

HOUSE & GARDEN / FURNITURE

Sculptural furniture pushing wood to its limits

Dynamic designers and artists are reimagining wooden furniture with surprising twists, coaxing a familiar material into ever-more fantastical sculptural forms.

Katrina Burroughs reports



Marc Fish sycamore and acrylic Ethereal desk, \$120,000, from Todd Merrill Studio

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Art meets artisanship and **sculpture** shakes hands with design in the latest functional artworks in **wood**. The sinuous silhouettes of chairs, consoles and lights in carved, laminated and scorched timber are informed by Constantin Brancusi, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore – and pay homage to solar systems, bodies of water and racing bicycles. Armed with a mix of traditional

skills and 21st-century techniques, makers are focusing on creating highly collectable curvilinear centrepieces for inspiring interiors.



Zaha Hadid Architects American-walnut and acrylic UltraStellar dining table, from £198,000, from David Gill Gallery | Image: Courtesy of David Gill Gallery

“Historically, wood has always been the material of choice for sculptors – there’s something very pure and raw in forming a block of wood into something spectacular,” says Loïc Le Gaillard, co-founder of **Carpenters Workshop Gallery**. The material certainly exerted a lifelong fascination over sculptor-turned-father-of-art-furniture Wendell Castle, who died last year, leaving a legacy of virtuoso works informed by his signature process of stack lamination – sheets of wood about 3cm thick, glued to produce a solid block and then sculpted into shape. Le Gaillard is offering Castle’s last monumental work, a plant-like form in stained ash, entitled *I Give It All* (price on request). “It demonstrates that Wendell was an amazing sculptor. He showed that there are no boundaries between design and **art**.”

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Few functional timber sculptures share the machismo of a Castle, but many of their creators draw inspiration from the great outdoors. Artist Philip Michael Wolfson says, “On my travels in Brazil, the use of wood, from **the amazing designs of the midcentury** to the way **Brazilian** artists employ natural resources, inspired me to create works that reflect the history of the forms and curves of the natural landscape,” he says. As part of his Lakes series, Wolfson designed a four-part composition of low tables (2014, made to order, from £32,000 a pair) based on the shapes of the rivers and estuaries of São Paulo state, layered in sustainably sourced Brazilian boxwood veneers (and later other eco-friendly woods), with insets in black slate.



Joseph Walsh ash Dommus chairs and Enignum shelf, price on request

The South American landscape is just one inspiration; Wolfson also credits the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer – who captured his imagination on the same trip – alongside an early career spent working with architect **Zaha Hadid**, which sowed the seeds of his streamlined style. Hadid, famous for her swooping **architectural** designs and manipulation of materials such as acrylic into melting forms, came to the use of timber in art **furniture** rather late. It wasn't until the final collaboration with her long-term gallerist and close friend **David Gill** that Hadid designed her first-ever wooden tables for the gallery. The American-walnut UltraStellar dining table (2016, from £198,000), featuring a tabletop punctured by an acrylic window, gives the architect's trademark shapes a fresh spin. The dark wood adds a warm glamour, reminiscent of midcentury luxury furniture, that is quite unique in her body of work.



Object Studio ebonised-ash Nodum desk, £21,600 | Image: Sam Barker

For collectors who are compiling a list of big game trophies to acquire, a key quarry is one of the most influential British designer-makers of his generation: John Makepeace. Makepeace is exhilarated at the rise of art furniture. “I’m really keen on realising the full potential of timber. I want it to flow freely in three dimensions,” he says. “Rather than using wood in the form of two-dimensional ‘planks’, I have been looking at ways to express the luxury of solid timber by sculpting the material, working it as a potter might work clay.”



John Makepeace oak Black Trine Variations chairs, £14,400, from Sarah Myerscough Gallery

Makepeace's own exploration of **fluid forms**, spanning two decades, has produced the ground-breaking Flow **cabinet** (2006, made to order, £108,000), featuring a hand-shaped, digitally designed surface pattern of three-dimensional ripples, and the Undulate console (2016, from £25,000) with legs in carved and rippled sycamore. Recently, he has experimented with lamination. Black Trine Variations (2017, £14,400), created for Sarah Myerscough Gallery, is a series of three-legged **chairs** with internal metal connections made using **technology** "developed by Nasa for joining wooden blades to the metal hub of a wind generator on Hawaii". Each seat is made from 13 layers of English oak and the pattern results from the natural qualities of the timber, which has been sculpted and polished to reveal the

grain of successive laminations.



Jan Waterston oak Velo //1 chair, from £5,000

Lamination, the layering of slim timber veneers, lies behind the most spectacular works – lyrical, lighter-than-air structures, from shelves that stream ribbon-like across walls to tables resting on looping, rippling legs and **lighting**, such as John Procaro’s Freeform luminaire (from \$8,000 from Todd Merrill Studio), composed of strips of cold-bent and handcarved wood. In this neck of the woods, the name to know is **Joseph Walsh**. “Joseph makes the impossible possible, pushing wood to its limits,” says his gallerist Sarah

Myerscough. Walsh's genius is for ethereal creations such as his Enignum shelves (price on request), made from 20 layers of ash, each 1.8mm to 2mm thick, glued together and bent without using steam into delicate, serpentine forms.



Alex Chinneck oak Growing Up Gets Me Down grandfather clock, \$50,000 for edition

from Priveekollektie | Image: Charles Emerson

Walsh began developing his method a decade ago. “I had a solo show in NYC at the American Irish Historical Society and spent the nine weeks of the exhibition living in **New York**. I was 28 at the time, visiting museums and galleries and meeting artists and designers,” he recalls. When he returned to his workshop in late 2008, he had a new aesthetic in mind. His drawings evolved into a new flowing style and he had to devise “a way to express the fluidity of the sketches through material”. Walsh’s works have grown from small shelves to a monumental sculpture for the courtyard of the National Gallery of Ireland and, just last year, a 4m-long Magnus dining table (from €300,000) in ghostly bleached ash for a **Dublin** apartment, which seems to hover in mid-air.

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According to Todd Merrill, formerly Walsh’s gallerist and a long-term proponent of fluid works in wood, the latest one to watch is an artist with an equally gravity-defying touch: Marc Fish. His newest work, a desk of extraordinary delicacy entitled *Ethereal* (\$120,000), represents a refreshing new take on sculptural timber, combining a special resin with lamination. Merrill, who showed the work at Design Miami last year, is excited. “Fish has created a revolutionary material that allows light to pass through frosted **resin** in varying levels of light and dark. Reflected by paper-

thin wood veneers, the light takes on different shades. The effect is that of a constantly shifting, illuminated surface.” The desk – the first piece in a planned series – is already causing a stir among art-world insiders. Makepeace has seen it and is impressed. “I was bewitched by the combination of resin and sycamore in the table top and the experience of seeing light through it,” he says.

Fish’s source of inspiration is the anatomy of leaves – the way a leaf displays its midrib and veins like a skeleton when held to the light. Another branch of creatives reference the natural form of the wood. The Palm **bench** (2018, £7,500) by Charlie Whinney Studio is a steam-bent and carved ash seat in the shape of a mini palm tree, while Mathias Bengtsson’s Growth Table Maple (2017, €110,000 from Galerie Maria Wettergren) is a computer-generated design resembling the roots of a tree. Added to the mix are the artists who celebrate wood as a solid, substantial construction material. The Pouf bench (from \$19,440, from Willer gallery) by American artist Ty Best for Caste Design, influenced by Henry Moore’s monumental outdoor sculptures, is an arresting piece – at once refined and rugged. Layered ply is hand-sculpted and sanded to reveal a pattern reflecting the topography of the mountains of Best’s native Montana. Another weighty example is Rasmus Fenhann’s solid-oak Hyomen bench (2017, €18,000 from Galerie Maria Wettergren); its thick plank top is CNC milled to create hefty hexagonal cavities.

In his Hack chair (2018, £18,000 from Sarah Myerscough Gallery), **Gareth Neal** reinvents the classic Georgian dining chair using timber from a “beautiful, giant chunk” of oak, taken from a trunk unsuitable for the furniture industry as it was too knotty and cracked to be used in mass-produced items. Neal delights in bringing together the woodworking skills of a traditional cabinetmaker with digital techniques to showcase the natural characteristics of the material. For this chair, he uses a 6 Axis CNC machine as “an extension of the craftsman’s hand”, alongside handcarving, and finishes the piece with a shou-sugi-ban charring technique.

The balance between human and machine, natural shapes and digital design is a constant influence on makers. “My work is about manipulating materials and pushing processes to their limits,” says Thomas Vaughan, founder of east London-based Object Studio, who describes his speciality as “making three-dimensional brushstrokes” and his heroes as Brancusi, Hepworth and Moore. “Everything is sculpture to me – but functional sculpture.” After early years spent fabricating for well-known artists and galleries, including Carpenters Workshop Gallery, Vaughan now solely creates his own work, including the Nodum desk (£21,600), a 2.7m-long ribbon in ebonised ash, ending in a knot. “It’s a very challenging piece to make. There’s a lot of engineering hidden inside the joints,” he says. “It’s one of the larger pieces I’ve done using processes I’ve developed over the past decade exploiting both traditional and digital crafts.” A similar form has been achieved by a different method in the Mizu CEO desk (2017, limited edition of nine, from £19,850) by Fratelli Reifer Custom – a 4m-long table, designed by Eberhard Mitterrutzner and constructed from 8m-long layers of Canaletto walnut, using an innovative three-dimensional hand-lamination technique.

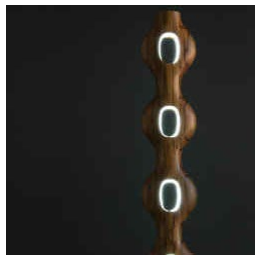
While the Mizu was conceived as a statement piece for the executive office, most of these functional artworks are quiet, domestic souls, destined for the elegant home. Jan Waterston, a rising star in the field of curvy furniture, says that his seats are created to suit the sightlines of modern open-plan interior design. “The idea is to make an object that from any viewpoint is firstly a sculptural silhouette. Hence, when you walk up a set of stairs and into a room, where you might see the underside of the furniture or the back of the chair, with this piece there is only one complete sinuous form.” Waterston launched the Velo //1 chair (available in ash, oak and walnut, from £5,000) in 2017, and although he names Hepworth as an influence, his main inspiration for the seat is an unexpected source: carbon-fibre racing bicycles. “I’m a fan of those forms by Pinarello and Bianchi – beautiful frames where the carbon allows one form to flow into another.”

An irresistible attraction of sculptural wood furniture is the element of

surprise, with makers delighting in coaxing this most familiar material into ever-more improbable forms. *Growing Up Gets Me Down* (2018, \$50,000 from Priveekollektie) is a functional sculpture by Alex Chinneck, the artist known for large-scale installations on the fronts of buildings, creating the illusion of levitation, smashed windows or “slipping” façades. The sculpture takes the form of a working grandfather clock, made from waxed French oak handcarved to resemble a knot. “The inspiration behind the clock is the idea of tying time in a knot, which in turn presents the challenge of introducing fluidity to a typically inflexible form,” says Chinneck. All the challenges of the genre expressed in one single piece – with a witty, captivating twist.

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