

David Linley | Charles Cator | Helen Chislett

# Star Pieces

The Enduring Beauty  
of Spectacular  
Furniture







## Horn

Hooves, horns and antlers have long been mounted as mementoes of the hunt. Chandeliers adorned with stag horns were popular in Austria and Germany from the Renaissance onwards. Antler furniture was unveiled to the British public in 1851 at the Great Exhibition by the German firm of Rampendahl, feeding the Victorian appetite for baronial splendour and its romantic love of all things Scottish. Prince Albert, the German consort of Queen Victoria, was ahead of the fashion, having ordered a suite of horn furniture for Osborne House on the Isle of Wight in the mid-1840s. In America, too, horns – taken from steer – were regarded as emblems of the pioneering spirit. In Texas, companies such as Wenzel Friedrich made chairs, sofas, tables and hall stands using steer horn; Chicago was another centre for such furniture. By the 1890s horn furniture was widely available, popular both for its novelty and for its romantic representation of the Wild West.

ABOVE RIGHT A pair of armchairs incorporating steer horns, ram's horns and antlers, with back and seat covered in hide. Such pieces were popular in the USA around 1900.

RIGHT A cabinet by Alastair Graham, 2006, has drawer and door fronts of nautilus shell, set in bleached sycamore; the handles are of solid silver.



## Mother-of-pearl

The lining of pearl oysters and other shells has a lustrous sheen that has made it perfect for the decoration of furniture for centuries. In the Renaissance, it was used across Europe as an inlay or as part of a marquetry design. It remained popular throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and in the



19th century was used to contrast with fashionable darker woods in French furniture. While rarity and cost have meant a decrease in shell-ornamented furniture since then, its beauty is still an inspiration to designers today working at the upper reaches of bespoke design, such as Alastair Graham [41].

## Leather

Leather has long been used by furniture-makers, for both functional and decorative purposes. It comes in a huge variety of types and finishes. Damask leather was produced in the 17th and 18th centuries by processing

leather to imitate the patterns of damask fabric. Gilt leather, or Spanish leather, originated in Islamic Spain, possibly as far back as the 8th century: leather is punched or embossed with a pattern, then painted in colours, and a yellowish varnish added to give the look of gold. Morocco leather is made from goat skin; it was used in the 18th century to line desk and table tops, as well as to cover chair seats and backs. Leather remains the material of choice for fine upholstery today, for reasons of durability and longevity, but in the hands of designers such as Helen Amy Murray (b. 1980) [15, above, 71] it takes on new relevance and personality.

## FRENCH BAROQUE: THE GOLDEN THREAD

The Baroque period has continued to excite and inspire contemporary furniture designers, for example the Dutch/Belgian duo Studio Job (see pp. 207–8). Conceived in 2006, their 'Robber Baron' series comprises a suite of five cast-bronze furnishings, which are magnificent in scale, finely

modelled and cast, with precision mechanical movements where required. The master craftsmanship evident in the work is guild-like in its perfection. These highly expressive pieces of limited-edition furniture are narrative works which address power, corruption, industry and art.



ABOVE A restrained interpretation of Baroque grandeur is the triple-bow-fronted cabinet with distressed gold on white gold finish and onyx top by Alastair Graham, 2006.

LEFT Studio Job's 'Robber Baron' cabinet is made of polished bronze with gilded reliefs. In its centre is a black patinated 'bomb crater', a stark reference to the conflict between art and industry.

## PARNHAM COLLEGE

Just as the Eindhoven Design Academy deserved a special mention (see pp. 202–3), so it is worth drawing attention to Parnham College in Dorset, which was founded by eminent furniture-maker John Makepeace (b. 1939) in 1977 and closed in 2000. It has a special place in David Linley's heart because it was here that he trained as a cabinetmaker himself. Parnham turned out many highly talented craftspeople, among them Wales & Wales, Konstantin Greic, Mark Boddington, Rupert Senior and Charlie Carmichael of Senior & Carmichael, Andrea Stemmer, Sarah Kay, David Upfill-Brown, Nico Villeneuve, Stuart Padwick and Alastair Graham. The course tutor through much of its time was Robert Ingham, a highly respected designer-maker himself.

Makepeace first called his academy the School for Craftsmen in Wood. He had planned to open such a school in the United States with Wendell Castle (see pp. 189–90), but instead Castle became a regular tutor at Parnham.

The school offered an integrated education in making, design and business skills for those wishing to become professional furniture-makers. In effect it became the focus of the British Craft Revival in the 1970s, going on to inspire new generations of craftspeople.

By 1983, the sustainability of indigenous timbers had become a pressing issue. The Parnham Trust purchased Hooke Park, a 350-acre (some 140-hectare) mixed woodland, to research and demonstrate better forest management. To teach such issues, in 1987 Makepeace founded Hooke Park College, which is today amalgamated with London's Architectural Association. Makepeace must take much of the credit for the craft revival in Britain today, not least because of his entrepreneurial leadership that has encouraged continuing creativity and professionalism among furniture-makers.

