

A Celebration of Arts & Crafts

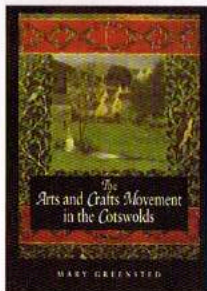
Author Mary Greensted is currently compiling a new exhibition featuring the Arts and Crafts Movement to be opened soon in Leicester. So we sent her along to August's Celebration of Craftsmanship & Design searching for the influence of Gimson and beyond

Craftsmanship in its widest sense – the art of making things well – has become a bit of a buzz word in 2008. The publication earlier this year of Richard Sennett's book, *The Craftsman*, aroused a lot of media comment. The joy of making things has been promoted as an antidote to consumer culture, an educational tool, the key to self-fulfilment, and a way forward for sustainable production.

I am working on an exhibition about craftsmanship and design focusing on the work of Ernest Gimson and the Arts and Crafts Movement so it was an interesting challenge to be invited to comment on the annual Celebration of Craftsmanship & Design exhibition held at Thirlestaine Hall, Cheltenham this August.

Talking to exhibitors at previous shows reminded that so many furniture makers see the work of Gimson and the Cotswold school as their grounding. Studio potters refer back to Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada working in St Ives in the 1920s in much the same way. So a brief recap: Gimson and the Bamsleys trained as architects in the 1880s before moving to the Cotswolds in 1893. Gimson began making ladderback chairs by traditional methods while the Bamsley brothers designed furniture using local timber, mainly oak, which they made themselves.

They learnt and developed woodworking techniques in the process. Sidney Bamsley continued to make all his own designs throughout his working life. Gimson set up a workshop with Ernest Bamsley in 1900 and employed Peter Waals as foreman/cabinetmaker. By 1903 the workshop had moved to Daneway House,



Waywood The American cherry (*Prunus serotina*) sideboard was designed by Simon Smith at Waywood. Simon previously worked with David Savage, and you can see David's influences in the sweep of the doors. "We started making very sculptural furniture," says Barney Scott of Waywood, "but have changed over the years, and this is a good example of what we do now. We don't like over-ornamentation and try to work with interesting forms. Nor do we like applied-on details, and the handles have an organic shape. We chose nicely figured cherry because the simple shape of the sideboard can cope with the marked timber"

near Sapperton but the partnership had dissolved. Eight cabinetmakers and four young local apprentices were making furniture to Gimson's design by 1904.

Gimson saw the craft workshop system not as a throwback to a romantic medieval past but as a model for reviving the rural economy, providing worthwhile training and creative employment. Many of his craftsmen acknowledged the pleasure they took in their work and the sense of purpose it provided. Most of the furniture was made of solid wood based on a traditional frame-and-panel construction. Many constructional details such as dovetails and through tenons were left exposed as part of the Arts and Crafts idea of honesty – this meant that faults could not be hidden. The decoration was often linked to the construction and, although decorative details such as inlaid stringing, chip-carving, and gouged lines became part of the Cotswold repertoire, the overwhelming impression was one of understated classic simplicity.

The workshop's reputation grew and work was plentiful until the outbreak of the First World War. Their furniture has become archetypal of the Arts and Crafts approach and ethos rather than style. The influence continued through the 20th century, to a large extent because of the impact of teachers like Percy Wells at the LCC Shoreditch Technical Institute and in particular, the contribution of Peter Waals and Edward Barnsley at Loughborough Training College, now Loughborough University.

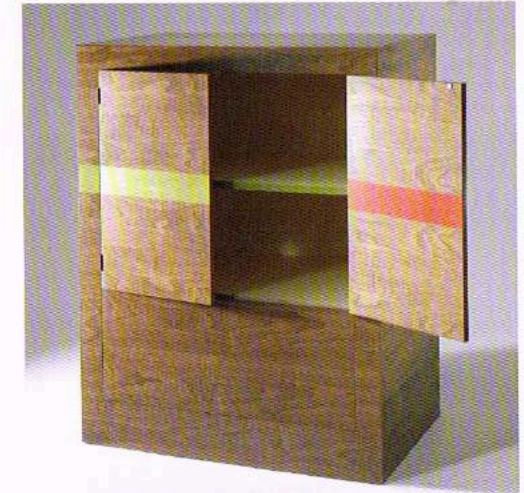
Sensitive use of materials

My remit at the Celebration of Craftsmanship & Design exhibition was to look for pieces which made reference to the Arts and Crafts Movement. I wasn't really interested in furniture making homage to the Arts and Crafts style although there were a number of pieces that reworked designs by Liberty and other makers of the period. What I was looking for were pieces that showed a sensitive use of material and whose decoration was linked to the construction. Above all I wanted to highlight work that was functional, well-designed and carefully proportioned, and had that timeless quality that characterises the best Arts and Crafts furniture but is very difficult to define. For me the work of Alan Peters had brought that Arts and Crafts tradition through to the 21st century. His understated but meticulous approach still shines through some of the best work.

The simplicity of Derek Elliott's walnut cabinet was appealing. The timber has been carefully chosen and arranged to exploit the grain to great effect. Despite its obvious handmade quality, the cabinet, with its spring-loaded drawers, has a strong contemporary feel. The combination of burr brown oak and ebony was a typical Arts and Crafts one and used confidently by Martin Grierson in his precise, geometric and elegant pair of side tables. They are beautifully made and both the design and choice of timbers add richness to the pieces. Like all his exhibits this pair of tables is identified by a name, 'Centre', and I wondered why some makers have adopted this



Accidental The offset black lining to the top of Suzanne Hodgson's quartersawn oak blanket chest was an accident of design. "I wanted to make a blanket chest," she told us, "and started a rough sketch, making a very dark line where the lid is. The pencil turned in my hand and the line thickened, so I thought I'd use it." Suzanne used bog oak veneer, bought off a friend, to give the piece a softer blackness than staining. The corners of the chest are mitred, with the grain chasing around. Inside the mitres is a loose tongue, and she glued up the joints by first sticking triangular 'ears' or blocks to the corners so that she could put cramps across the corners to really tighten the joints. The sides of the chest are made up from two planks each, from oak Suzanne (who trained at Farnham House from 1985-87) had been storing for years. The hinges are made by Hettich in Germany, but they have a Manchester office which can be contacted by email by visiting hettich.com/uk



Stripes The idea of a stripe on his walnut veneered cabinet was a development of another design Derek Elliott was working on for a client. He'd designed an oak kitchen, with a brown oak stripe around all the doors. The customer decided to go darker, so Derek used a red veneer for the stripe. When they asked for some more furniture he stuck with the stripe, deciding that green compliments the red nicely. "It keeps the theme," he says, "and with a large statement like that the shape needed to be simple, like a cube." The walnut veneer and coloured veneers were all taped up and applied to the MDF core in a veneer press. Lining up was particularly tricky as veneer tends to slip in a press, but Derek overcame this by inserting a very thin strip of solid walnut down the outside corners afterwards. It's too thin to be seen here.

approach. There were very few occasions where the use of a name added anything. In the context of the exhibition it often made these pieces harder to identify than those with a straightforward functional description.

Suzanne Hodgson is a designer-maker based in Chester. Her blanket chest in oak and bog oak struck me as a piece with real presence. It is carefully designed and proportioned and looks extremely simple, relying on the quality of the timber and workmanship. However closer inspection made me appreciate the subtlety of the design. Features such as the lid which is slightly off the rectangle are almost playful. Every detail has been carefully considered down to the German-made Hettich hinges inside the lid which look superior to the hardware one normally sees on craft furniture.

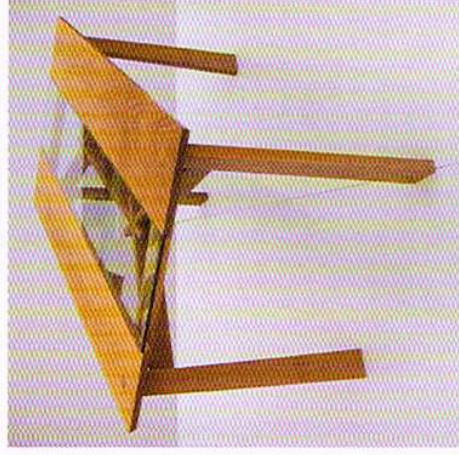
Exposed construction

A dining table exhibited by Chris Alley, based at Lewes, caught my attention, made in oak with constructional details (such as through tenons) left exposed. Using the constructional features as decoration is a typical Arts and Crafts approach, asserting the honesty of design because there are no hidden faults but I would have preferred them to be more assertive. Their small size made them seem rather apologetic. The table includes a glass insert in the tops which made a feature of the underframing below. Robin Furlong also uses exposed through tenons as a decorative feature in his diamond display cabinet in maple and cherry (see p5). The rectilinear outline and the careful choice of timber also recalled the Arts and Crafts approach. The triangular cut-out drawer handles give this piece a strong contemporary feel but also relate to ideas of form and function. It was often constructional features like this which drew my attention.

The Waywood workshop exhibited a couple of pieces all made in solid wood with attractive natural finishes. They try to achieve an 'unlaboured excellence' in their designs which helps to ensure the furniture remains functional and is treasured for years. I was particularly impressed with an asymmetrical sideboard in cherry whose subtle lines and profiles show off the beauty of the wood, with the curved lines of the door fronts also forming the handles.

For me the best furniture designs of the Arts and Crafts Movement are characterised by good workmanship and materials, simplicity and the absence of a personal style or fashion. This sort of timeless quality is hard to achieve but it is one which is increasingly important and relevant in the 21st century. Craftwork still has a role to play in a society where sustainable production is becoming more and more important.

The exhibition *Mary Greersted is curating* is entitled *Craft & Design: Ernest Gimson and the Arts & Crafts Movement, and is on at the New Walk Museum & Art Gallery, Leicester from 8th November to 1st March 2009. For further details please look at the website (leicester.gov.uk/gimson) or contact the museum on 0116 225 4900.*



Star Chris Alley's American white oak dining table proudly displays the joinery in classic Arts & Crafts fashion, particularly the unusual 'star' joint, or what Chris calls a 'thirthing joint' (as opposed to a halving joint). "The construction is the beauty of the piece," he says, "with no applied decoration." The legs splay to give solidity: "Just like trees"



Contrast Martin Grierson's table, 'Centre', has brown oak legs, with the 'infills' in 5mm burr veneer they cut themselves and glue onto gaboon ply. "That gives the qualities of solid wood and the stability of ply." Martin says. The legs are actually set into a housing in the underside of the top for the length of the chamfer. Then it's a butt joint between the underside of the top and the top of the leg, reinforced with a Festool Domino 'biscuit': The housing in the underside of the top (which is about 30mm wide and 40mm long) is cut with a router using a little jig, quite similar to that used by Steve Maskery to produce pocket holes (see p38). It stops 8mm short of the top, where the vertical edge starts. Martin expects the brown oak to fade with time and the contrast to diminish. "I saw a job I did 10 years ago recently, and the brown oak looked like natural oak. The owners hadn't noticed because the change was so slow." Watch out for news of a special London exhibition of designer-makers organised by Martin Grierson in April at the Millinery Works