

# 20 minutes with... John Rook

Although he's just starting out, John Rook is no amateur. He took 2012 by storm at a host of exhibitions and events and 2013 is shaping up to be equally as exciting



John Rook is a designer/maker of contemporary handmade furniture. Working primarily in solid and veneer hardwoods, he has recently been experimenting with colourful Valchromat-engineered board. Influences vary from the simplicity of Shaker, Cape Dutch and contemporary Scandinavian furniture to the symmetry and complexity of Art Deco and Islamic art. His workshop is in Herefordshire where he is ably assisted by Alisdair Rushforth.

**F&C:** What are you working on at the moment?

**John Rook:** Following the encouraging launch of the 'K' desk at Celebration of Craftsmanship and Design, 2012 and 100% Design, we are developing a range of furniture based on the curved legs concept. We have just finished a console table with a poplar burr top, laminated sycamore legs and ebony detailing. We've used a gold resin to infill the larger burrs on the poplar. We have also been experimenting with 'Valchromat' pre-dyed fibreboard and exhibited a standup workstation and writing desk at HOME2013 in January. Also recently completed is a tall drinks cabinet – see opposite.

**F&C:** Why did you become a furniture maker?

**JR:** Although I'm well into my 50s, I'm very much the new-kid-on-the-block. Until a few years ago I lived in Africa, working as an economist on development issues. I grew disillusioned with development assistance to the Third World and decided it was time for a change.

I'd always been interested in furniture design – in hindsight I should

have studied design rather than economics – but my ability to translate my ideas into products had been frustrated by a lack of cabinetmaking skills. So I went back to school and learnt how to make furniture.

**F&C:** What inspires you?

**JR:** Materials inspire me the most; that and the challenge of producing



The 'K' desk with detail opposite, made from purpleheart (*Peltogyne porphyrocardia*) and rippled sycamore (*Acer campestre*)

a piece of furniture that does justice to them. I don't limit this to natural timbers and veneers, but would include the ever-increasing array of engineered materials available. I like rich textures, exotic veneers and complex forms/patterns, such as Islamic geometry, but furniture pieces themselves should be simple and clean and should fulfil their intended function.

Drinks cabinet in rippled sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) with white ebony (*Diospyros virginiana*) doors and purpleheart (*Peltogyne porphyrocardia*) legs, 1,700 high x 430mm wide x 430/350mm deep



technique. I'm a furniture designer/maker rather than a cabinetmaker. I try to translate the design into the product by the simplest and most efficient way, ensuring quality, durability and practicality.

**F&C:** Are we too obsessed with outdated modes of work?

**JR:** No, there's room for many modes. Different clients want different things.

**F&C:** How or where do you exhibit your work?

**JR:** Because we are just starting out, I'm spending lots of resources on marketing. I've quickly learnt that designing and making furniture is relatively easy compared with marketing and selling. We've exhibited at several shows over the past six months, including Celebration of Craftsmanship and Design, 100% Design and HOME2013 and showed at MidCentury Modern in March. We are getting some recognition, including some very positive reviews, but it is a gradual process and we still have to break into the market. We are always on the lookout for suitable galleries and internet sites – which seem to be becoming more prominent. We've also just updated our website with new images.

**F&C:** How comfortable are you with working at someone else's design?

**JR:** I see potential benefits in collaboration with the right person.

**F&C:** Describe your creative process.

**JR:** Shower... doodle... sketch... sketch-up... full-size mock up... shower.

**F&C:** Do you consider yourself an artist or a craftsman?

**JR:** I aspire to be a designer, but my passport still says economist.

**F&C:** Do you think furniture making is in danger of disappearing?

**JR:** Not as long as we need something to rest our backs on.

**F&C:** What advice would you give to someone starting out?

**JR:** Go for it if you have the passion.

**F&C:** What irritates you about the industry?

**JR:** Not much... but I'm only just getting going! *F&C*

**F&C:** If your furniture were music, what kind of music would it be?

**JR:** I'm using purpleheart in my current projects, so it's got to be classic rock.

**F&C:** What do you admire in the craft at the moment?

**JR:** There are so many amazing furniture makers with such a rich and diverse talent. It's difficult to identify anything specific. I'm impressed by spectacular examples of design and craftsmanship, but it's minimalistic, functional pieces that endure.

**F&C:** Who has been your greatest mentor/role model?

**JR:** I studied cabinetmaking with Peter Sefton. He taught me everything I know about furniture making. Above all, he instilled the principles of non-compromise and zero tolerance.

**F&C:** What comes first, design or technique?

**JR:** Identifying a problem or need usually comes first, then design and

Contact

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