

OregonLive.com The personal touch of an agent. The speed of cyberspace. BOOM! Introducing My Quote. Get an auto quote in 5 minutes* with My Quote. [Quote Me](#) **AMERICAN FAMILY INSURANCE** Legal, Legal,

Sign in | Register for free [f Sign in with Facebook](#) **Site Search** **Search Local Business Listings** Brought to you by: **The Springs at Tanasbourne** » **REQUEST A TOUR**

Search for keywords, people, locations, obituaries, We [Go](#)

Home **News** **Opinion** **Sports** **Entertainment** **Living** **Interact** **Jobs** **Autos** **Real Estate** **Rentals** **Classified Ads** **Shop**

Entertainment **Books** **Comics** **Dining** **Events Calendar** **Music** **Performance** **Puzzles** **TV/Film** **Visual Art**

Top Stories  **Journey to Everest within reach**  **OHSU scientists make AIDS breakthrough**  **Follow The Oregonian on Facebook**

Home > **Portland & Oregon Art**

iPhone cases made in Portland by Grove wrap an old-fashioned idea around a high-tech product

Published: Sunday, March 06, 2011, 5:15 PM Updated: Wednesday, March 09, 2011, 1:52 PM

By **David Stabler, The Oregonian** [Follow](#)

[Like](#) [f](#) 93 people like this. [Tweet](#) 31 [Share](#) [f](#) [Share](#) 93 [Email](#) [Comment](#) 1 [Print](#)



+View full size Photos by Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian
Joe Mansfield, left, and Ken Tomita formed Grove less than a year ago.

Correction appended

It began, like so many things do, with a football.

Two guys tossing a ball in the street, instead of working. And pretty soon, along with the ball, ideas began spiraling between them. One guy was a furniture designer, the other a digital arts major. Next thing you know, they formed a company. Less than a year old, **Grove** wraps an old-fashioned idea around a hot, high-tech product.

Meet the bamboo iPhone case, one answer to a dilemma for our age: how to protect your pristine gadget from scratches, nicks and dents.

Grove brings tech precision and old-fashioned craftsmanship to an imperfect material: wood. It shaves honey-hued bamboo radically thin, carves exact curves, etches art with lasers and rubs on oil finishes with human hands.

Where was the last time you saw wood paneling embrace electronics? Your parents' rec room?

It's a story about a young, nimble company diving into a hyper-competitive industry where Apple products represent a gold rush for designers. In typical Portland



SHOP DESIGNER FASHION, HOME AND BEAUTY AT UP TO 80% OFF [JOIN NOW](#)

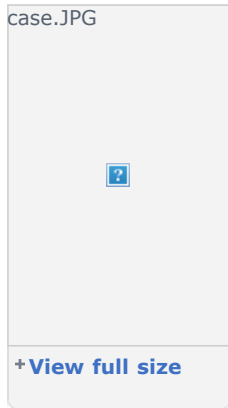
More Portland & Oregon Art

Most Comments **Most Recent**

Portland & Oregon Art stories with the most comments in the last 7 days.

- 6** [Portland Art Museum receives 34 works from local donors for its permanent collection](#)
- 1** [Johannes Girardon's 'Light Matters', at the junction of image and reality, viewing at PDX](#)

fashion, the story involves two idealistic young men, no experience, lots of experimentation, one flop and a bunch of machinery they had no idea how to use.



Owners Ken Tomita, 32 and Joe Mansfield, 26, aren't businessmen. They don't market their work or outsource it. They don't want to grow too big and they don't design cases for other brands of phones.

What they do is make their products themselves -- they just added an iPad 2 case -- as well as combine traditional materials with contemporary design and sell directly to customers. Their iPhone cases come in plain bamboo, or engraved with artwork -- they have 35 pre-existing designs or they can customize them.

Before Grove took over their lives, Tomita designed **custom wood furniture** with a Japanese influence. Mansfield, a University of Oregon graduate, **engraved laptops**, their cases and slipcases for Moleskin notebooks. Their backgrounds in wood design and art engraving merged to create Grove's products.

"None of us has formal experience in what we do, and we are all expected to learn and create our own techniques and procedures from the ground up," Tomita says.

Consumer reviews of Grove's phone cases have been positive: "I find myself randomly staring and smelling the case in public," writes Jacob B on Grove's website. "I think this scares people."

Grove iPhone Case
Ken Tomita and Joe Mansfield talk about the thinking behind their bamboo iPhone case.
[Watch video](#)

Gizmodo, a technology blog about consumer electronics, had an issue with the case slipping off the phone, but praised the craftsmanship. "It feels about as thin and precise as a wooden case could be," the reviewer writes. "I can't ask for more."

They can break if dropped, owners have noted, but Tomita says he hasn't heard of damage to the phones.

Grove joined the saturated market last August, but the company's timing was nearly catastrophic. The very day owners Tomita and Mansfield launched their gleaming new 3G iPhone cases, the design of the iPhone 4G became public in a now famous story of a guy who unwittingly leaked the design of the new phone by leaving it in a California bar.

3G phones were dead on arrival.

"Nobody wanted a 3G design," Mansfield says. "It ended up being a training exercise."

"That's looking on the positive side," Tomita adds. Grove no longer sells 3G cases.

Typical turnaround time to launch a new product at a large company is four months, Tomita says. Grove retooled its design and launched the new iPhone 4 cases in six weeks, barely meeting the phone's August release date. Sales have been "really successful," he says, with cases sold in 50 countries so far. Forty limited-edition cases made of colorful skateboard decks, designed by Lindsay Holmes of Portland's **MapleXO**, sold out in 10 minutes, at \$200 each. Ten remaining skateboard cases are being auctioned off on eBay, with half the proceeds going to the Oregon Humane Society. The first one sold for \$810. The final five will be auctioned on eBay beginning Tuesday.

They've had Apple employees ask for cases -- at a discount.

Now, Grove is in scramble mode again over a bamboo case for the iPad. Last week, Apple announced its new iPad 2 would be released Friday, almost a month earlier than expected.

Grove iPhone cases

A Grove iPhone case begins as a flat sheet of bamboo thick enough to knock a panda sideways. Of 1,000 species of bamboo, only one will do because of its color and warmth: Moso, grown in China. Not the kind pandas eat, by the way.






The bamboo board goes into a \$70,000, wing-ding milling machine, where a computer-controlled rotating cutter carves out the shell of the case -- 10 at a time. The boys didn't know how to use the machine, so they hired a friend to teach them. The cutter is precise to within .001 of an inch, which is a good thing because the geometry of Apple's iPhones would make Euclid's head spin.

Wood is tricky to cut uniformly, so human hands sand rough patches inside and outside the ribbon-thin cases,


Contemporary Art

Most Active Users [What's this?](#)

Users with the most **OregonLive.com** comments in the last 7 days

- 170**  **thatkewlgirl**
- 137**  **Mayonasia**
- 133**  **EagleforFree...**
- 111**  **Izzy**
- 96**  **vwolfe**

Users We Love

 **OregonLive.com contributor 'lynnne97030'**
Frequent commenter also posts articles to My Oregon public blog.

[More Users We Love](#)

Connect with OregonLive.com [What's this?](#)



[All Facebook & Twitter accounts >>](#)

Recommendations

Login You need to be logged into Facebook to see your friends' recommendations

 **Ndamukong Suh's new Chrysler commercial puts Portland in spotlight (video)**
484 people shared this.

"Lots of pressure, very little time but this is where we really shine," Tomita says. "We will have a prototype ready in a few days and will start selling on March 11." He estimated a timeline of three to six weeks to receive an iPad 2 case.

Competitors steal their ideas as soon as they go public, Tomita says. "Our edge, we're fast. People copy us immediately, but they're not a threat because there's such a difference in quality."

Mansfield enjoys talking to artists from around the world. He gets pitches from Portugal, Russia, Spain, Japan and the United States, he says, and accepts about 5 percent. He adds two new designs a month.

"Bamboo is a tough 'canvas'," Mansfield says. "Not all designs work well. Photographs don't work."

Grove also sells bamboo art, such as wall hangings engraved with images of animals or faces.

Tomita and Mansfield have tried to keep a few things central to their business, which employs 10 people, including their friends and relatives. Five are full-time. Making things in the United States is one. Making the product themselves is another. Selling directly to customers and reducing waste are important, too. The bamboo frame that comes with the case can become a wall hanging for framing a photo.

Down the road, Tomita and Mansfield would like to become less dependent on Apple products. "So our destiny is not tied to someone else's product," Tomita says. "I think Grove is about a lot more than just the product. We are both really idealistic and have always believed that if you do a good job, do the right thing, and treat people right things will work out in the long run."

-- David Stabler

The article reflects a correction published March 10, 2011. The weight of Grove's bamboo iPhone case is 0.6 oz. A story in Monday's How We Live section incorrectly stated the weight.

along their sloping edges and through the tiny holes. More hands apply four coats of oil, waiting eight hours between coats to enhance the grain. Still other hands glue rubber bumpers inside the case and apply a tiny band of wood around the bezel edge.

Now comes the fun part -- adding art to the case.

The empty cases nestle in a laser engraver that looks like a tanning bed. As the laser glides back and forth like an old dot matrix printer, pulses of light etch designs of whimsy (happy/sad octopuses, frisky birds) and inspiration (wind, sun, trees) on their backs, 72 to a batch. Customers can choose existing designs or submit ideas of their own.

Eighty percent of iPhone owners buy cases for their phones, Grove co-owner Ken Tomita estimates. Most cases are plastic, silicone rubber or leather. Grove cases add .6 of an ounce to the phone's weight. The case comes in two pieces, with a slide-off bottom for docking and sell for between \$69 and \$99 at grovemade.com.

-- David Stabler



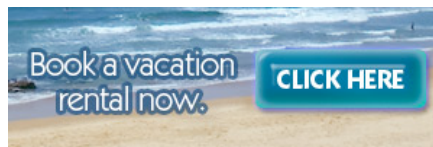
Newport woman wakes up after surgery speaking with British accent

1,663 people shared this.

Facebook social plugin

From Our Advertisers

Advertise With Us >



Popular Tags

What's this?

- art arts funding blue sky gallery brian ferriso bruce guenther creative advocacy network disjecta elizabeth leach gallery first thursday lake oswego laura russo gallery lee kelly milwaukie oregon city oregon college of art & craft oregon historical society pacific northwest college of art pdx contemporary art photography portland art museum Portland Art Museum portland institute for contemporary art tba time-based art festival your comments

Related topics: [art](#), [bamboo](#), [cases](#), [grove](#), [iphone](#)

Sponsored Links

iPhone 4 Accessories Sale

Leather Cases, Chargers, Armbands, Headsets, Batteries. Ship Same Day! www.HDAccessory.com

Exclusive Hyatt Discounts

Deals on Hotel Locations Worldwide. Book Now for Hyatt's Best Offers! Hyatt.com

iphone 4 cases

Stylish iphone 4 cases up to 70% off. Same day Shipping! www.iGearUSA.com/iphone_4_cases

Share this story

Story tools Email Print

More stories in Portland & Oregon Art

Previous story

Denise Mullen is dealing with strengths and perceptions at the Oregon College of Art & Craft (with correction)

Next story

Karl Burkheimer's 'In Site' at Disjecta through Mar. 26: Review

1 Comments Feed

Post a comment

Pdxpr March 07, 2011 at 6:04AM Follow

They make some sweet cases http://www.grovmade.com/

Reply Post new

Inappropriate? Alert us.

Post a comment

Sign in to OregonLive.com

Username

Input field for Username

Password

Input field for Password

Remember me?

Sign In

I forgot my username or password >>

Don't have an account?

Register now for free, or sign in with any of these services:

Connect with Facebook

AIM

Google

OpenID



Site Search

Search Local Business Listings

Search by keyword, town name, Web ID and more...

Go

Site Map | Advertise | Contact us

Make us your home page

Home | News | Weather | Sports | Entertainment | Living | Interact | Jobs | Autos | Real Estate | Rentals | Classifieds | Shopping

- Your Photos
- Your Videos
- Blogs
- Forums
- Travel
- Music

- Post a job
- Post a free classified ad
- Sell your car
- Sell/rent your home
- Apartments & rentals
- Claim your Business Listing for free

- Obits / Death Notices
- Business News
- Environmental News
- Contests
- Dining
- Movies

- Subscribe to our content (RSS)
- News alerts | Sports alerts
- Twitter feed
- OregonLive.com Multimedia
- OregonLive.com Mobile Site
- Learn about our mobile site



The Oregonian - The Oregonian Business Center | Hillsboro Argus

© 2010 Oregon Live LLC. All Rights Reserved. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our User Agreement. Please read our Privacy Policy. Community Rules apply to all content you upload or otherwise submit to this site. Contact interactivity management.