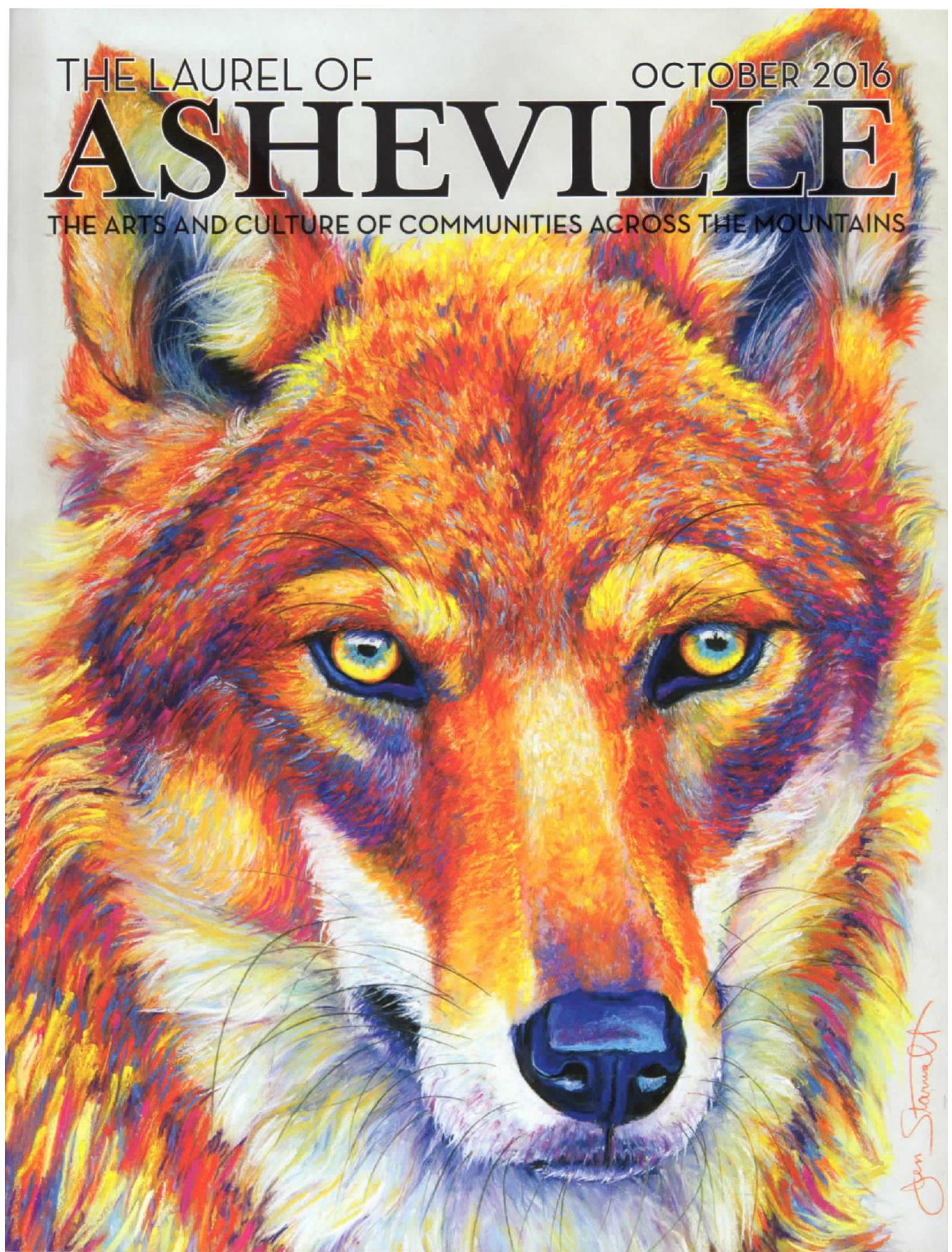


THE LAUREL OF

OCTOBER 2016

ASHEVILLE

THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS



Jan Starnall

Highland Craftsmen Repurpose Unwanted Tree Bark

BY JAKE FLANNICK

When they started fashioning salvaged tree bark into decorative wall coverings two and a half decades ago, Chris and Marty McCurry were not seeking to merely carve out a niche in the design world. Instead, the innovative couple built what has become a venerable Western North Carolina small business on a broader vision: blurring the line between the built environment—homes and office buildings—and the natural world.

Based in Spruce Pine, about an hour's drive northeast of Asheville, Highland Craftsmen Inc. sources bark from trees harvested by logging companies in the Southern Appalachians, mainly from nearby forests. The bark, which would otherwise go to waste, is used to craft all sorts of

wall coverings for commercial and residential buildings, including laminates, paneling and shingles. The largely handmade products are part of the company's brand name, Bark House. They are durable and vary in style and texture, from contemporary to luxury to rustic.

In early August, the company became the first in the world to receive the highest rating for product sustainability under an internationally recognized certification program. Part of the Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute, the program rates products based on the type of materials used to make them, their environmental impact and how they are processed. The platinum rating was awarded to the company for its shingles and wall panels made from poplar bark, replacing its previous rating, gold, the second highest. The company uses other types of bark for its interior wall coverings, including cherry, white pine and yellow birch.

The McCurrys have enjoyed watching their business prosper since they founded it in 1990. At that time, home construction in the region was picking up, and the couple wanted to bring a "refined sense of nature" back to the

building industry, Chris says. Back then, words like "green" and "sustainable" were less ubiquitous.

"We were doing what we were doing when green was still a color," Marty says. He notes that, if done sustainably, harvesting trees in the Southern Appalachians does not have a harmful environmental impact.

While its products and sustainable manufacturing processes have remained largely unchanged, the

company's reach has greatly expanded, growing to sell its artisanal goods in every state and overseas. Most of its bark comes from within a 50-mile radius of Spruce Pine. Employing more than two dozen workers, it works with between 175 and 250 logging crews each year. The bark is processed onsite, untouched by chemicals like sealants and stains.

Over the years, the company has drawn attention not



Photo by Scott Pearson Photography

only for its products, but also for the holistic philosophy that is embodied in its tagline, "beautiful outside and within." It has received a number of awards including "Best for the World," a certification from the nonprofit organization B Lab that measures intangibles such as social responsibility and environmental friendliness of companies in various industries around the world.

Beyond that, the Bark House at Highland Craftsmen has had an economic impact in the region, helping strengthen the building and forestry industries, as well as partnering with economic development groups. The company has also helped improve the streetscape of Spruce Pine, where Chris grew up, planting trees and helping build a small park.

"The people of this region have built strong bonds around the utilization and conservation of natural resources," Chris says. "We have always taken a holistic approach to business, from the low impact of our product lines to the high impact of our social outreach."

Highland Craftsmen Inc. is located at 534 Oak Avenue in Spruce Pine. For more information visit barkhouse.com, find them on Facebook or call 828.765.9010.