

SPECIAL ISSUE

NEW MEXICO

MAGAZINE



Intricately carved wood from India finds new life in this Santa Fe home's living room. Incorporating imported wood details from La Puerta, the fireplace mantel, built-in entertainment console and coffee table strike a harmonious balance with traditional Southwest-milled vigas and Pueblo pottery.

NEW LIFE FOR ANCIENT WOOD

Approximately 6,000 hand-carved doors alone await homes in La Puerta's Santa Fe salvage yard.

A HUGE SALVAGE YARD. That might be your first impression of La Puerta Originals, on the outskirts of Santa Fe. Scott and Melissa Coleman see something quite different. For them, the rows of standing doors, columns, cabinets and scraps of plain and carved wood reflect hundreds of years of cultures from such areas as the remote Swat Valley in northeast Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan as well as India, Morocco, Spain, Mexico and Central and South America.

You might say the Colemans have rescued these ancient wooden artifacts and have given them new life.

"Old wood has a history and a memory," says Melissa Coleman, as she leads a tour of the yard, which contains more than 6,000 antique doors and hundreds of wooden cabinets and carved columns and corbels, which they organize by region. "When clients select pieces from our collection to be made into a door, cabinet or furniture, it brings a unique richness to their home," she adds.

Two decades ago Scott Coleman,



This detail of carved wooded beams shows the meticulous artistry that goes into the wood fragments that La Puerta imports.

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with degrees in architecture and design, spent time studying the architecture of old buildings in Europe and other regions. As a builder, he began combing the world for antique doors and old wood to use in new ways for his custom homes.

"The vast majority of our doors and other architectural elements have been salvaged from areas throughout the world where there's no historic preservation," Scott explains.

He began recovering discarded materials from buildings being destroyed by neglect or war in their countries of origin, and shipped them back by the container loads—pieces doomed to be firewood or landfill. After studying the various cultures, he felt compelled to preserve the cultural importance as well as the craftsmanship of the artisans.

In 1992, he founded La Puerta, and when he married his wife, Melissa, six years ago, she became president and CEO. After years of renting, they recently purchased 4½ acres of land in Santa Fe County. They remodeled the site's building into a showroom and offices, and created a new 10,000-



Salvaged doors have been incorporated into this head-and-foot board set.

LA PUERTA
IS THE NATION'S
LARGEST RESOURCE
FOR ARCHITECTURAL
WOOD MATERIALS,
INCLUDING ANTIQUE
DOORS, COLUMNS,
GATES, SHUTTERS
AND MORE.

square-foot manufacturing facility.

"Our mission is to design and produce beautiful, one-of-a-kind products from architectural antiques and old wood, and by doing so, to help preserve our world's natural resources and limit further deforestation," Scott explains as he stands over a large wooden table covered with his designs and the plans of one of the huge homes where his designs will be incorporated.

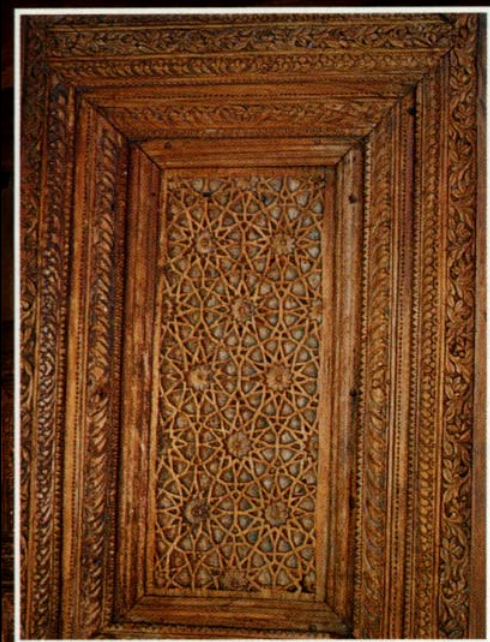
"I design everything that we sell. Although much of my design work is in standard-size doors, gates, windows, cabinetry and furniture for custom homes, some are oversized ornate doors, beds and tables."

Who are these clients? Scott explains that many customers are people longing for the Euro-Spanish lifestyle. "They're seeking the creativity and nonmanufactured quality that we provide. It's important to them to know the authenticity and history of the wood and where it comes from."

Besides individual homeowners, contractors and architects come from around the country to work with Scott and integrate La Puerta's products into their custom projects. Two-thirds of the company's business is from out of state.

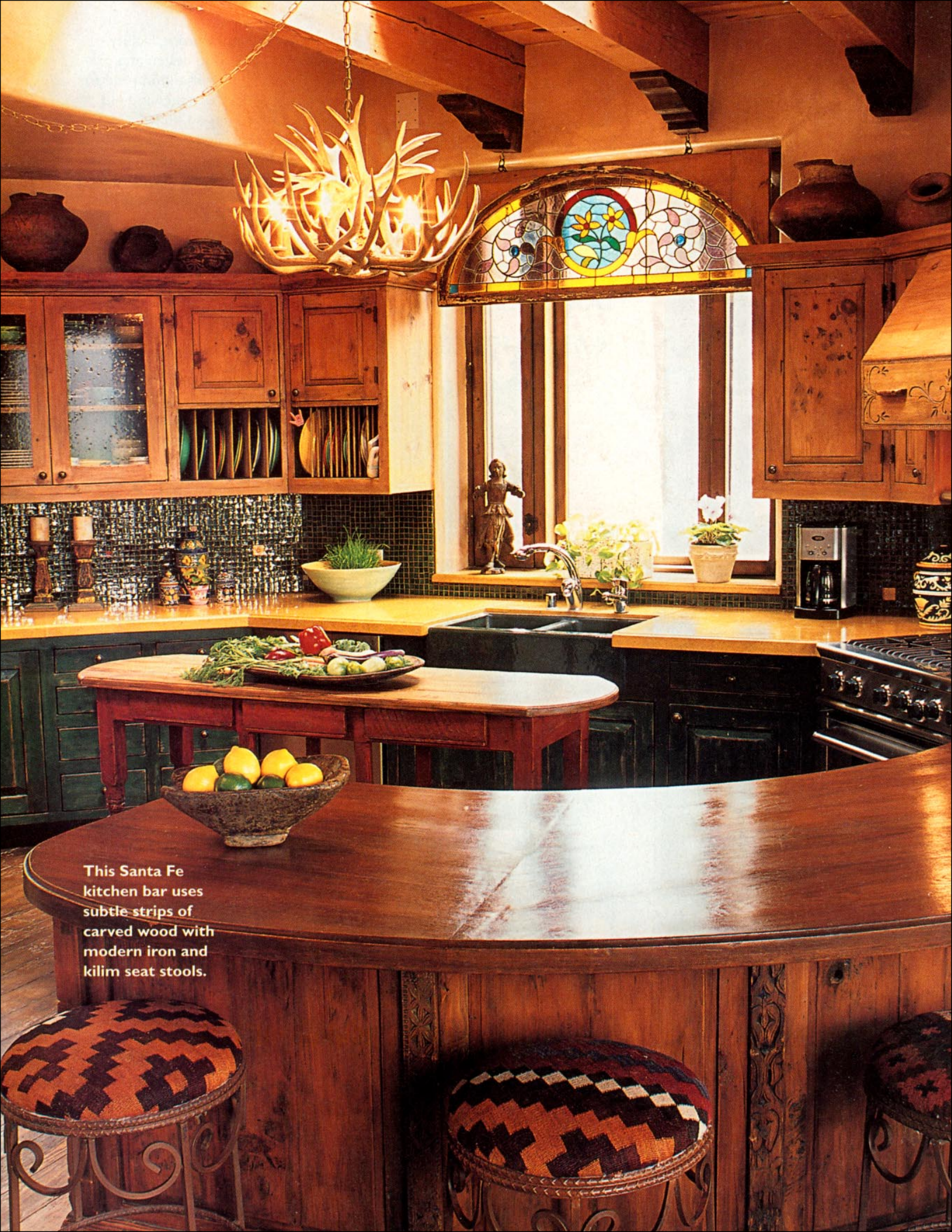
Scott custom-designs each piece and educates clients about the history, country of origin and the initial uses of the wood. Looking at the vast field of products—doors without frames or metal hinges, door jams and panels held together with hand-forged nails and corbels that once decorated important buildings—it can be overwhelming to imagine what to use to enhance a modern home. The design process allows the client to choose the material and participate in the design of the products, including (besides new handcrafted doors and gates) functional pieces such as tables and chairs, mirrors and frames, headboards for beds, windows, kitchen cabinetry and even entertainment centers.

For more ideas, clients can peruse the library, where volumes of books reveal the history, origin and context of the inventory. Portfolios and photo books of past projects show thousands of images of doors, gates and furniture that he's designed over the years for clients. The vast choice of finishes incorporate mostly organic, water-based finishing



Above—This ornate Indian door now leads to a Santa Fe bedroom.
Below—Strips of salvage wood are perfect for framing doors and windows.





This Santa Fe kitchen bar uses subtle strips of carved wood with modern iron and kilim seat stools.



SCOTT AND MELISSA
SHARE TIPS:
DECORATING
WITH
ANTIQUE
PIECES

“OUR MISSION IS
... TO HELP PRESERVE
OUR WORLD’S
NATURAL RESOURCES
AND LIMIT FURTHER
DEFORESTATION.”



techniques. Oil-based petroleum products are rarely offered because of their harmful effect on the environment.

“Old growth wood doesn’t necessarily need to be treated to last, because it already has cured itself over time,” Melissa explains. “New wood, harvested from tree farms, comes from young, fast-growing trees and must be chemically treated before use.”

La Puerta uses mostly reclaimed and re-milled lumber. “There’s almost no old-growth wood left in the world today,” Scott admits. “We find old-growth wood from old buildings throughout the country and re-mill it for our products.” They also use parts of old doors, columns and cabinet panels from India and Pakistan.” He estimates that he owns the largest collection of Swat Valley (Pakistan) artifacts in the United States. All together, the inventory comes from 14 countries and 15 years of collecting.

He notes that creating the finish is a living process. “We protect and support the wood, sealing it with water-based instead of chemical-based sealers and waxes, and only using water-based paints, before creating the final object. Many times we begin with the paint layers already on a piece and take as many as seven to nine different steps to match the existing color.”

Melissa and Scott are partners in the

1. Take an old trunk, cut a hole in the top and place a sink inside for a vanity.
2. Cut and piece together small pieces of carved wood to make a picture or mirror frame.
3. Take an old column or beam, split it in the middle, frame it around the jamb of a door and paint or stain it to match.
4. Peruse antique stores for old pieces of molding. Tack them directly onto the wall for a mirror frame.
5. Make a table by sanding and painting an old door and top with glass. Add legs with a base of stone or wooden blocks.
6. Remove old panels from a door; cut a square frame inside, and insert a photo or piece of art.
7. Metal rings once used for horse bridles and harnesses make great pull rings for drawers and cabinets.

very best sense. At 40, she brings organization to the company and ensures financial responsibility. This includes managing the finances, marketing and human resources. The couple has two young children, 3-year-old Story and 5-year-old Chance.


“There’s a clean division of responsibility, which allows me to design and create,” says 46-year-old Scott. As they describe their home—featured last year in *Mountain Living* magazine—their energy, love of their family and work is apparent.

Today La Puerta is the nation’s largest resource for architectural wood materials, including antique doors, columns, gates, shutters and more. They have more than 40 employees, and more than half of them work in their wood and finish shops, handcrafting each piece. They hire and train talented artisans and teach them La Puerta’s process.

According to Scott, their favorite piece of the La Puerta collection is a ceremonial effigy ladder from the Darien Rain Forest, located at the Continental Divide between Panama and Columbia. The Choco Indians carved the piece decades ago. The carved face expresses the trees’ spirit and conveys not only the life of the material but also its utilitarian use.

“This is a value we hold in our company. To us, wood is living and has spirit unto itself. We’re committed to finding new uses for old things,” Scott explains. “What we do is an expression of an awareness that wood that has withstood years of use and survived the elements is valuable and deserves to be restored. Besides designing objects that complement people’s homes and lifestyles, we also hope to cultivate their understanding and appreciation of the material. In doing so, they become aware of the beauty and the total uniqueness of their piece.”

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To contact La Puerta Originals, call (505) 984-8164, visit their showroom at 4532 NM 14 (just off I-25 at exit 276A or 278), or logon to www.lapuertaoriginals.com. 

Eileen Stanton is featured in “Storytellers” on Page 6.