

# Functional Art

*The Furniture of Mike Whittall*



*Photography by Craig Stephen*

**T**WO YEARS AGO, MIKE WHITTALL MADE A DRAMATIC CHANGE TO HIS LIFE. He left his accountancy-based career of twenty-five years – which had included working for Customs and Excise, Grant Thornton and Deloitte in the south and London – and moved to Scotland. He started in Aberdeenshire working for Deloitte and after some time freelancing and working, settled in Netherdale, near Aberchirder.

His new home, which he shares with wife, Jane Craigie – who runs a marketing business – is also the site of his new business venture. He will run 'Ochre & Wood', furniture-making and restoration in a steading workshop, which he is converting as we write. Mike gained an appreciation for woodworking from the age of five – from his grandfather and his father who were enthusiasts. Now Mike is in a position to realise his dream to be a professional woodworker. Although

he is largely self-taught, he did attend a recent nine month course at the Chippendale International School of Furniture at Haddington – tutored by Anselm Fraser. Until now he has been travelling back and forth using the school's well equipped workshops and has produced some outstanding sample pieces.

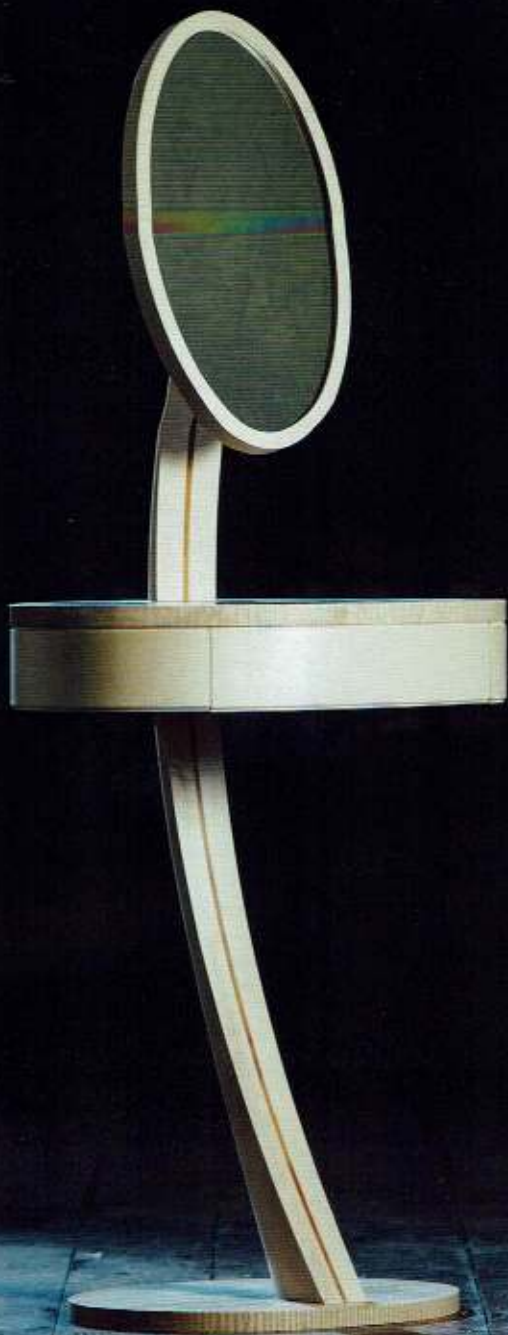
His aim is to use our local Scottish woodland heritage for the raw material. Despite centuries of felling for fuel and building, our countryside is still home to some 1.4 million hectares of forestry – three quarters of which is coniferous and the remainder broadleaved trees. He is a firm believer in sourcing his timber locally where possible. Apart from the obvious 'wood mileage' benefits – his resulting pieces will have provenance. Mike's philosophy is that 'every tree has a story'. Some can have personal meaning or relevance and from this he can create truly bespoke pieces if a customer requires – from timber with a personal relevance – once seasoned of course. He talks of his preference of using slightly more



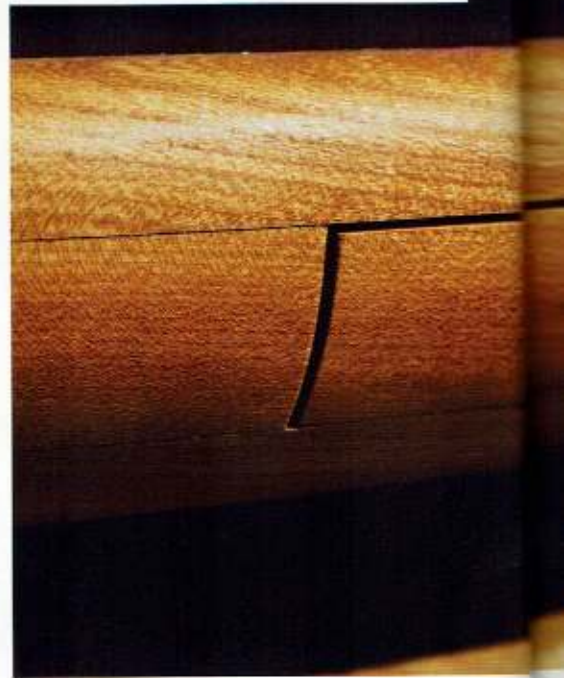
unusual pieces of timber, so the pieces do not look so synthetic or mass-produced. Hence, he will seek out spalted beech, ripple-grained sycamore, elm, beech, oak and other local hardwoods that have more interesting grains, colours, textures or a story to them. Choose your own tree! But be prepared to wait one year for each inch of thickness to dry, naturally is the best method though a kiln can also be used.

Then there is the design aspect. What inspires Mike? He does not set out to create a distinct style, or to ape other styles. He becomes inspired by what is around him. Landscape can provide this. Also foreign travel inspires him. The kidney-shaped desk, *Tales from the East*, is a desk with generous flowing curves and features a fretwork design borrowed from a frieze he saw at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, once the heart of the Ottoman Empire. The design is practical with plenty of space and two hidden drawers. The ergonomic arc and seating position make it comfortable to use. A leather top and drawer linings give a feel of luxury. The wych elm has eye-catching grain and rich tones. *Soft Kiss* is a dressing table, made from sycamore with a yew inlay that is formed around an organic curve, expressing the natural lines of the human body. It invites you to use it. It is also a strong design statement. He describes his work as 'functional pieces of art'. "I like to build movement into my designs and to bring the wood alive by the furniture I create." The *Barley Breeze* table, in ash and elm, is inspired by the sight of a breeze blowing through a field of ripening barley, something that is a characteristic of Aberdeenshire's landscape at this time of year."





Previous page: *Barley Breeze Table*: Shaving bowl and brush, spalted beech (€120 gift-wrapped).  
Left: *Soft Kiss* dressing table. Sycamore with yew inlay. 1400mm x 700mm x 450mm.  
Top right: *Tales from the East* - 'not a square desk' - elm. 735mm x 900mm x 600mm.  
Below: Drawer detail.





What about the production? Mike will use traditional hand tools to give that unique feel; but he also accepts the use of modern machinery – as he points out he is running a business too. He also plans to run short or weekend courses for budding woodworkers – they will be well fed and watered too. They tell me that they are fully geared up for this.

Is there a demand for this type of furniture? Earlier in the century it was quite usual to find yourself a cabinet maker or local carpenter to make a bespoke piece or suite. He is sure that there is a renewed interest for unique pieces of quality; you do see 'special' pieces dotted around locally in distillery tasting rooms – along with bespoke kitchens, bedrooms and libraries in private houses, which Mike can also create. In fact he does not limit himself – any request will be looked at. He tells me he has had some unusual requests such as fire surrounds and tea pot stands! The other aspect is restoration. If you have cherished pieces that you wish to extend the life of, or rejuvenate, he will do this.

He recently won the coveted 'Best Portfolio Award' from the Chippendale International School of Furniture for three pieces of furniture mentioned above: his *Soft Kiss* dressing table; the *Barley Breeze* coffee table; and his *Tales of the East* desk. And he has caught the attention of Scott Grove, a New York-based designer and craftsman, who said, "Mike has a natural design sense which captures the elegance and sensitivity that matches his demeanour. His understanding of materials, functionality and traditional woodworking is only exceeded by his artistic vision. I am sure that Mike's work will be coveted by collectors around the world in years to come." **CS**

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Local events: He will be sharing the Scottish Furniture Makers' Association stand at the Aberdeen Arts Fair on 2-4th September.

