

A springboard to recognition

From his home workshop in the serene and relatively unspoilt environment of Cable Bay – some 20 kilometres north-east of Nelson – furniture designer and maker David Haig has garnered a reputation as one of New Zealand’s most successful craftspeople. He talked to Michael Smith about “making furniture that other people want, but creating it the way I want”.

DAVID Haig is happy to admit he preferred pottery at school in the UK. “Clay was so direct and instantly malleable. I’d only built a boring shoe-cleaning box out of old Oregon pine at carpentry lessons as a 12-year-old and had felt rather intimidated by the hardness and difficulty of working the wood.”

Fast forward a few years to the beginning of his life in New Zealand when his wife, Clare, was pregnant with their first child. Haig was working in Wellington for a conservation group (the Native Forests Action Council) and living in a ramshackle old house in Khandallah – made available by one of the council’s benefactors.

“My future brother-in-law, John Shaw, who was a competent woodworker, was visiting and we went for a walk in the overgrown bush behind the house. Coming across a moss-covered square post sticking up from the undergrowth, we pulled it out of the ground and took it to the garden shed. John took the blade out of an old hand plane, sharpened it on an oilstone on the bench, and then passed the plane to me. I ran it over the post and a dark green shaving of moss came off. A couple more strokes ... suddenly the shavings were dark red and a beautiful lustrous wood was revealed. It was jarrah and I was instantly captivated.

“I decided then and there that somehow I would build our first child a rocking cradle out of this wood. At that moment an enchantment with wood and a strong creative urge came together – and the reverberations continue nearly 40 years later.”

Classic rocker

Haig is most well known for his ‘Monogram’ rocking chair, the latest iteration of his



David Haig pictured with his Swiss clock stand: walnut with pure silver inlay. “My youngest son saw my first laboured drawing in response to the client’s wish for a mounted clock. His ‘boring!’ comment sparked off a completely different and livelier direction!”
Photo: Daniel Allen

‘Signature’ chair – a design classic exhibited and sold worldwide. At the core of its design and construction are the technicalities of the steam-bending process, in which he is well versed.

“In essence, heat mediated through boiling steam is ideally suited for temporarily plasticising wood. It can then be bent – within certain constraints – and when cooled and dried out

again, will pretty much hold the shape it was bent to. Temperate hardwoods are better suited in general than either coniferous or tropical timbers. So you have oak, walnut, elm, ash, sycamore and European beech commonly used – all timbers that actually grow very well in New Zealand’s climate.”

Haig’s rationale for choosing species more often than not depends on design

considerations. “Walnut, one of my favourite woods, also happens to be one of the best for steam bending. I love the drama of rich colours and unexpected flashes of depth and lustre.”

He says that despite the huge palette available to woodworkers, there is a very unadventurous aspect to specifying the safe uniformity of featureless woods – although it makes life easier for commercial production. “As a one-off designer/maker, production considerations don’t affect my timber choices so I pretty much have a free hand. I’m all for celebrating richness and diversity, but like everything it requires judgement.

“As for indigenous timbers, we plundered our native forests for 150 years, and most of what remains should not become timber. Podocarps like rimu and matai are very slow growing, too, and are timbers we should use sparingly. The native beech tree is another story though, and it’s a shame more hasn’t been made of developing areas of our red and silver beech forests as managed stands.”

Selling to the world

Haig has a particular interest in chair design, although his work runs the gamut from tables and writing desks to chests and clock stands. He does, however, acknowledge the success of the Signature/Monogram in establishing and furthering his reputation. “It’s often been picked up as the feature image in articles on exhibitions and shows, and that has been a huge help. Galleries, too, have been great in having the actual piece out in front of people. Unfortunately, the price structure of retail galleries makes it hard to survive off



Monogram rocking chair, in walnut with quilted maple backrest – the latest iteration of Haig’s ‘Signature’ chair, a design classic. Photo: Daniel Allen



‘The Professor’s Steps’: sycamore frame and cherry treads. Photo: Digby Shaw

Cont P 11



'V' chairs in walnut. Photo: Digby Shaw



Blanket chest and seat, in figured English walnut. Photo: Digby Shaw



Walnut writing desk and 'V' chair, commissioned by an architect in Northern Ireland. Photo: Daniel Allen

Finding a dynamic interplay

From P 10

those sales alone, so 90 per cent of what I've sold has been direct to clients."

When it comes to commissions and connecting with clients, Haig says he makes furniture that other people want but creates it the way he wants. "I try to avoid commissions which start off with a photo of someone else's work. The best commissions are more like: 'Here's an idea; it's got to fit this space and have this function. I like your designs so let's go for it and see what you come up with.'

"I make every piece as well and as beautifully as I can, and the care and thought I put in become palpable to others. Then they may make the decision to live with those qualities and have them close at hand. I love visiting homes that have my work ... it's like checking up on your children and being surprised how well they turned out!"

Instinct and inspiration

Haig doesn't necessarily have a conscious design philosophy, but his starting point comes "from a kind of educated intuition. I don't like copying, so there must be elements of original thinking. There's a lot of trial and error in the initial sketching and I can take weeks before I generate the confidence to feel I'm on the right track.

"Good furniture for me is a lot about 'stance' and finding a dynamic interplay between the various components. I'm a modernist in so far as I consider



Circular bench built from California redwood, oak and New Zealand red beech. It complemented a gold-medal-winning garden designed by Andrew Fisher-Tomlin for the 2013 Ellerslie International Flower Show in Christchurch's Hagley Park. Photo: ©David Haig



Walnut and rippled maple desk with matching Folium chair. Photo: Digby Shaw

form is primary, and surface features – colour, pattern, inlay or whatever – back that up and hopefully enhance it."

He draws inspiration from the works of many designers and makers – sometimes more for their spirit and holistic approach to art – but is a woodworker first and foremost. "While I admire early modernists who pioneered the use of plastic and plywood and metal tube – like Eero Saarinen and Le Corbusier – I don't personally like the industrial flavour of much of their work. Many of the great Danish designers, though, like Hans Wegner and Finn Juhl, knew how to

use wood brilliantly and made wonderful chairs.

"On the more sculptural side, makers like Sam Maloof and John Makepeace explored furniture in very different but in fluid and luscious ways. And there was an iconic rocking chair by Martha Rising in the early eighties, which was a masterclass in sinuous laminations; while just last year Yuri Kurobashi made an incredibly delicate and refined chair using steam-bent strips of ash.

"George Nakashima and James Krenov also inspired me with their approach to craftsmanship and deep respect

for the wood they used. Similarly Alan Peters, an English furniture maker steeped in the Arts and Crafts tradition. All these people set the benchmarks for the rest of us."

Fine instruction

Haig complements his commissioned work by teaching at the Centre for Fine Woodworking on the outskirts of Nelson. "Once again, it was my brother-in-law, John Shaw, who was the spark here. He got the centre up and running in 2006, with help from a financial backer who had great faith in him.

"John's taught woodworking for much longer than me, and always had the vision of getting an independent wood school going. Initially, I just tagged along ... helping out with early courses and the curriculum. Ten years on and he has pulled back to get on with his own work, and so we've kind of swapped roles.

"I've been wanting to lead a group of students through an intensive and extended period of full immersion in the practice of fine woodworking and to develop their capacity for design. When the opportunity arose I put my name forward ... so I will be lead instructor for next year's nine-month programme. The school is in excellent heart right now – the management is running smoothly and the facilities are world class."

David Haig's Monogram rocking chair and other examples of his fine furniture can be seen at <http://www.davidhaigrockingchair.co.nz>.