

Neil Martin creates beautiful sculptured wooden furniture made from locally sourced Scottish hardwoods



**C**REATIVE MINDS are not usually known for being the most organised of people. Artistic talent and inspired vision often develop at the cost of thought-out career plans and predictability, and Neil Martin is no exception to this rule.

His CV may read like a hotchpotch of different professions and trades, but to his credit, Neil has always remained focused on being creative in some way. Like most craftsmen, he realised in his school days that he was fond of artistic subjects. A keen art student throughout his education, he left school to enter the printing trade, and remained there for five years. However, as he realised that the creative potential within this industry was limited, he enrolled at art college as a mature student.

"I grew up in Dumfriesshire and it was only a small trip over the border to Cumbria College of Art," explains Neil. "I took a general art and design course, which was great as it gave me a taste of all the basic skills. After that I moved to Berkshire to take a graphic-design course, as I felt that it combined the skills I had learned in Cumbria with the technical attraction of printing. I had been very keen on typography, which plays quite a large role in graphic design, as well as the problem-solving skills required to fulfil a client's brief."

Neil then studied graphic design for two years, before moving to London in search of employment. He was unfortunate to arrive at the start of the recession, which saw a massive decline in the popularity of craft and design. After being made redundant, Neil could not cope with the cost of living in London and turned back to the familiar world of further education.

"It was really a stroke of luck that led me into furniture design, as I was keen to retrain in the crafts, and this was something that I had not tried yet. I moved to Manchester and enrolled in two courses: one in hand-made furniture construction and the other in fine art. I was very

lucky to have a great tutor on the furniture course, and I also enjoyed the freedom afforded by fine art, which allowed me to experiment with painting and sculpture. Essentially what I do now is a marriage of those two disciplines."

What Neil does do now is create pieces of sculptured wooden furniture and decorative vessels, or, as he likes to call them, forms. He moved to Scotland four years ago, and has since set up a workshop in East Lothian.

"I have always been very attracted to wood, as it is such a beautiful material to work with. Every piece is unique, and even if you take two pieces of timber from the same tree, you will find individual characteristics. I also love the warmth of wood, in that it is a fragrant, smooth material.

"Edinburgh seemed like a natural place to settle as my father's family lived here. I have also found that the people of Edinburgh are interested in craft and design, and are keen to style their houses well."

The Scottish influence on Neil's work extends further than simply his

client base. For the vast majority of his projects, he relies solely on locally sourced hardwoods, such as oak, sycamore and walnut.

"I would say that about 95% of my material is grown in Scotland, and I only use exotic timbers very occasionally for small detailing work. We really are very spoiled in this country, and that is a blessing that many people are still unaware of. Gradually we are recovering from the days when everything was made of pine, and so it is becoming more common for Scottish woods to be used here rather than being shipped abroad. Of course, the expense does put this material at a less-affordable level than some others, but it is rewarded by the fact that the client gets a totally unique piece of furniture.

"One of the things I like most about using local woods is that you are more likely to learn about the history of this timber. I get all my material from a local sawmill, and they can tell you a great deal about where a tree is from and how old it is. I once managed to get a piece of cedar that had stood in the grounds of the Astley Ainslie

hospital. It's nice to be able to pass that kind of background onto the client."

At the moment Neil is concentrating on completing his pieces for the 'All Wrapped Up' exhibition in the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, which will feature makers of woodwork, textiles, jewellery, ceramics, glass and basketry from all over Scotland. This type of work allows him to maximise his creativity.

In designing his pieces, Neil often relies on intuition to drive the sculpting process. "Obviously with the furniture pieces, there have to be certain elements included in the design, but with some of the vessels that I create, I just begin by stripping the wood and see where it takes me. It is hard to explain, but a piece of timber might have a particular idiosyncrasy or shape that captures your imagination, and so the design has to be quite fluid." □

*All Wrapped Up will run from November 15 to January 11 at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh (0131-552 7171). Neil's work is also on show at the Gold Gallery on Dundas Street (0131-556 3159) and Stenton Gallery, East Lothian (01368 850256). Neil Martin (01875 814932, [www.neilmartin.biz](http://www.neilmartin.biz))*

# TOPOFHISTREE