford, NC. When Masterpiece decided to become high-tech, they didn't expect the same level of service that they give their clients from a machine company. However, they were in for a pleasant surprise — this more-than-40-year-old,



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family-owned business immediately became a trusted guide, adviser and troubleshooter. “J&G helped us evaluate our needs and select the right tools,” Kevin Schoolcraft explained. The J&G professionals are knowledgeable, dependable, proactive and honest. Since that first purchase, Masterpiece has added a Doucet wood clamp rack system and an Invicta Quiet Cut planer. When they need something, J&G is their first call. Only sometimes a call isn’t needed, because their sales rep stops by on a regular basis to make sure things are working correctly and to address any issues they may have.

This Biesse Rover B machining center allows Masterpiece craftsmen to make parts for staircases faster and more economically. In fact, it will improve accuracy to within 1/10,000 of an inch. In addition, it allows them to produce highly sophisticated wood parts for cabinets, mantels, millwork and other specialized purposes. In some cases, it can turn out intricate work that cannot be done by hand. The possibilities are limitless.

The three-dimensional carving feature makes the production of hand-carved decoratives, rail, newels and custom entry doors far easier and faster. Radius millwork is also more manageable, and the nesting feature allows them to calculate and cut a lot of parts from a



PHOTO BY VALENTINE DESIGN

single piece of wood. Not only is this more economical, but also visual consistency is improved.

Recently, a homeowner decided they wanted solid carved panel balusters on their staircase. A Masterpiece artist drew an idea on paper. With approval from the homeowner, the rendering was created in a CAD drawing, which was programmed into the Biesse Rover B. Eight hours of machine carving produced one side of the panel. Another eight hours brought it to a point where hand finishing could easily be done. What was achieved in hours would have taken a craftsman months to carve by hand.

The artist remains — only the tools change.

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER

There is a universal trait among artists — they are never satisfied. Because they are driven by the need for expression, whether it is a concept, thought, idea or something only they understand, the object of that expression becomes exceedingly important. No flaw or inaccuracy is acceptable and time loses all meaning. Their focus is on the final outcome. It no longer is a product — it is a piece of art — a piece of them. As a result, the level of attention and service that builders and homeowners receive from Masterpiece is unsurpassed.

### SETTING THE TONE

There is one undeniable truth: A well-crafted and majestic staircase is a focal point in the home that sets the tone for how owners and visitors view the rest of the house. It is structural art created to fit naturally in a specific space. When the right fit, look, feel and function are achieved, the home takes on its own unique personality. To achieve this lofty goal requires both highly sophisticated carpentry skills and an artist’s eye.

This is a combination that can’t be beat. ■

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