

SIMON THOMAS PIRIE | BEAUTIFUL CONTEMPORARY FURNITURE

As you drive deep into the beautiful County of Dorset a turn, off the main road near Dorchester, leads you down a long tree-lined lane into the heart of farmland. Here, surrounded by the mellowed red brick of an old high-walled courtyard, designer Simon Pirie, and his small team, pool their complementary skills and spend their days creating beautiful bespoke furniture. This small designer-maker furniture business has emerged out of the tradition of the British Arts and Crafts movement and early modernism. The furniture they make marries a strong visual aesthetic with functionality and beauty is a word that they have no hesitation in applying to the pieces they produce. A close-knit dedicated group of makers, they are united in their passion for wood.

Trained originally as a sculptor, Simon Pirie went on to study at Hooke Park, the furniture and forestry college that was then part of John Makepeace's Parnham Trust. Both experiences fed his interest in the natural world and the sustainability of his materials. His leaning towards environmental art had emerged early in his career, pre-furniture, with two seminal pieces of work: linked pairs of trees in a forest avenue and a series of freestanding arches, diminishing in size as they receded into the distance. These beautiful structures played with space, proportion and interval. They had all the ingredients of his furniture: simplicity of form, proportion, architectural enclosure of space, pierced form, repetition, detailing and truth to materials. They also prepared him for his move into Public Art.

Simon Pirie prides himself on being involved in every part of each project from initial conversations to the final delivery. He is pursuing more opportunities for the company in the field of public art and has collaborated with Architect, Adam Zombory-Moldovan and his company ZMMA on plans to enhance public spaces. One such project is in the Dorset town of Shaftesbury where they have designed complementary areas integrating the new sections of the town with the older historical part. Through the physical making of repeated footsteps and other repeating forms, Adam and Simon have been able to fuse references to erosion, geology and timelines. The successful outcome of this joint project with ZMMA has encouraged the company to pursue similar collaborations by establishing contacts with some of the best architectural practices in the South West. This strategy allows them to have a say in how a space will function, facilitating their role as designers. Their input at the start of a building project allows them, as furniture makers, more freedom, removing the necessity to design around existing windows and doors. The move into interiors is relatively recent and they limit the company to a small number of very high-end kitchens a year. Their approach is unconventional, often using curves, which reference Art Deco, but always pushing the boundaries of design and use of materials. Wood is always their primary material but occasional use of glass and steel create accents, which enhance the naturally beautiful qualities of the wood. As Pirie says, "when I do an interior I want it to be really different and exciting". The organisation of space, which is very architectural concept, has also impacted on the free-standing furniture part of the business, leading to more opportunities to make pieces that can be placed sculpturally within a created and fully considered interior space.

A characteristic of the company's tables, chairs and cabinets is an understated stillness that comes from Simon's fascination with oriental design. The Oriental influence, which emerged following a trip to Japan in 1992, is deep rooted emotionally and aesthetically. He loves the lightness of touch of Japanese furniture and has set himself the challenge of making pieces which illustrate "how little you can get away with when making a really strong structure" He likes to combine an engineering with a design solution. In this, his design skills are underpinned by the exceptional abilities of chief maker Michael Smith. Michael joined the company five years ago and his natural gift soon became evident. He is that rare thing; a skilled craftsman who understands instinctively, in what order a piece of furniture should be constructed so that each piece progresses smoothly from inception to superb finishing. He systematically solves the technical problems presented to him in complex designs, "Once Simon has given me a drawing it won't be long before I know how every process is going to go and in what order.

There is a lot of variation in what we make and there is always something new that is going to be a challenge". Whilst Simon and Michael concentrate on their particular areas of expertise, Joint Director, John Beaves ensures the smooth running of production and completion of projects. He combines invaluable experience as a furniture maker with the organisational skills required to fulfil the dual roles of workshop and project manager. "For me, the beauty of wood is most important. It is very honest how we source timber, we select it ourselves and make sure that it is as local as we can get. But I also enjoy the making; the working out how to put something together in the best possible way so that it will last a lifetime." As a company they embrace new technology as well as using traditional methods. This is evident in two differing processes, used to make curved furniture, which are at the opposite extremes of the making process. For outdoor furniture, which is subject to weathering, they will use the traditional method of steam-bending, which involves placing the wood in a steamer and then quite physically forcing it into a curve, holding it with a steel strap, whilst it is still malleable. As Pirie says, "It is an organic process so you end up with something where every bend is slightly different so you have to design around it. It is expensive and time-consuming but it makes a very direct connection between maker and timber." In contrast, where precision is essential, in the closure of doors and drawers, they turn to advanced computer technology, programming a CNC router to cut perfect curves in solid wood. Sometimes, for example in curved doors, they utilise lamination. This entails the pressing together of thin slices of wood to create perfect and stable forms. Every problem demands its own unique solution.

One of the core principles of this small workshop is their concern for sustainability. They use exclusively sustainable, predominantly British timber, and when possible source it locally. Although they operate across three different areas: free standing furniture; interiors; and public art, the things which link these three diverse areas of production are a deceptive simplicity in design that celebrates the natural beauty of wood, and superb craftsmanship, which comes from the search for perfection.