

feature

Into the woods

From Linley to Lotusier, discover the designers championing the intricate 16th century craft of marquetry

words by Camilla Apcar



On 17 October, a macassar ebony and bird's eye maple cabinet by Studio Job will go under

the hammer at Sotheby's with an estimate of £40,000 to £60,000. It is one of an edition of six, made only in 2006, when the Dutch design duo were at the forefront of a renewed and revived interest in marquetry.

Such graphic skeletal designs were far from the conventional use of technique, in which incredibly thin veneers are cut to a design, pieced together and applied to a solid wooden base. Studio Job turned heads, and created an appetite for the technique that – as the Perished cabinet's appearance at auction suggests – has not diminished.

Veneer marquetry evolved in the 16th century from the idea of stone inlays and intarsia. A new jigsaw blade made it possible to cut precious woods into ever thinner sheets; the technique swept through Flanders and into France, with cabinetmaker André-Charles Boulle leading the way at Versailles. A century later, elaborate veneer designs had outstripped most other decorative furniture techniques.



“Marquetry is an extraordinary illusion, even in this day and age”

At Decorex in September, bespoke specialist Zelouf and Bell launched a number of designs that offer a delightful contemporary approach to marquetry, in their own way. “What interests us is not so much the making for its own sake, but the ability to use different techniques as a way

to express ourselves and our interests,” says co-founder Susan Zelouf. “We’re more interested in style and expression than woodworking.”

At the moment, geometric and repetitive patterns are inspiring the duo, such as a credenza with 22,000 triangles of macassar ebony inlaid into a grid of pale pink sycamore (Othello, £28,000). The pattern is inlaid back into the timber, like a jigsaw.

Other new projects have taken particularly artistic cues from nature. A champagne cart mirrors one of the largest mazes in the world, at Reignac-sur-Indre (£8,100); for the Jungle cabinet (£16,500), the pair worked with a fashion illustrator, playing asymmetrical offset marquetry. To achieve such vibrant colours, pressure-dyed veneers are used, although care must be taken with placing – like any fabric or painting, all woods react to sunlight.

Zelouf and Bell's new feather cocktail cabinet, meanwhile, marries both graphic and naturalistic inspirations (£26,150). “We were excited by the idea of a very formal and linear joinery, then introducing one organic element,” says Zelouf. To wit, hyper-real marquetry hen feathers decorate its rippled sycamore drawer fronts, while opening the plain centre drawer reveals a matching tray.

The idea of marquetry as artwork in its own right is continued at Linley, where the craft is at the company's core. It was founder David Linley's »



This page, from top: Studio Job, Perished cabinet; Zelouf and Bell Othello credenza; Jungle cabinet

Opposite page: Tim Gosling's corridor door



Clockwise from top left: the making of Linley's Cassiopeia screen; Zelouf and Bell, Serpent in a Maze champagne cart; marquetry from Francis Sultana's new collection; Linley, Girih cabinet; Linley, London skyline screen



» specialisation when he studied fine furniture, admiring the work of Boulle and William Kent.

This year at Masterpiece, Linley brought a triptych screen made in collaboration with artist Jonathan Yeo, using 40 different veneers (£125,000). "It brought a figurative element to marquetry," says Linley's creative director Carmel Allen. "Our designer really looked at brushstrokes and chose the grains of the wood to reflect that. We are constantly experimenting and trying to push the boundaries a little." Each panel rotates on its own support; a Connolly leather-clad valet and drinks bar sits on the reverse.

"Modern marquetry is very much about exciting surface design and pattern, bringing in some colour and wit, making it really relevant for now," says Allen. "So often people associate marquetry with brown furniture – and it really doesn't have to be." Case in point, is the striking royal blue Girih cabinet in sycamore and satinwood (£75,000), inspired by an eight-pointed star mosaic tile that Linley spotted on a visit to Doha.

Huge city skyline screens, which Linley first started producing around the turn of the millennium, each include more than 30,000 pieces and take more than 750 hours to put together (£75,000 for London).

Every time he goes to New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's room of 15th-century trompe l'oeil marquetry tops furniture designer Tim Gosling's list. "It's one of those incredible techniques that never seems to fail to amaze you as you approach it – realising it's not three-dimensional, but flat," he describes. "It's an extraordinary illusion even in this day and age of movies and iPads. To still see craftsmanship that makes you look at it differently is wonderful."

When in his 20s, Gosling met Jack Wild, a craftsman who worked on the Orient Express. "He had perfected



the art of marquetry like no one else,” says Gosling. “He was in his 80s then and we had a couple of years of him being able to train younger people. To hand that baton on is incredible.” One of Gosling’s concerns is that such crafts are less likely to be commissioned if the intricacies of the techniques are not understood – and then might die out.

Some pieces might take months to create. One of Gosling’s most impressive creations is a door at the end of a corridor that turned out like a drawing in itself, with about 4,000 pieces of hand-cut wood creating an optical illusion as if looking further down the corridor and out over a balcony. Many of the edges were sandburnt to provide extra shading (the wood is shuffled gently into a pile of hot sand, charring the edge). In the coming centuries, as the woods start oxidising, the dark woods will become light and vice versa.

The most modern aspect of marquetry today is the use, in some cases, of laser cutting instead of cutting by hand, to achieve painstakingly detailed designs. But there is little space for purism, says Gosling, and this in turn helps crafts survive. “I sometimes think it’s really great to use laser cutting. It does a very different thing as opposed to cutting it by hand – you end up with a slightly burnt edge. But straw cutting is all done by hand, and remarkable because in a photograph it doesn’t capture the light in the same way as if you actually walk past it and see the iridescence of the straw.”

When Hermès reissued a selection of Jean-Michel Frank pieces in 2013 that Gosling also worked on, he was spurred to find craftspeople expert in straw. “A lot of them are based in Normandy because Mont Saint-Michel was used as a prison during the Napoleonic wars, where they had nothing else to do all day except use the straw on the bottom of their cells to make pictures,” says Gosling. “It was born out of that tiny little industry in the 1800s.”

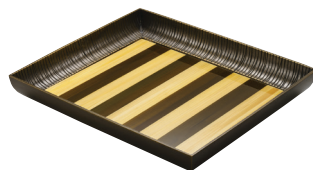
Gosling has now started to look at inlaying bone and mother of pearl into the straw. “It’s using three sets of different craftsmen to create something that wouldn’t have happened before, a century ago,” he says. Another table features a 3-metre accent of green straw, dyed in the south of France and worked on in Normandy, before the panels are sent to Gosling’s workshop in Whitby.

treasure box

A trio of accessories with
marquetry in miniature



Cufflink box, £3,100, Dior, dior.com



Tray, £1,500, Francis Sultana, francissultana.com



Tea humidifier, £9,950, Lotusier, lotusier.com

Christophe Pourny, a French furniture designer based in New York, has worked on public projects including the restoration of City Hall, and countless private commissions involving straw. “Marquetry was always reserved to the ‘happy few’ that could afford, or had the lifestyle or home to welcome it,” says Pourny. Straw was originally used by those wanting a cheaper alternative to wood marquetry in the 1700s, but its rediscovery by Art Deco designers created a demand and expense that could only be afforded by the wealthiest households in Paris.

Today there is an additional obstacle. “The process of creating is not as challenging as creating the desire for clients to appreciate it. We worked for several years promoting this craft, before we saw large projects planned.” The rye straw that Pourny uses is grown organically in France, specifically for marquetry. The bundles are imported to Brooklyn, where each stalk is split by hand and ironed flat. Only the best are kept.

The designer’s specialty includes impressive waterfall tables inspired by Jean-Michel Frank, shimmering over the curve of the wood, and covering entire walls in straw marquetry. The foyer of a new European home took nearly two years to complete.

Where Pourny sticks to infinitely mesmerising golden hues, Francis Sultana’s latest work uses straw marquetry to colourful effect. The designer’s imagination was captured by straw marquetry on trips to Baku and Istanbul, combining strong colours with the natural straw. The result is a collection of chevrons and blocky stripes in bright green and blue (from £7,225). “Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s it was all natural in colour, we have created something entirely contemporary,” says Sultana.

Hundreds of years on, the horizons of marquetry are still expanding. Bethan Laura Wood focuses on laminate marquetry for her limited series of Hot Rock furniture POA at Nilufar Gallery), while Allen notes a trend for incorporating metal. Meanwhile, at the Design Centre Chelsea Harbour, Lizzo has just introduced wallcoverings by Japanese specialist Tomita (£309 per m). Thin sheets of lustrous paulownia wood are cut then placed together, alternating the grain of the wood, with more paulownia or paper mulberry inlaid in a contrasting direction to complete the effect – intricate, and ever enchanting. ◇