



Above: "Credenza"
Opposite: "Totems"

FURNITURE AND SCULPTURE

ENVISIONING THE UNSEEN WORLD

The unique creations of Hillary Riggs.

By Jo Ann Baldinger

Hillary Riggs has been designing and making furniture in New Mexico for almost 20 years—at first with her pioneering, often-imitated willow-twig line called Sombraje, and, since 1995, through the aptly named Quimera, Spanish for “a flash of inspiration.” To create her unique, custom-made, hand-carved and hand-painted furniture and sculptures, she utilizes skills usually considered to be the territory of anthropologists, botanists, mystics, and seers.

“I believe there is an unseen archetypal world that some of us have access to, through meditation and visualization,” Riggs affirms. “My job as an artist is to go places where cameras and technology cannot go and faithfully record what I see there.”

Seated in a quiet corner at Collaboration, the furniture showroom for Quimera, we are surrounded by some of Riggs’ one-of-a-kind pine beds, armoires, decorative

screens, wall pieces, mirrors, and cabinets. Each one is meticulously carved and painted, and no piece is ever duplicated. The signature oversized roses, lilies, sunflowers, irises, and tulips that adorn them have been joined by decorative geometric patterns that call to mind indigenous African, Asian, and Native American designs. Riggs’ recent work has included a dining table and matching upholstered chairs embellished with geometric patterns,



PHOTOS BY MARK NOHL



"Sunflower Headboard"



"Cat-Tails Screen"

and four eight foot tall carved standing pillars, or columns, which the artist refers to as "totems."

These totems are just one part of a large project commissioned by a Colorado couple for the home they are building. They represent a new direction in Riggs' artistic path. "They are not furniture; they are not functional. They are sculptures," she explains.

The totems are simple, their clean, Egyptian-like geometries softened by Art Nouveau-flavored swirls and spirals. Carved into the rectangular base of each column is one of the archetypal patterns that have drawn Riggs' attention: a Celtic cross on the back of a turtle, stylized representations of birds and other animals, a labyrinth. "The labyrinth is a motif that has shown up in cultures around the world and across the centuries. You see it, for example, in Australian aboriginal paintings, which are maps of the dreamtime. The labyrinth is a map of the journey of the spirit into the other world."

Riggs discovers these patterns by entering altered trance states through meditation, visualization, swimming, or walking. "This is something I've done for a long time," she informs. "I have a very rich inner world of dreams and ideas that I bring into this reality when I make art. But now I am beginning to see that what I experience in these states isn't just my own imagination, but something universal. I understand that I'm not just making it all up."

"Underlying all cultures are these patterns of life, a form of intelligence that works through decipherable codes. I'm reading a book about shamans in the Amazon rain forest, whose drawings resemble the DNA structures of plants. The author says the entire biosphere is about DNA communicating with itself. DNA can be read like a book; each life form has its own story because of the millions of patterns in the way they are formed."

This concept makes sense to Riggs, with her life-long interest in the structure of plants, flowers, and abstract geometries. Growing up in Mexico City, where her artist parents designed and manufactured woven textiles, she recalls being entranced by beautifully rendered botanical illustrations. Even as a child, she had a sense of underlying patterns within the forms of the natural world.

Later, as an art student in Europe and San Miguel de Allende, she was drawn to abstract expressionism, a style of painting which, she points out, is also based on underlying order. "There are rules for the way everything in this world is constructed. Even a chair follows a certain pattern, a



"Treasure Cabinet after Taos Pueblo"
(Collection of Gil and Nancy Waldman)

defined order. This is what I've been practicing all these years."

Paradoxically, the more she explores trance states, the more Riggs appreciates the furniture she makes. "It grounds me in the real world; it's solid and beautiful, and will outlast both me and my clients. You have to understand and respect the underlying structure of things. Furniture is that foundation for me. It's a very good teacher."

Five years ago, when Riggs sold Sombraje, she vowed to herself that she would do only one-of-a-kind pieces. "When you do production furniture you commit to one pattern and then you crank it out, even with variations. Someone once said, 'When a bush makes roses, no two are alike.' So why do we have this fascination with the cookie-cutter approach? I tell my clients I will work with them in a collaborative process, but I will not duplicate any piece I've already made. This is the way I balance my need to have a business with my need to



grow as an artist. Anybody who buys a piece of furniture from me is buying part of this process that I committed to as an artist."

At the same time, the years Riggs spent

running Sombraje taught her that the main priority must always be to satisfy the customer, a lesson she still holds sacred. "My customers show faith in me—they give me money to make something they've never seen before. In return, my goal is that when they get the piece they are happier than they even imagined they would be."

"Every now and then I have to tell a potential client, 'I don't think either you or I will be happy with what I make for you.' But mostly it goes the other way: listening to what my clients need allows me to go further in my own work, to stay very close to that creative process while making functional objects. The secret is doing it with love," Riggs believes. "If you agree to do a job, then you do it with love."

Furniture and sculptures by Hillary Riggs of Quimera are shown at Collaboration, located at 544 South Guadalupe Street. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday. (505) 984-3045.