

MANSION

GURU

ANCIENT TRUNKS, MODERN LINES

Woodworker Adrian Swinstead crafts contemporary pieces from 5,000-year-old bog oak, blending new and old materials

BY RUTH BLOOMFIELD

ADRIAN SWINSTEAD found his vocation in a valley in Wales when, armed with a hefty piece of wood, he first learned the art of hunting for bog oak.

Bog oak, for the uninitiated, is an extraordinarily well-preserved legacy of the prehistoric era during which much of Britain was covered in oak forest. In a few parts of the country—specifically those blessed with acidic peat soil—their fallen trunks have survived for some 5,000 years, buried under six or so feet of soil.

In 1992, Mr. Swinstead went with a sculptor friend in search of this ancient souvenir. “It is quite a wonderful process which involves walking around with a big piece of wood and thumping the ground,” he said. “When you get a really resonant thud, a sort of echo from the ground, it means you have found a piece of bog oak.”

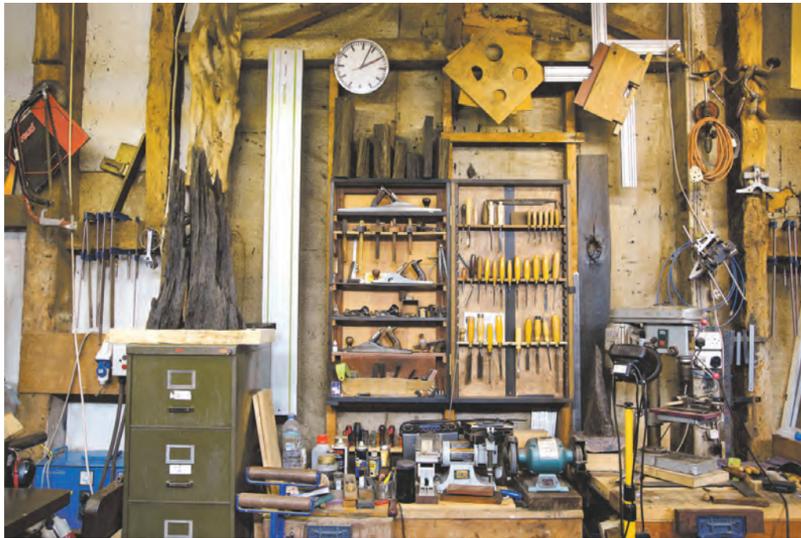
Although extracting the oak from the sodden soil is back-breaking work, his first sight of the wood (the exact age of which can only be established by carbon dating), enthralled him. “It was absolutely beautiful, black, black wood, absolutely saturated in ground water,” he said.

Mr. Swinstead’s background meant he was particularly well suited to finding a modern-day use for the material. After a childhood spent in South Africa and Uganda, he was educated in Britain and went on to study fine art at two leading London institutions: the Hornsey College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art.

Then, in his early 20s, he performed a career volte-face—he became a musician, devoting himself to North Indian classical percussion. To pursue his new passion, Mr. Swinstead spent large parts of the following 12 years in the Indian cities Calcutta and Varanasi.

To support himself, he returned regularly to Britain to build up funds, and took a job working on house-renovation projects. Building kitchens and cupboards, he taught himself the art of joinery and carpentry.

In the early 1980s, he returned to the U.K. full time, working for Live Music Now, an organization established by the violinist Yehudi Menuhin to bring performers into nursing homes, prisons and hospices. He also continued his carpentry work, though he



THE WOODSMAN Adrian Swinstead, below, in his workshop, also shown above. Each piece takes several months, and a lot of patience, to complete.

found himself less interested in working on houses and more in creating one-off pieces.

Then he discovered bog oak—a material at once tactile and eerie, and marked with a complex timeline of ridges, furrows, fissures and cracks—and he began to work with it full time, creating tables, benches and cabinets, as well as installations and sculptural pieces.

Working with such ancient material is an appropriately slow process. Each piece of wood must be left to season (dry out) for at least five years, by which point Mr. Swinstead, 64 years old, feels he knows each piece intimately. “When Buddha was on the earth this tree was already 2,000 years old,” he said, indicating a bench that had just been completed.

Rather than deciding on a design in advance and then molding the wood to fit his plans, Mr. Swinstead decides how an individual piece of oak would work best.

Once this decision is made, the wood must be painstakingly cleaned. Some pieces require parts of the outer layer to be removed, revealing the black hardwood beneath, a hugely delicate and intricate process. Mr. Swinstead likes to pair sections of the ancient oak (which are treated with wax or oil) with contemporary woods like light maple or burr oak to create modern pieces with clean, simple lines. His trademark bench, for example, features maple supports that appear to have been implanted into the heart of the bog-oak seat.

Each piece takes several months, and a lot of patience, to complete at his workshop, located in the countryside 50 miles north of central London. He works alone and sells directly from his workshop, offering completed pieces as well as delivering commissions.

Prices range from around \$4,900 to \$9,800 for a bench, \$4,900 to \$16,000 for a cabinet, and \$3,300 to \$4,900 for a sculpture—often formed from a tangle of ancient roots.

Mr. Swinstead avoids using any kind of decoration—there are no handles on his cabinets—and favors simple forms, allowing the material to speak for itself.

“The story is the texture of the tree, its cracks,” he says. “I would not want to make it more ornate—it is a minimalist design ethic which is about the material and not the cleverness of the maker.”



AT WORK Work on a tree outside Mr. Swinstead’s studio, above; inside the studio, right; a wooden book by Mr. Swinstead; wood shavings.



Lovely, Dark and Deep

1. Sycamore/glass low table
2. Prehistoric bog-oak bench
3. Series of mountain peak forms, prehistoric oak
4. Burr horse chestnut and sapele cabinet
5. Carved book
6. Bog oak and maple cabinet.



Julian McDonald/Wild Sync (6)

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