

## Going with the grain: A new wave of craftsmen is seeking to capture the magic of old timbers and rustic beams

By **Angela Neustatter**

Friday, 26 November 2010

Adrian Swinstead's showpiece table – a toughened glass disk resting on three gnarled and gleaming black oak pillars, broad as elephant legs – exemplifies the delight he takes in making ancient history part of contemporary furniture design. A delight that began 15 years ago when a sculptor friend introduced him to the jet dark bog oak, rarely used by other furniture makers, that has, since, become a "passion" and central focus in many of his cabinets, cupboards, benches and tables.



*Wooden wonders: Adrian Swinstead at work in his study*

The aesthetics of this choice are evident, but getting the wood does not come easy. Forget lorries driving up to his Bedfordshire home and delivering to the workshop set in the woodland, he says with a guffaw.

"Bog oak comes from forests that were buried thousands of years ago, beneath land near the sea. Climate change had caused glaciers to retreat, sea levels rose, the salinated trees collapsed and were overgrown by mosses which became peat enshrouding them. The acidity of the peat matches the acidity of the tannic acid in the oak so it was preserved. Over time the wood darkened to jet black which is dazzlingly beautiful when you polish it.

Swinstead can be found prospecting in the Norfolk Fens where the melting of the ice cap began 5,000 years ago and here he finds most of his bog oak, although the oldest, about 8,000 years old, come from a valley in Wales, south of Snowdonia.

He sets off, hat pulled over his shaven head, often in slanting rain, pick axe and shovel over his shoulder. He thumps the ground to hear the resonance that tells him there are trees. Once located, it usually takes several hours of excavating to uncover the bog oak which must then be hauled to the surface

with a rope.

"The idea that this wood existed when our ancestors were erecting standing stones as an expression of their spirituality, and that it can then be translated into a piece of furniture exciting someone enough they want to put it into a 21st century home, is endlessly thrilling," he says.

Swinstead, who also uses beech, yew, sycamore, horse chestnut, an African striped wood called zebrano, and purple heart wood from Guyana – all sustainable, he is quick to add – is among an increasing number of furniture designers who are passionate about the provenance of the wood they use, environmental responsibility and creating hand-crafted pieces that will endure.

This integrity may be admirable, but choosing not to follow fashion trends – with their quick turnover, use of man-made materials and mass manufacture, which they see as deeply damaging to the environment – makes it difficult if not impossible to make a viable living.

This is something the new National School of Furniture, which opened this month – a joint venture of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College and Buckinghamshire New University –, aims to address.

Dr Lynn Jones, head of the Furniture Department at the Buckinghamshire site, said: "It is vital that we learn to value traditional crafts such as furniture making, and that young people learn them before those who still have the traditional knowledge and skills are gone and it is too late."

It is encouraging, she says, to see students looking at how they can design cutting edge contemporary furniture in wood, but have craft techniques and sustainability as their guiding principle.

Which means, says Jones, that the school must find ways to educate public away from wanting furniture they will dispose of in a few years, to see the value in furniture that has been made with care and individuality. "A piece of furniture that is personalised and not one of thousands the same, can easily become a part of your life, living with you, gathering memories becoming an heirloom," she says

Philip Koomen established his furniture company in 1975, at the age of 22. His Pondlife Bench, described by The Independent in 1998 as: "organic and wildly eccentric" was original and inspired enough to bring commissions from Beatle George Harrison and Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, and it has been re-created in many different interpretations.

The original was made from cedar of Lebanon and sweet chestnut thinnings, so giving a sustainable life to wood otherwise destined to be burnt.

That was an early inkling, but Koonen has taken on the importance of sustainability as integral to what he does. He sees a clear ethical question he must face: "My profession is a designer and maker, so I ask what am I doing

with that?"

For the past 10 years he has been using mostly wood grown within a 30 mile radius of his Oxfordshire home, although he also uses oak, maple, cherry, ash, walnut, ripple sycamore, cedar of Lebanon and sweet chestnut – all from sustainable sources. From these woods come designs ranging from finely detailed classically-styled pieces to flowing modern creations such as a table made for the Hay-on-Wye festival with broad ribbons of wood curving upwards at an angle to meet the circular top, and a selection of slender-limbed sculptural chairs.

He says: "I see myself as having a modern approach to design but I am being guided by a responsible knowledge of what using the wood means. So it's thinking further than just sustainability. For instance maple might be the fashionable timber one year, then say cherry, but they have a cycle of say 10 years to grow. So woodland growers try to meet demand, then when fashion changes they have a lot of underused wood and nobody wants last year's fashion. I wanted to work with architects and designers interested in trees that don't go in and out of fashion so quickly."

"We need marketing focused on helping the public understand this and handing them some responsibility. But those doing the marketing haven't so far been particularly interested," he adds.

Katie Walker too is committed to putting environmental concern into her work and uses predominantly local wood – ash grown in West Sussex where she lives. She says: "Ash is a particularly good wood for me because I can pare it down to the structure and it bends easily which is important for the shapes I want." One of her newest designs is a Windsor rocking chair where she has steam bent a band of timber which creates the entire frame embracing a solid timber seat with fine ash spindles.

"I studied sculpture and I see the structure as the character of my pieces. I see my furniture as part of a contemporary design "conversation" where furniture that does not damage the conscience, is made with care and love and can be treasured over produced materials, is coming into fashion. I believe we offer serious competition for creations which are more about the wildest ideas, or greatest gimmicks which have dominated for so long."

Betty Norbury, author of Furniture for the 21st Century who has run the exhibition Celebration of Craftsmanship for 15 years, would like to share this optimism. She fears too many disadvantage themselves by an admirable, but possibly quixotic, idealism. And although there are discerning consumers who want something that has individuality, and quality that will give it long life, this idealism does not compel generations reared on Ikea culture.

So for the burgeoning number of designers like these, the provenance of the wood they use, and taking great care in the cost of any other materials they add, is a guiding principle. They are, unashamedly, new moralists in an area of creativity they believe must re-assess how it treats the planet in the desire

to produce ever more cutting edge furniture.

Swinstead, after 25 years of striving, has steadily built up a small but devoted clientele for his designs. And since his exhibition he has been featured in American design magazines and had write-ups in the British design press, and there are new commissions on the books. He has a strong belief that furniture makers like himself, working with wood, and with passion, could find themselves newly desirable.

Clearly it's time for him to get digging again.