

# BIG SKY JOURNAL HOME

Mountain Living and Architectural Design



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**WESTERN FOCUS**  
*People and Profiles*

NEW THOUGHT MEDIA

## The Spirit of the West in Jackson, Wyoming

Behind the scenes with  
Allison Merritt at the Western  
Design Conference Exhibit + Sale

WRITTEN BY SEABRING DAVIS

**ABOVE:** Western Design Exhibit + Sale owner Allison Merritt stands in the Designer Show House.

**J**ACKSON, WYOMING, IS BEST KNOWN FOR ITS MOUNTAINS. The Teton Range, with some of the steepest slopes in North America, attracts climbers, hikers, and skiers from all over the world, both summer and winter. But for a 10-day stretch every September, Jackson is also a haven for Western art lovers.

The annual Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival offers local home tours, fine art exhibits, quick draw painting events, art auctions, and food pairings in galleries. Anchoring it all is the Western Design Conference Exhibit + Sale (WDC), where handmade



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“We ask the artists to be forward thinking with the designs that they showcase here, because a lot of the work will set trends in the overall Western design world.” — ALLISON MERRITT

leather couture meets one-of-a-kind Western furniture meets custom cowgirl boots meets hand-forged bed frames. This year’s WDC event features a “Designer Show House” with six rooms composed by selected interior designers. Bringing 130 artisans of fashion, furniture, and accessories with a unique Western flair together under one roof isn’t a simple undertaking, but WDC executive director Allison Merritt makes it seem that way.

“What I love about this show is the functionality of it,” explained Merritt, who bought the rights to the event four years ago after working for a decade as the event director. “These are things you will *live* with, beautifully appointed things that have a story. They aren’t overly precious, they are meant to be loved.”

When Merritt talked about the WDC Exhibit + Sale, her enthusiasm was infectious. Her smile lit up the room as she recounted the mix of handcrafted works in leather, metal, wood, and

wearable art. She sashayed through the massive Snow King Center at the 2015 event wearing a flattering, long leather skirt made by Montana Dreamwear, a perennial exhibitor. Passing other exhibitors, she knew each person by name.

**ABOVE:** Showcasing a creative blend of hand-made home furnishings and fashion, the 2015 Western Design Conference in Jackson, Wyoming, included the Buffalo Collection club chair and a contemporary interpretation of an elk tooth Native American dress by Sandra Okuma.  
**BELOW:** Silversmith Matt Litz used tooled leather and silver elements to enhance a modern handbag.



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As a new artist in the WDC, in 2015 furniture maker David Stine saw his live-edged tables appeal to customers.

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Western decor. WRJ Design's showroom incorporated contemporary elements and work from artists including Ashley Tudor, who put a refined spin on traditional antlers by adding a bronze skull. Jackson's longtime go-to gallery, Fighting Bear Antiques, displayed works from historic Western artists, and brought rare Native American decorative arts to bear in their space. The work of another Jackson designer, Kathy Reedy, stood out with a dining room setting that incorporated sleek

furnishings with rustic textures.

The Designer Show House will return to the 2016 event in an expanded form, according to Merritt.

"Every one of these pieces has a story to tell. They are uniquely made by unique artists and I imagine they will become heirlooms for some people who will pass these things down from one generation to the next," Merritt said. "I love being a part of that."

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