

# LUXE

THE AUSTIN AND SAN ANTONIO HOME REDEFINED™



## THE CONSUMMATE CRAFTSMAN

WRITTEN BY JENNY MILLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF STOCKTON

When it comes to establishing a homestead, pair authenticity with a requisite special something, and you'll begin to see artists settle in. In fact, those were the qualities that drew Wells Mason to Coupland, a town of 200 people with no stop-lights, about 30 miles east of Austin.

From this sleepy outpost, Mason runs Ironwood Industries, a thriving company inside a pair of side-by-side historic buildings. It's hard to know exactly what to call Mason. An artist, a designer, a furniture builder, a welder or a craftsman? Any will do. He regularly fills each of these roles and remains inspired by the variety.

"The first piece of furniture I ever built collapsed the first time somebody sat on it!" he recalls. The Atlanta native was then a student at the University of Texas at Austin, studying neither art nor design, but 17th-century British literature. "The subject taught me how to examine a problem from different angles," he explains.

Since then, Mason has clearly nailed the technical side of his work; buckling chairs are a thing of the past. Yet, he still brings an inventive approach to each piece with both his site-specific commissioned projects and the experimental Umasi furniture collection. At Ironwood, a credenza, in the works for a client, sits just off-center on its steel base, giving the piece "movement." Mason and his team added a tomato-red inside panel to the otherwise black-lacquered piece. "I like to give my pieces layers," he says. "It always elevates them."

Though his custom work is robustly in demand, it's the Umasi collection, which debuted in 2006, that gained Mason a flurry of recognition. For Umasi, the artist uses scraps and repurposed materials to create impressive pieces—a weathered ship's mast, a shard of steel, the base of an old trampoline—as a "comment on the things we throw away" and to "blur the line between furniture and sculpture." One chair, displayed in the shop window, accomplishes this. Made from blue lacquered birch and a segment of telephone pole, it slants sideways, discouraging sitters. The piece is arguably ornamental, but the collection's tables, chairs and benches are on the whole perfectly practical—marrying fun with function, irreverence with social commentary—reflecting Mason's new and intriguing approach to contemporary design.