

# FURNITURE WITH *Flair*

Some of the most exciting and individualistic designers of contemporary craftsman-made furniture are to be found in Britain, reports Jane Mulvagh.

Britain is not internationally regarded as a force in contemporary furniture design—but this has produced an important advantage. While Continental countries and the United States have developed big companies that set their own style and employ a string of designers to develop it, British design in this field is largely a cottage industry, centred on the individual. The designer is often also the craftsperson, or he may co-ordinate a small team of specialist woodcarvers, joiners and metalworkers.

For quirky, individualistic pieces, lovingly rendered by hand, Britain is a fertile hunting ground. Private homes and small studios, well away from central London, often double as showrooms for young style-setters who produce exciting, often eccentric pieces with none of the rough edges smoothed away. With the slick, throwaway 1980s now behind us and a new emphasis on durability and quality emerging, the stage looks set for a steady growth in their appeal.

John Makepeace, founder and director of Parnham College, which trains craftspeople in wood, has remarked on a growing awareness of Britain's history of furniture design. If this has in recent decades been pushed from the limelight by foreign design corporations, it has many, more distant, centuries on which to draw. He applauds the new propensity for Britain's young designers to delve

*Like many of the current generation of furniture designers in Britain, Lucy Fielden began by studying architecture. The change of career offered more creative freedom to produce, for example, her range of metal furniture inspired by Montacute House, a late-Elizabethan mansion in Somerset.*



deep into the past as a way to the future. "Design is only possible if it is based on an understanding of where we come from. For a long time—since the 1960s—we have ignored history and the basic tenets of good design. Now we are seeing a new sensitivity to materials and techniques. It is a welcome shift in values."

Coming to grips with all that is happening in Britain is not easy. To track down particular pieces of furniture you may have to go directly to the creators. Alternatively there are several stores in London, such as the Conran Shop, Liberty and the Study, where an eclectic mixture of pieces is displayed. Themes & Variations, in Westbourne Grove, is another treasure trove of lively, idiosyncratic creations. Among the furniture on show here is work by 25-year-old Mancunian Peter Fossick, who mixes the metallically flamboyant with pure, rich wood. Prompted by the recent furore over the value to the nation of the antique Badminton Cabinet, Fossick designed his own version in American black walnut with a matching veneer embellished with forged and beaten steel. The result is a butterfly poised for flight. Winged doors open to reveal 12 drawers, two of which are false.

Insect-like themes crop up again and again in Fossick's work, which would be well suited in its sinister drama to an Addams Family setting. His fish-tailed chair is one of the most beautiful pieces of furniture I saw on my rounds. But you must bear in mind that Fossick's furniture is not for the faint-hearted. His clients have included the pop group Depeche Mode, who commissioned a dining table and chair. Prices start at £1,000, but can rise considerably higher.

Aside from the strength of Derek Frost's work the attraction of commissioning a piece of his furniture is simply the pleasure of talking to him. He is imaginative and self-effacing ("I'm hideously under-trained"). He generously dwells on the importance of the craftspeople with whom he works and points out that the advantage of being a designer rather than a craftsman is that a buyer can commission three or four skills for one piece—thus it might be the creation of a gilder, a carver, a metal-worker and a marble carver.

Having worked as a picture dealer, and "played the hippy for a while, travelling and looking", Frost joined the interior designer Mary Fox Linton for eight years. Initially they worked closely with David Hicks, to whom he acknowledges an influence, and then he began his own company. "I was trained on the streets rather than at school," Frost explains. But his streets stretch as far as the Indian subcontinent. There is

nothing predictable or gratuitous about Frost's designs, everything is there to reflect the commissioner's character and demands. For example, his lectern satisfies the client's wish for both a serviceable library object and a sculpture. Frost started with the observation that most church lecterns are based on the eagle with spread wings. "I wanted to play with this bird theme, but rather than the bird facing the congregation it faces the reader." The zebrano wood veneer was chosen to imitate the rippling patterns of a bird puffing out its breast feathers, "like a man's formal dress suit with the proud chest decorated with dress shirt and studs". The lectern was finished in copper-leaf water gilding and it stands on a marble base.

Frost designs to order and will discuss every aspect of the project with the client as it evolves. The price is likely to be anything from £3,000 upwards: his most expensive piece was £15,000.

Charles Codrington's work is easy on the eye, reflecting the simplicity and charm of early colonial American furniture and the Shaker tradition. He says he learnt most of his trade while working with the London art dealers Crane Kalman Gallery on picture frames and restored furniture. By 1988 he felt confident enough to start his own business. He is attracted to simple design inspired by early-English oak furniture, which he prefers to heavily carved or elaborately veneered pieces.

"I like wood to show itself off—its grain and natural qualities," he explains. He cites the provincial craftsmen's copies of what Chippendale was doing in London, for "in some rare cases they actually got the proportions better".

Codrington's prices range from £350 for a box chest on curved legs to £2,800 for a William and Mary-style tallboy. His work can be found in many shops, including Liberty, where his table is the number two best seller. You can also order from him direct. He puts his survival in the recession down to the fact that he will custom-make for clients, changing size and even paint-finishes to suit individual taste. But he admits: "Cabinet-making is a luxury. Furniture does not wear out, and if people have the choice between a new piece and a holiday, they will opt for the holiday." His Dutch Colonial-style furniture created in partnership with Sasha Waddell was inspired by their trip to Sri Lanka: they hope to "smother Britain in it and aim for the export market—perhaps the Queen's Award for Export", he teases.

John Makepeace, of Parnham College, is a master craftsman and fine teacher. This gentle sage can speak informatively and inspiringly on the subject of

cabinet-making and must truly guide his students. This year's graduates range from a civil engineer, Ronald Emmett, embarking on his second career, to a bevy in their mid-20s.

Emmett is a brave but contented man. He sold his company and pursued his dream to become a furniture-maker. "I decided that as my children were going off to college to study, so could I. This was my last chance." He makes supremely elegant chairs, tables and cabinets that range in price from his Enigma display table in holly and walnut at £3,500 to a high-back chair in maple at £450.

Christopher Healey, one of Parnham's star graduates this year, received a good end-of-term report when I spoke to Makepeace about him. "One of Chris's abilities," he proudly informed me, "is his understanding of a variety of human interests and needs, such as the Small-bone kitchen island. It is delightful and everyone can relate to it. His other work is mystical and he's anxious to find a route that is not normally taken with furniture forms and to look for a spiritual quality in objects. That is very difficult for a student and very courageous."

Healey generally works in ways that avoid craft for craft's sake. Technically he is naïve, which is part of the charm of his objects, but they do retain their spontaneity. Makepeace opines that although Healey's work is "difficult" it will attract attention from both the media and onlookers as well as buyers



*The range of styles employed by modern designers is enormous and eclectic, but a love of high-quality natural materials and craftsmanship is a common theme. Left, Peter Fossick uses fluid, organic forms for his flamboyant creations, such as the sideboard in quilt maple and his cast-aluminium shark chair. By contrast, Charles Codrington's work is marked by the simplicity and restraint of the Shaker-style dresser, above.*



*Seats with style: above left, Ronald Emmett's elegant maple high-back chair; above right, sturdy, nautical "Gulliver's Chair" by Julianne Dolphin-Wilding; below, Derek Frost's equine "Racing Chair".*



*A recent graduate of Parnham College, Christopher Healey, seen right with rooster egg-stand, brings a spiritual element to more exotic works, such as this brown-oak chair, left.*

because of its uncompromising character.

Healey's Molluscabinet is a perfect example of a spiritual yet "difficult" piece. Healey explains: "A mollusc shell with seaweed was the starting point. I chose sycamore for the doors so that they will yellow with time and become more shell-like." He attached red slubbed silk, quilted into strands, to create seaweed-like tendrils at the back of the cabinet. The whole sits on a steel leg structure. Opening the doors you find it is a drinks cabinet, with one shelf made of granite and the other of rippled sycamore.

The logo for his company, which is being incorporated this autumn, symbolises a human silhouette as part of the tree of life. He is determined to draw

furniture design from nature and create objects that both stimulate and relax the viewer. This exceptionally talented young man's kitchen island is available at Divertimenti, priced at £1,700. More affordable is his "rooster" egg-stand (already a best seller) at £20 and his candlesticks priced from £12 to £24.

A telling fact I discovered in researching this article is the paucity of women furniture designers. When I asked some of the Parnham students why this should be, one of the men replied: "Oh, it's not a woman's craft, because it's too heavy and there's never been a tradition in England for women cabinet-makers."

But women *are* making their presence felt. Among them, 32-year-old Julianne

Dolphin-Wilding confided that she, like her father, a carpenter, has very big hands. "Since I was a child I have loved tools and have always been a hands-on kind of person." Not for her the itchy-bitsy, gilded and painted little pieces of furniture and mirrors often associated with the few craftswomen, but a rough-and-ready style based on her degree thesis on ship construction.

Miss Dolphin-Wilding is inspired by the ship technology of old galleons. "In the same way that Philippe Starck found inspiration in aero technology, many have looked at industrial processes and principles and applied them to chair design," she says. Her chairs are pre-industrial in style but have mistakenly



RICHARD WAITE

been typecast as primitive; no doubt, her black African roots have fuelled this misconception.

The mast motif, a perpendicular, is central to her work: "I hate horizontal surfaces, such as tables, and can't resolve them. That's why I mainly make chairs." To the mast everything is attached to keep it erect, such as ironmongery, ropes, toggles, blocks and pulleys. In keeping with the nautical theme, she favours distressed woods, often driftwoods collected from the banks of the Thames. The result is what you would imagine a shipwrecked chair would look like; it might even float and would certainly be enhanced by the weathering process. Her signature is extremely high-backed chairs, which, curiously, can make a small room look bigger.

While the British are appreciative of innovation and creativity, they are frequently too scared to make the leap of placing such work in their own homes, she says. "I often find that first-time buyers decide to put my work in the garden, where they feel they can be more daring, and then gradually, as their confidence increases, pieces start appearing round the house. The Americans are less inhibited. Perhaps it is because they are familiar with the rustic tradition of the Adirondack mountains and the crafts of those people. Similarly in France I have

a good reception, as primitive art is part of their culture."

Miss Dolphin-Wilding's pieces range in price from £400 to £2,000. She is wary of using African hardwoods in her low-tech, hand-crafted pieces, because of creeping deforestation. She tends to opt for yew. "When most people buy yew they discard 70 per cent of it because of cracks and faults. Instead, I use the whole, faults and all. Alternatively I will go to Eco-Timber, which claims to use farmed rather than wild African timbers, but by and large I don't need new woods. Either I collect driftwood or people give me wood from trees, such as holly, hornbeam, cedar or yew, that have fallen in storms and which I keep in my barn."

Simon Pugh, too, is amused that his customers, a distinctly different market from Miss Dolphin-Wilding's, "don't understand that wood is an imperfect material. It's not like metal or plastic; it has grain marks, burs and even cracks." Pugh came to furniture design through a circuitous and fruitful route. After leaving school, he set himself up in the rag trade during the punk years, and then in 1981 opened an art gallery where he showed the paintings and sculpture of his contemporaries.

Having dabbled, Pugh decided that he had found his *métier* and applied to Christie's auction house to train as a

paintings expert, but "I got on very well with the furniture expert", he recalls. His path was clear and he spent five years with the auctioneers, gaining a thorough grounding in the history of furniture. "I would never have made a successful dealer. I was too possessive about the pieces I bought and a terrible snob about whether a piece was too late, or not pure. You can be too academic; after all many people just want decorative pieces."

The answer was to set up a gallery that interprets old designs in a contemporary manner. Pugh does not copy old furniture but offers hybrids, such as a recent commission of a Georgian-style four-poster bed with fluted columns and Empire-style ebonised headings combined with a boat-bed base.

"I do not want people to think they are buying an antique," he warns, "they are not. The idea behind the business is not that people fill their home with my work but rather add it to antique or modern pieces. It's a matter of taking styles I admire and replaying them, such as that coffee table, which is based on the simplicity of a French provincial kitchen table. I made it in cherry wood, because it has a beautiful grain, and then used a mahogany finish to enrich the colour."

One of the reasons why Pugh has to reinterpret is that craftsmen are much more expensive nowadays. "Take that

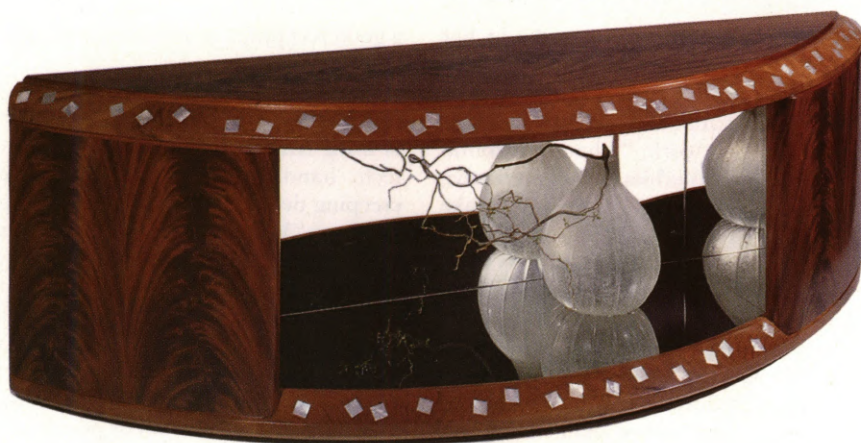


*Left, horn chest, designed by Derek Frost. The doors conceal a mirrored bar with glass shelves. The carcase is clad in yew veneer laid in "tiger stripes".*



*Above, Derek Frost's lectern, standing on a base of medium issorie marble, is set aglow by distressed and patinated copper-leaf water gilding and use of quilted maple veneer.*

*Right, a low, semi-circular sofa table designed by Derek Frost incorporates cherry hardwood and matched "flame" mahogany veneers. Polished stainless steel provides a mirror-like lining for the low-level recess, of which the top and bottom edges are decorated with mother-of-pearl insets.*



Napoleon III-style bed. The original would have come apart in many different ways, but that's far too expensive to craft today and would cost over £8,000. Instead, my version cuts corners and costs only £2,000." He is inspired by Continental rather than British 19th-century furniture because it is simple.

A large proportion of today's furniture designers come from a background in architecture. Having spent five years training at the prestigious Architectural Association, one of Europe's most avant-garde schools, Lucy Fielden felt guilty about admitting that she was unhappy in the *métier* in which she had qualified in 1986 and worked for two years. "You can't imagine the strain of being in that profession," she explained. "You're totally beholden to the craftspeople and if an electrician doesn't earth something and your building blows up then it's *your* responsibility."

While travelling in Morocco in 1988 she worked up the courage to start anew as a furniture designer. "I always felt if I

had had my time again I would have begun as an apprentice to a cabinet-maker." She began with the Shropshire Set of oak garden and conservatory furniture which was named after her home county where she found two groups of craftsmen to work with. "There are so many craftspeople there: cabinet-makers, carvers and metal-fabricators."

The success of her competitively priced furniture, which she sold direct from home, prompted Craig Allen, of the Conran Shop, to commission from her a series of carved oak conservatory pieces; since then she has branched into metal furniture, inspired by Montacute House.

Curiously Miss Fielden attributes her success partly to the recession. "When

there is very little money around, few are going to spend several thousand pounds on grand cabinet-making. My work starts at £150 [for a wall sconce] and the most expensive project I have completed was an ebonised wood 15-foot oak table and 14 hand-carved chairs. That was only £7,000."

Lucy Fielden no doubt speaks for many of today's young designers when she points to the fun and excitement inherent in her work. "I have total freedom and control over my own designs, and can work closely with craftsmen and develop my ideas with them in the workshop. Best of all, I can design a piece of furniture on a Monday and be sitting on it by the following Saturday."